

**Counting the Uncounted: Colonial Demography, Forced Mobility, and the Statistical
Invisibility of the Guarani and Kaiowá in Mato Grosso do Sul**

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INTRODUCTION

The production of demographic knowledge plays a central role in shaping how populations are rendered (in)visible, governable, and politically relevant within modern states. Far from operating as a neutral technical exercise, demographic classification constitutes a powerful mechanism through which social realities are organized, hierarchized, and translated into policy priorities (Merry, 2011). In contexts marked by colonial dispossession and territorial conflict, such as Indigenous regions in Brazil, the limits of population measurement reveal not only methodological shortcomings, but deeper political and epistemological choices made by state institutions regarding who is counted, how populations are classified, and to what ends demographic knowledge is mobilized.

Mato Grosso do Sul offers a paradigmatic case of these dynamics. Historically constituted as a demographic and territorial frontier – where land and population have been systematically reorganized through state-led incorporation and agrarian expansion – the region has been shaped by successive waves of land appropriation and Indigenous displacement (Ioris, 2024). For the Guarani and Kaiowá, forced mobility, confinement, and the erosion of ancestral territories have not only reconfigured material conditions of life, but also challenged the capacity of official statistics to adequately capture Indigenous presence. Demographic instruments premised on residential stability, standardized households, and individualized classification have struggled to account for populations whose existence is

structured by displacement, territorial struggle, and collective forms of belonging (Gomes, 2019; Guimarães & Santos, 2024).

In this context, demographic invisibility cannot be understood as a mere technical failure. Rather, it emerges as a constitutive feature of territorial governance, closely intertwined with land and agrarian policies that privilege economic productivity and legal legibility over historical occupation and social justice. This article starts from the problem of whether, and how, census practices that render Indigenous populations statistically marginal or residual contribute to the naturalization of territorial dispossession and the depoliticization of structural violence.

In this sense, the general objective of this paper is to analyze how demographic knowledge operates as a mechanism of political and epistemological erasure in contexts of Indigenous displacement, focusing on the Guarani and Kaiowá in Mato Grosso do Sul. By examining the interaction between census categories, population measurement practices, and territorial governance, the article investigates how statistical visibility and invisibility shape public policy priorities and reinforce patterns of land dispossession. Its relevance lies in critically interrogating demographic practices as instruments of state power, while situating statistical erasure within broader processes of agrarian expansion, forced mobility, and colonial inequality. Accordingly, the analysis aims to contextualize Mato Grosso do Sul as a demographic and territorial frontier, to assess the methodological limits of Brazilian census practices regarding Indigenous populations, and to explore the continuity between demographic, legal, and economic forms of exclusion in the governance of Indigenous land and population.

SHORT LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical approaches to demography and population studies have increasingly framed statistics as instruments of governance rather than neutral tools of measurement. Krause (2006) argues that demographic narratives participate in the political construction of risk and priority, shaping whose lives are deemed worthy of intervention. Similarly, Merry (2011) conceptualizes indicators as technologies of governance that condense complex realities into simplified numerical forms, thereby directing public policy agendas and resource allocation.

These perspectives challenge the assumption that demographic invisibility is accidental, instead situating it within broader political economies of knowledge production.

A substantial body of scholarship has documented the historical processes of Indigenous dispossession and territorial confinement in Brazil, emphasizing how agrarian expansion and state-led development have produced enduring patterns of violence and marginalization. Ioris (2020; 2024) provides a detailed account of how the consolidation of agrarian capitalism in Mato Grosso do Sul reconfigured land ownership and labor relations, resulting in the systematic displacement of the Guarani and Kaiowá. Complementing this analysis, Mondardo (2021) conceptualizes the region as a frontier of territorial containment, where Indigenous mobility is restricted and vulnerability intensified through mechanisms of spatial control rooted in colonial and capitalist logics.

Parallel to this body of literature, research on Indigenous demography in Brazil has highlighted the limitations of census practices in capturing Indigenous populations and living conditions. Marinho, Santos and Pereira (2011) demonstrate how census household classifications disproportionately exclude Indigenous households from key socioeconomic indicators by privileging standardized dwelling types and nuclear household arrangements, which fail to capture improvised, collective, or spatially fragmented living conditions, common in regions marked by land conflict. More recently, Simoni, Guimarães and Santos (2024) show that a significant portion of the Indigenous population would remain statistically invisible without indirect census mechanisms –particularly the use of supplementary coverage questions that allow Indigenous self-identification beyond the race/color item– underscoring the structural inadequacy of conventional racial and residential categories. Together, these studies reveal persistent gaps between Indigenous realities and their statistical representation.

While these strands of literature offer important insights, they are often addressed separately. Studies on Indigenous dispossession tend to prioritize territorial and economic analysis, whereas research on Indigenous demography frequently focuses on methodological refinement without fully engaging with questions of power and governance. Drawing on Santos' concept of abyssal thinking (Santos, 2007) and Yuval-Davis' analysis of hierarchical regimes of recognition (Yuval-Davis, 1997), this article bridges these debates by examining demographic invisibility as a mechanism that links population measurement, territorial governance, and state interests. In doing so, it contributes to a critical understanding of how

demographic knowledge participates in the reproduction of Indigenous marginalization in contexts of forced mobility and agrarian expansion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws, among other critical approaches, on Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2007) notion of abyssal thinking to conceptualize how demographic knowledge participates in the production of visibility and invisibility within modern state governance. From this perspective, population data and census categories are not treated as neutral representations of social reality, but as epistemological devices that define what is rendered present, legible, and governable, and what is actively produced as nonexistent. Abyssal thinking provides a critical lens to examine how Indigenous populations affected by colonial dispossession and territorial conflict are systematically positioned outside the boundaries of legitimate demographic and political recognition.

Building on this epistemological critique, the article engages with scholarship that conceptualizes statistics and indicators as technologies of governance. Drawing on Sally Engle Merry's (2011) analysis of indicators in global and national policy contexts, demographic data are understood as instruments that condense complex social realities into simplified numerical forms that are legible to state institutions and policymakers. In doing so, indicators do not merely inform public policy but actively shape agendas, priorities, and resource allocation, directing political attention toward populations and territories aligned with dominant economic and institutional interests while marginalizing those that resist standardized modes of measurement.

The framework further incorporates approaches that link population knowledge to political hierarchies of recognition and citizenship. Following Yuval-Davis' (1997) analysis of stratified regimes of recognition, demographic visibility is understood as unevenly distributed and deeply entangled with state-defined criteria of legitimacy and belonging. Populations rendered statistically residual occupy subordinate positions within national projects, where access to rights, resources, and territorial protection is conditioned on forms of legibility compatible with dominant imaginaries of population and territory. In this sense, demographic practices function as gatekeeping mechanisms that regulate political inclusion and exclusion.

Finally, the article draws on critical perspectives that situate demographic discourse within broader political economies of governance. As Krause (2006) argues, demographic narratives play a central role in defining risks, priorities, and acceptable forms of intervention, often framing structural inequalities as technical or demographic problems. From this standpoint, statistical invisibility is understood not as a methodological failure, but as a strategic outcome of governance in contexts marked by forced mobility, agrarian expansion, and colonial inequality. Together, these theoretical contributions provide the conceptual basis for analyzing how demographic practices operate at the intersection of population, territory, and power.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative and critical approach grounded in interdisciplinary population studies, combining insights from critical demography, political sociology, and territorial analysis. The research is based on a systematic review of specialized academic literature on Indigenous demography, statistical governance, and land politics, as well as the examination of census methodologies, and demographic reports. Methodologically, the article advances through an analytical progression that connects historical-territorial processes, census classification practices, and the political uses of demographic knowledge. Following the introduction and contextual background, the analysis examines the production of demographic invisibility through census categories, the limits of population measurement in contexts of forced mobility, and the articulation between statistical knowledge, state interests, and territorial governance. The article concludes by synthesizing how demographic practices function as mechanisms of political and epistemological erasure, highlighting their implications for understanding population, territory, and power in contexts marked by colonial dispossession.

5 MATO GROSSO DO SUL AS A DEMOGRAPHIC AND TERRITORIAL FRONTIER

5.1 Historical Confinement and the Production of Indigenous Marginality

The constitution of Mato Grosso do Sul as a territorial frontier is inseparable from a long historical process of Indigenous dispossession, confinement, and political

marginalization. Far from constituting a peripheral outcome of development, the marginalization of the Guarani and Kaiowá has been actively produced through the convergence of settler colonialism, capitalist land regimes, and state-led strategies of territorial control (Ioris, 2020). Indigenous presence in the region predates national borders, with historical records documenting Guarani occupation of the Itatim region since the sixteenth century. This spatial continuity, however, was progressively disrupted by colonial expansion and later by the consolidation of the Brazilian nation-state, which redefined Indigenous territories as commodities subject to private appropriation (Leitão, 2010).

A decisive shift occurred with the institutionalization of private land ownership through the 1850 Land Act, which excluded Indigenous peoples from legal access to land while consolidating elite control over territory. This process was reinforced by geopolitical reconfigurations following the War of the Triple Alliance, which divided Guarani territories between Brazil and Paraguay without consultation, fragmenting communities and reclassifying Indigenous populations as minorities within newly established national borders (Ioris, 2020; Leitão, 2010). Together, these legal and territorial transformations inaugurated a frontier logic in which Indigenous spatialities became structurally incompatible with national projects of sovereignty and development.

From the late nineteenth century onward, extractivist economies further intensified Indigenous dispossession. The expansion of the erva-mate industry relied on the systematic exploitation of Indigenous labor under coercive conditions, while appropriating vast extensions of Guarani and Kaiowá land. This period established a pattern in which Indigenous bodies were incorporated as labor while simultaneously expelled as territorial subjects—a dynamic that would later be reproduced and intensified under agrarian capitalism (Ioris, 2020; Leitão, 2010).

State intervention consolidated confinement as a central mechanism of governance. Between 1915 and 1928, the Indian Protection Service (SPI) forcibly concentrated Guarani and Kaiowá populations into a limited number of reservations, under an assimilationist and positivist rationale. While framed as a civilizing project, this policy functioned as a strategy of ethnic containment that freed land for non-Indigenous occupation and produced a racially differentiated labor force situated near urban and agro-industrial zones (Ioris, 2020; Leitão, 2010). Indigenous territories that once spanned millions of hectares were reduced to fragmented and overcrowded areas, generating chronic dependency and social disintegration.

As argued by Martins (1980) and Oliveira (2004), and cited in Mondardo (2021), this process must be understood not only as territorial loss, but as a broader form of political governance over life itself. The transformation of Indigenous land into a commodity subjected Guarani and Kaiowá existence to regimes of control that systematically expose communities to precarious living conditions, social abandonment, and premature death. This dynamic resonates with Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which describes how power is exercised through the production of differential conditions of life and death, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Mbembe, 2018). In Mato Grosso do Sul, confinement to overcrowded reservations, forced displacement, and persistent exposure to violence and deprivation reveal how agrarian expansion operates not merely through dispossession, but through the normalization of Indigenous vulnerability within a territorial order structured by economic extraction.

These dynamics are further inscribed within a broader colonial matrix of power. The agrarian expansion in the Brazil-Paraguay borderland reproduces neocolonial relations in which race, territory, and labor are hierarchically organized according to global regimes of accumulation (Quijano, 2005). Indigenous confinement generates what Haesbaert (2014) conceptualizes as territorial containment: a spatial strategy that restricts movement while intensifying vulnerability, transforming Indigenous presence into a managed anomaly within the frontier.

Despite these conditions, Indigenous agency persists. The emergence of *retomadas*¹—collective actions aimed at reoccupying ancestral lands—represents a direct challenge to the colonial ordering of space. As Mondardo (2021) and Loera (2014) note, these practices exceed the limits imposed by state-managed reservations and articulate alternative territorialities grounded in Indigenous memory, cosmology, and collective existence. The frontier thus remains a contested space, where historical confinement coexists with ongoing resistance.

5.2 Agribusiness Expansion and Population Reordering

The consolidation of agribusiness in Mato Grosso do Sul must be understood not merely as an economic transformation, but as a territorial project that reconfigures space,

¹ Portuguese word, which loosely translated means “resumption”.

population, and political authority. Rather than expanding into an empty frontier, agrarian capitalism advanced through the systematic appropriation of Indigenous lands, transforming historically occupied territories into commodities aligned with export-oriented production (Ioris, 2024). This model of development privileges land concentration, monoculture, and large-scale capital investment, while rendering Indigenous forms of territorial use incompatible with dominant regimes of property and productivity.

This process has produced a profound reordering of population. As Indigenous territories were progressively expropriated, Guaraní and Kaiowá communities were displaced, confined to overcrowded reservations, or forced into precarious settlements along roadsides and urban peripheries (Ioris, 2024). Far from representing a demographic anomaly, this displacement constitutes a structural outcome of agrarian expansion, in which populations rendered surplus to capitalist accumulation are spatially marginalized and politically abandoned (Oliveira, 2004). The transformation of land into a market asset thus simultaneously reorganizes population by severing Indigenous livelihoods from their territorial foundations.

Within this context, the agribusiness frontier operates as a space of containment rather than integration. Mondardo (2021) conceptualizes this dynamic as a form of territorial containment in which Indigenous mobility is restricted while vulnerability is intensified. Displacement does not translate into freedom of movement, but into confinement within fragmented and insecure spaces, where exposure to violence, poverty, and social disintegration becomes normalized. The frontier, therefore, functions not as a zone of opportunity, but as a mechanism for managing Indigenous presence as a persistent problem to be controlled.

The political effects of this reordering extend beyond spatial displacement. By reorganizing territory around agrarian productivity, agribusiness expansion produces differentiated conditions of life and death for Indigenous populations. As Ioris (2024) sustains, the systematic exposure of Guaraní and Kaiowá communities to hunger, unsafe living conditions, and recurrent violence reflects a development model that tolerates Indigenous suffering as a collateral consequence of economic growth. In this sense, agrarian expansion operates not only through dispossession, but through the normalization of Indigenous precarity within a territorial order structured by extraction and accumulation.

6 CENSUS CATEGORIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDIGENOUS “RESIDUAL POPULATIONS”

6.1 Brazilian Census Classification and Methodological Limits

The incorporation of Indigenous populations into Brazilian census statistics has been historically uneven and conceptually fragile. For most of the country’s census history, Indigenous peoples were not recognized as a distinct category, being subsumed under broader racial classifications such as “*pardo*”.² Only with the 1991 census did “Indigenous” become an explicit option within the “race/color” question, inaugurating a relatively short statistical series with significant implications for demographic visibility (Simoni, Guimarães & Santos, 2024). While this shift represented an important political achievement, it did not resolve deeper methodological and epistemological tensions embedded in census design.

A limited availability and uneven quality of sociodemographic data concerning Indigenous populations remain defining features of Brazilian census practices. Despite extensive evidence of disproportionate exposure to poverty, morbidity, and mortality, comprehensive demographic information on Indigenous peoples is persistently fragmented and incomplete. This deficit is particularly striking given the sociocultural heterogeneity of Indigenous societies, which encompass hundreds of distinct peoples with diverse territorial arrangements, kinship systems, and patterns of mobility. Census instruments, however, continue to rely on standardized classificatory frameworks that struggle to accommodate such diversity, privileging homogeneity, stability, and individualization as normative assumptions (Marinho, Santos & Pereira, 2011).

One of the most consequential sources of distortion lies in the census definition of the household (*domicílio*), which operates as the primary unit of data collection. By distinguishing between permanent, improvised, and collective households –and restricting the collection of detailed housing and socioeconomic information to those classified as permanent –the census implicitly enforces a residential model grounded in Western notions of nuclear family arrangements, fixed occupancy, and exclusive residential use. Indigenous households, particularly in regions marked by land conflict and displacement such as Mato Grosso do Sul, are disproportionately classified as improvised or collective (Marinho, Santos

² Pardo is the word commonly used in Brazilian censuses to refer to anyone of mixed race.

& Pereira, 2011). This results not only in misrepresentation, but in systematic exclusion from key indicators related to housing quality, sanitation, and living conditions. Importantly, these classificatory outcomes often stem from the misapplication of census categories to Indigenous forms of co-residence shaped by extended kinship, communal living, or spatial arrangements embedded in political and cultural practices, revealing how methodological rigidity produces statistical invisibility precisely where vulnerability is greatest (Marinho, Santos & Pereira, 2011).

Recent methodological innovations introduced in the 2010 and 2022 censuses sought to mitigate some of the longstanding limitations in the demographic capture of Indigenous populations. The incorporation of a supplementary coverage question, allowing respondents to identify as Indigenous even when not selecting “Indigenous” in the race/color item, significantly expanded statistical visibility, with this indirect mechanism accounting for more than a quarter of the Indigenous population identified in the 2022 census (Simoni, Guimarães & Santos, 2024). While this adjustment challenges assumptions of territorial fixity and rural confinement by capturing Indigenous presence beyond officially recognized Indigenous lands, it simultaneously reveals the depth of the underlying problem. The reliance on indirect questioning to render Indigenous populations visible underscores the persistent misalignment between census categories and Indigenous realities, particularly in contexts marked by displacement and land conflict. The concentration of newly identified Indigenous populations in municipalities such as Dourados, in Mato Grosso do Sul, suggests that statistical invisibility has been closely intertwined with processes of forced mobility and territorial dispossession, rather than resulting from mere classificatory oversight (Simoni, Guimarães & Santos, 2024).

Taken together, these findings indicate that the limitations of census classification are not merely technical but structural. By privileging standardized categories, stable households, and individual-based identification, census methodology systematically marginalizes populations whose existence challenges dominant models of residence, territory, and social organization. These constraints set the stage for a deeper critique: one that moves beyond methodological inadequacy to interrogate the political and epistemological foundations of demographic knowledge itself. This critique is developed in the following section, which examines how demographic discourses function as instruments of power, shaping who counts, how they count, and to what ends.

6.2 Statistical Invisibility as an Epistemological and Political Choice

The limitations of census classification outlined in the previous section cannot be adequately understood as the unintended byproduct of technical insufficiencies or methodological inertia (Marinho, Santos & Pereira, 2011; Simoni, Guimarães & Santos, 2024). Rather, they point to a deeper and more consequential dynamic: the production of statistical invisibility as an epistemological and political choice embedded in state-centered regimes of knowledge (Krause, 2006; Santos, 2007). In this sense, demographic categories do not merely fail to capture Indigenous realities; they actively reorganize them according to classificatory logics that privilege stability, legibility, and governability over historical complexity, territorial struggle, and collective forms of existence.

As Krause (2006) demonstrates, demographic knowledge operates within specific political economies of fear, scarcity, and control. Numbers are not neutral descriptors of social reality, but instruments through which states identify risks, allocate resources, and justify intervention or neglect. Within this framework, populations become intelligible insofar as they conform to dominant assumptions about residence, productivity, and social order. Groups whose lives unfold through displacement, territorial contestation, or non-normative social organization are rendered statistically problematic and, consequently, politically marginal. The construction of Indigenous peoples as “residual populations” thus reflects not a failure of measurement, but the limits of what the state seeks or wills to know.

This logic is particularly evident in the Brazilian census apparatus. As shown by Simoni, Guimarães, and Santos (2024), significant portions of the Indigenous population would remain invisible without indirect mechanisms such as coverage questions, revealing the inadequacy of conventional racial classification and household-based enumeration. Yet the reliance on such corrective tools does not fundamentally alter the epistemological foundations of census practices. Instead, it exposes a paradox at the heart of demographic governance: Indigenous peoples are rendered visible only through methodological exceptions, while the normative structure of data collection continues to privilege individualized, sedentary, and territorially fixed subjects. Visibility, in this sense, becomes conditional and fragile, contingent upon techniques that remain external to the core logic of demographic classification.

The political implications of this conditional visibility are far-reaching. Demographic data serve as a primary basis for public policy planning, budgetary allocation, and institutional prioritization. When Indigenous populations are undercounted, misclassified, or partially excluded from key indicators, such as housing conditions, sanitation, or income, their needs are systematically deprioritized within policy frameworks. As Marinho, Santos, and Pereira (2011) demonstrate, classificatory exclusions at the level of the household translate directly into informational voids that limit state responsibility and obscure structural inequalities. In this way, statistical invisibility functions as a mechanism of governance, shaping not only what is known, but what is deemed worthy of political attention.

Crucially, statistical invisibility cannot be disentangled from the historical and territorial dynamics discussed in previous chapters. In regions such as Mato Grosso do Sul, where Indigenous populations have experienced prolonged displacement, confinement, and violence, demographic erasure reinforces territorial dispossession by naturalizing absence (Ioris, 2024). Populations living in improvised settlements or circulating through conflict-driven mobility are structurally incompatible with census instruments premised on permanence and residential order (Marinho, Santos & Pereira, 2011). As a result, historically produced displacement is translated into a statistical image of marginality, legitimizing narratives that portray Indigenous presence and territorial claims as residual or demographically insignificant (Simoni, Guimarães & Santos, 2024).

From this perspective, statistical erasure operates alongside legal and territorial exclusion as part of a broader architecture of power. As Mondardo's (2021) analysis indicates, colonial and capitalist regimes of land appropriation depend not only on physical displacement, but also on the administrative denial of Indigenous existence. Demographic knowledge contributes to this process by converting historically constituted marginalization into an ostensibly neutral numerical fact, stripping it of political meaning. By privileging legibility over justice and standardization over context, demographic practices thus reproduce the inequalities they claim to measure, revealing invisibility not as a technical failure but as a political choice embedded in population governance.

7 Statistical Erasure and Territorial Governance

Statistical erasure plays a central role in the governance of territory by shaping what the state is able to see, recognize, and regulate (Santos, 2007). Far from being a neutral reflection of demographic reality, population data constitute a selective form of knowledge that structures public policy priorities, resource allocation, and territorial planning (Merry, 2011). In this sense, population invisibility is directly translatable into territorial invisibility: groups that are not adequately captured by demographic instruments are simultaneously excluded from the spatial imaginaries through which land, development, and governance are organized. This dynamic can be productively understood through Santos' (2007) concept of abyssal thinking, which conceives modern Western knowledge as operating through radical epistemological distinctions that define what is rendered visible and what is actively produced as nonexistent. The abyssal line does not merely separate social realities but denies their co-presence, establishing zones governed by regulation and recognition on one side, and zones of appropriation and violence on the other.

Applied to the Brazilian context, demographic practices draw such an epistemological boundary by situating agribusiness, urban populations, and territorially fixed subjects within the field of visibility, while Indigenous peoples displaced from their lands are relegated to the invisible side of the line, where they cease to exist as relevant demographic and territorial subjects. Within this framework, the absence of Indigenous populations from official statistics is not an accidental omission but a constitutive mechanism of territorial governance (Santos, 2007). By rendering Indigenous territories statistically residual or nonexistent, demographic invisibility facilitates their reclassification as empty or underutilized spaces, stripped of historical occupation and social meaning, and made available for economic exploitation. This process is inseparable from broader regimes of political recognition, in which access to territory and rights is conditioned on inclusion within hierarchized forms of citizenship. In this sense, citizenship functions as a stratified system that differentially allocates legitimacy and protection, shaping whose territorial claims are recognized and whose are rendered expendable (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Citizenship, understood as a relationship of power between individuals, state, and society, is not uniformly distributed but organized through hierarchies of belonging and legitimacy (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Indigenous peoples whose territorial claims challenge the legitimacy of the settler national project are systematically relegated to a residual status. In demographic terms, this residualization manifests as partial visibility, truncated recognition,

or outright exclusion from the population deemed relevant for public planning. The boundary between who is counted and who is rendered residual thus mirrors broader political decisions about who belongs to the national community in a substantive sense.

The effects of selective demographic visibility are particularly evident in land and agrarian policy. As critical scholarship on indicators shows, statistical data function as key instruments guiding decisions on infrastructure investment, agricultural zoning, land titling, and economic incentives (Merry, 2011). When Indigenous populations displaced by land conflict are not adequately captured by demographic indicators, they are effectively excluded from the calculations that shape territorial governance. In line with Santos' concept of abyssal thinking, this erasure does not merely obscure Indigenous suffering but actively directs state attention and resources toward territories aligned with dominant economic interests, while rendering others administratively invisible (Santos, 2007).

Merry's (2011) analysis of indicators as technologies of governance provides further insight into how statistical erasure operates in practice. Indicators condense complex social realities into simplified numerical forms that are legible to policymakers while systematically stripping away historical context, relational meaning, and political responsibility (Merry, 2011). In doing so, they replace political debate with technical expertise, presenting decisions about land use, development, and resource allocation as neutral outcomes of data-driven rationality. Crucially, indicators do not merely measure reality; they actively produce it. Through standardized categories and criteria of commensurability, demographic instruments generate certain forms of social existence while erasing others (Merry, 2011). In the context of Mato Grosso do Sul, this process transforms heterogeneous Indigenous territorialities into administratively irrelevant anomalies, while rendering agribusiness landscapes coherent, productive, and governable. Even when their limitations are recognized, such indicators continue to be privileged due to their apparent objectivity and institutional portability, enabling agrarian expansion to proceed without confronting the colonial and violent conditions that underpin Indigenous displacement.

These dynamics point to a broader pattern in which statistical erasure is a foundational mechanism of territorial governance. By monopolizing legitimate knowledge about population and space, the state produces a cartography of relevance that aligns demographic visibility with economic productivity and political legitimacy. Indigenous peoples displaced by agrarian expansion are thus excluded not only from land, but from the

very epistemological frameworks that determine whose claims matter. In this sense, demographic invisibility does not merely reflect territorial dispossession, but actively sustains it, transforming historical violence into an administratively neutral absence that underwrites land and agrarian policies.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that demographic knowledge is not a neutral mirror of social reality, but a central instrument through which population and territory are governed. Focusing on the Guarani and Kaiowá in Mato Grosso do Sul, the analysis demonstrates that statistical invisibility is structurally produced at the intersection of census classification, territorial dispossession, and state interests. Rather than resulting from technical inadequacies alone, demographic underrepresentation reflects epistemological choices that privilege stability, legibility, and economic productivity over historical violence, forced mobility, and Indigenous forms of collective existence.

By examining Mato Grosso do Sul as a demographic and territorial frontier, the article shows how agrarian expansion has reordered both space and population, transforming Indigenous displacement into a normalized condition. Census instruments premised on fixed residence and standardized households are ill-equipped to register lives shaped by confinement, circulation, and territorial struggle. As a consequence, historically produced marginalization is translated into statistical residuality, converting structural injustice into an administratively neutral absence.

In this process, census practices that render Indigenous populations statistically marginal or residual actively contribute to the naturalization of territorial dispossession and the depoliticization of structural violence, transforming historically produced inequalities into administratively neutral absences. The analysis further reveals that demographic invisibility plays an active role in territorial governance. Population data and indicators guide policy priorities, resource allocation, and land-use planning, defining which populations are rendered politically relevant. When Indigenous displacement fails to appear as a demographic fact, the absence of targeted policy responses is presented as a rational outcome of data-driven governance rather than a political decision. In this way, statistical erasure reinforces agrarian and territorial regimes aligned with dominant economic interests.

A central finding of this analysis is that Indigenous populations become visible to the state only through methodological exceptions, while the normative architecture of demographic data collection continues to privilege individualized, sedentary, and territorially fixed subjects. This asymmetry reveals that visibility itself is conditional, produced not by inclusion within standard categories, but by corrective mechanisms that leave the underlying logic of population measurement intact. As a result, displacement and collective Indigenous forms of existence remain structurally misaligned with the demographic knowledge that informs public policy.

Finally, it's fundamental to highlight the continuity between demographic, legal, and economic forms of exclusion. Legal doctrines that condition Indigenous rights on state-recognized forms of presence operate in tandem with statistical practices that render displacement invisible, producing a regime of selective recognition. Law and demography thus converge in transforming colonial dispossession into technical normality. Recognizing demographic invisibility as a political and epistemological choice is essential not only for rethinking population measurement, but for challenging the knowledge regimes that continue to sustain Indigenous marginalization in contexts of forced mobility and territorial conflict.

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