

# The Role of Writing in the Construction of Public Causes: An Analysis of the Documents Produced by Groups of People Affected by the Tucuruí Hydroelectric Dam, Pará State

*O papel da escrita na construção de causas públicas: uma análise do acervo de documentos produzidos por grupos de atingidos pela Usina Hidrelétrica de Tucuruí, Pará*

Henri Acselrad\*,<sup>1</sup>

English version: David Rodgers

## RESUMO

O presente texto discute o processo de produção dos artefatos impressos elaborados por diferentes entes associativos formados ao longo do conflito que opôs os atingidos pela barragem de Tucuruí e a Eletronorte, empresa estatal responsável pela construção da obra. Com base em um acervo de documentos impressos produzidos pelo movimento de atingidos, são aqui analisadas as situações de escrita, os atos de escrita e os usos sociais da escrita, bem como seu papel na veiculação de denúncias de situações percebidas, pelos atingidos, como injustas.

Palavras-chave: atos de escrita; atingidos por barragens; rio Tocantins; Hidrelétrica de Tucuruí.

## ABSTRACT

The present text discusses the processes involved in the production of printed artefacts by different associations that formed during the conflict between people affected by the Tucuruí Hydroelectric Dam and Eletronorte, the state company responsible for the dam's construction and operation. Based on a collection of printed documents produced by the movement of people affected by the dam, the article analyses the writing situations, writing acts and the social uses of writing, as well as the role of these documents in conveying denunciations of situations perceived as unjust by the affected people.

Keywords: writing acts; movements of people affected by dams; Tocantins River; Tucuruí Hydroelectric Dam.

\* Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Instituto de Pesquisa e Planejamento Urbano (IPPUR), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. hacseld@uol.com.br <<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5774-5220>>

CANTO DO RIO TOCANTINS

Quando o Rio Tocantins, onde muitos vivem  
a esperança, / hoje já não tem mais nada, res-  
ta só a lembrança / do que era o Rio Tocan-  
tins e o que tinha de beleza. / Hoje já vi-  
rou um lago, deixando só tristeza. / Várias  
cidades mudaram pra nunca mais voltar. / Po-  
demos tomar por exemplo a cidade de Jacundã  
/ Várias pedras e remanço que causaram ad-  
miração. / Só restará a lembrança em cada  
coração.

Com o remanço das águas tão lindo, / com os  
passaros a cantar, / os canários com suas  
tarefas na quele recanto viviam, pescar, /  
as lindas flores de sua margem, e as lindas  
praias, pra gente banhar. / Tudo isso acabou  
/ pois tudo se transformou. / Não existe nada  
mais em Jacundã.

Tocantins, acabou-se a natureza, / a ma-  
ior riqueza que Deus deixou pro homem des-  
frutar. / Rio Tocantins, acabou o que não  
queria, / não precisamos desta energia / que  
tu produz para exportar.

Source: PRELAZIA..., n. d., separate document.<sup>2</sup>

The present text takes a set of printed materials produced by social movements as its subject matter. It aims to achieve a critical comprehension of the material, textual and graphic forms in which the experience of the construction of a large dam is manifested from the viewpoint of social groups affected by it. To this end, it describes the process of elaborating written statements and the graphic forms of conveying their contents in the denunciation of situations perceived as unjust by the people affected by the dam. Based on interviews with activists and the analysis of printed material, the article aims to describe the writing situations, acts of writing, the social uses of writing and the scenarios in which these acts became realized in the case of the movement of people affected by the Tucuruí Hydroelectric Dam.

Between 1984 and 1985, the construction of the Tucuruí Dam in the south of Pará (PA) state in Brazilian Eastern Amazonia flooded 2,600 square kilometres of forest along the shores of the Tocantins River, including part of the reserve of the Parakanã indigenous people and some urban centres, compulsorily evicting around 10,000 families from their areas of residence and work. Primarily involved in extractivist activities, part of this population were transferred to new sites located along the shores of the reservoir. Brusquely thrown into agricultural work in areas where the natural landscape was unfamiliar to them, the relocated population were unable to establish themselves economically, which led to land reconcentration and deforestation. After flooding of the forest, which was not cleared in time across 90% of the area due to the military government's haste to

inaugurate the work, a process took hold involving decomposition of organic plant matter, a proliferation of aquatic macrophytes and the emanation of hydrogen sulphide gas. Various steelworking enterprises, closely associated with the Grande Carajás Program, were implanted in the region, intensifying the demand for wood to manufacture charcoal and exacerbating the disruption to the small-scale local production of food.

Numerous social mobilizations erupted from 1980, demanding compensation for the compulsory evictions, in a tumultuous process of pressure and negotiation that lasted for many years, both before and after 1984, the year the floodgates were closed and the reservoir filled. This process was closely linked to the demand for measures to improve the sanitary conditions of the local populations, afflicted by a plague of mosquitos, uncontrolled and worsening since 1987. The residents of these areas found themselves under threat from the intense proliferation of insects in the area to which they were originally relocated. At the same time, they were also threatened by landgrabbers seeking to take possession of the new areas to which Eletronorte (ELN) – the state company responsible for building and operating the hydroelectric plant – had transferred, for the second time, the evicted families, away from the area affected by the plague of mosquitos (*Mansonia* sp.), an insect whose larvae feed parasitically on plant roots in anoxic environments (Silva, 1997).

Six months after the closure of the dam floodgates, the rivershore populations living downstream of the dam also began complaining about changes to water quality and fish behaviour, an increase in intestinal and dermatological problems, and a fall in the productivity of the extraction of native cacao and assai palm along the river's shores (Silva, 2014; Ata..., 29 March 1987).

Filling of the Tucuruí reservoir took 206 days, beginning in September 1984 and concluding in March 1985. The first step of the process caused the Tocantins River held behind the dam to rise to the height of 35 metres above sea level – the so-called 35 metre quota. The conclusion of the process of filling the reservoir led its maximum depth to the 75-meter level and an average depth to 17.3 metres. The reservoir's shores vary of time since the normal minimum operational level today is 58 metres and the normal maximum level 72 metres above sea level. The conditions of existence of thousands of rural and urban families were altered profoundly, both by the preparatory measures for filling the reservoir, and by the subsequent flooding of their traditional spaces of work, their compulsory relocation to new areas, and the effects of the change to the hydrological dynamics of the Tocantins River.<sup>3</sup>

The activities of surveying and registering the population, which preceded the filling of the reservoir, triggered a multitude of microlocalized demographic movements. These relocations amounted to processes of compulsory socio-cultural migration insofar as they involved the transference of rivershore populations to dry areas by the roadside, peasant farmer groups who shared the same natural resources along communal lines now being confined to plots of land rigidly delimited by the boundaries of private ownership. The affected social groups were inserted in new spatial and social trajectories: *caboclos ribeirinhos* (riverside *caboclos* – the term refers to someone of mixed indigenous and European descent) of the Tocantins were transformed into *colonos* (tenant farmers), while *beiradeiros* (shore dwellers) of islands and floodland areas were transformed into farmers of arid lands. The construction of the dam thus altered the trajectories arising from the pre-existing dislocations of peasant farmers in search of what they call ‘improvement,’ pursuing “a networks of neighbours, a network of kin, or the opening of a road, or the Brazil nut harvest, or a job on a farm, or employment with a construction firm, or, more directly, free land” (Magalhães, 2002, pp. 265-266).

In 1979 Eletronorte began to implement actions to remove populations living on the shores of the Tocantins River, alleging that the reservoir would soon be filled to generate electricity. This saw the start of the first mobilizations of residents living in areas that, according to Eletronorte, would be submerged by the Tocantins’s waters after the river was dammed. The affected groups demanded more information about the procedures to which they would be forced to comply during the dam construction and protested against the ban on continuing to cultivate permanent crops. The first pamphlets then emerged, home printed and written in the name of the peasant farmers of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, the Marabá-Altamira section between kilometres 95 and 110. These stated: “we are unhappy with how Eletronorte is treating us. We are furious and no longer accept the insecurity in which we live. Eletronorte is treating us badly and inhumanely.” (Documento “Eletronorte”, 9 January 1980).

A year later, communities of *vazanteiros* (floodplain farmers) living on the shores of the Tocantins, in the municipality of Itupiranga, also protested against what they saw as the high-handed actions to which they had been subjected, alleging, in particular, Eletronorte’s ignorance of the practices specific to the *vazante* (seasonal floodplain) with the company’s consequent refusal to provide compensation for the temporary crops grown during the dry season:

It is regrettable that ELN [Eletronorte] is unaware of our situation as *vazanteiros* and requires permanent crops and houses, when we all know that this kind of work cannot be undertaken in the *vazante*, since for six months of the year the river floods and fertilizes the land and devours everything planted and built on it. Are the technicians and researchers unaware of this [natural] law that happens in the North and here on the great Tocantins? (Documento dos Vazanteiros de Itupiranga à Eletronorte, 2 November 1981)

Over the following years, countless manifestos circulated, signed by groups situated in different localities of the affected area, which added to the first printed manifestation of the peasant farmers of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, multiplying the denunciations and demands, and leading to the formation of a unified movement of expropriated people.<sup>4</sup>

## SOCIAL MOBILIZATION AND ACTS OF WRITING

The printed material produced by agents involved in the constitution and dynamization of social movements is one of the vehicles through which a language common to the different actors is produced, assisting the construction of their collective identities. This material is included in a broader repertoire of collective actions (Tilly, 1986, p. 541), constituting a means of shaping and amplifying the rhetoric of the groups mobilized around their causes. It forms part, therefore, of a toolbox that contains interpretative schemas particularly in demand at moments of instability, in which unexpected events, like the construction of dams, undermine previous modes of life and ways of comprehending situations, requiring the invention of new ways of seeing, saying, making and thinking. These are tools that help stimulate in actors their capacities to manage the syntaxes of action and to formulate ‘maps’ that enable them to locate, identify and define the situations imposed on them (Cefai, 2007, p. 482 and 487). The messages contained in them can thus be conveyed to the diverse intended recipients whom they aim to mobilize or from whom they seek support, as well as the public authorities to whom they seek to present and justify their demands.

Each type of printed material aims to produce a particular effect, whether minutes, letters, reports, bulletins, manifestos or *cordel* literature. All the elements of text layout, design, pagination and typographic configuration, as well as printing resources, form part of a process that can be called a “graphic resistance” (Artières; Rodak, 2008) through which the performative statements

mediated by writing convey the meanings desired by the movement of dam-affected people. Among the latter, these printed materials ended up merging with the traditional channels of circulation of information and ideas widespread in rural areas such as the *cordel* (cheaply produced popular literature) and the *cânticos* (songs). In the case of Tucuruí, their elaboration originated in meetings, assemblies and encounters where a communicative dynamic developed in the communities concerning the impacts of the hydroelectric dam. The growing interaction within each group of affected people, as well as between different groups distributed across a large area, led to the intensification of the flows of communication that had previously been restricted to the moments of popular festivals, processions and religious cults. For representatives of the public authorities, the material signed by members of the rural popular classes represented a somewhat surprising inflection in the usual paths taken by the printed word in the region. This word, when addressed towards the popular classes, typically followed vertical trajectories, ‘top-down,’ from government authorities or businesses. In the case of dam construction in particular, we know that selective information is routinely distributed in the affected areas in a controlled form, according to the strict dictates of the communications policies adopted by electricity sector companies (Locatelli, 2014). Through the drafting and divulgation of printed texts, the affected peoples enter a social world mediated by the text, integrating a production of meaning composed by multiple forms of media – which, alongside oral interactions and collective public mobilizations, also count on textual manifestos emanating from different associations.

Nevertheless, what we could call a ‘graphic reason’ present in the printed materials does not relate only to a technique of communication, but to an entire cognitive and sociopolitical system. Writing, furthermore, integrates a social relation founded on the unequal distribution of what Coton and Proteau (2012) call a ‘scriptural capital,’ that is, of types of knowledge and writing skills that tend to authorize the exercise of a specific kind of power. For this reason, the multiplication of the printed material originating from the movements of dam-affected peoples can be considered to have broken the kind of pre-existing monopoly over this type of skill held, in the affected area, by the regional media, itself controlled by local elites.

From the arrival of the first agents involved in dam construction, there was, in diverse villages and settlements due to be affected by the dam, an observable growth in the production of newsletters, assembly reports, letters to Eletronorte, documents setting out denunciations and demands,

explanatory statements by affected families, minutes of meetings between the company and expropriated people, campaign bulletins, reports of meetings of committees to evaluate campaigns, and records of encounters between farmers, pastoral officers and lawyers.

These acts of writing, performed by a diverse range of collective subjects in the process of being formed, saw a shift from the language of relations of immediacy and proximity, inherent to the oral interactive act, to a communicative relation that can occur, via a relatively durable material support, in an out of phase form in time and space (Faure, 2011). The artefacts resulting from these acts are thus carriers of accounts, mottoes, demands, exhortations, denunciations and protests. Certain slogans present statements and actions simultaneously by advocating a specific operation that should be undertaken, according to the movements of dam-affected people, for their benefit, by those responsible from the electricity sector and governments. Arranged on printed surfaces, these statements exhibit the graphic force of the long-term character of their inscriptions (Fraenkel, 2007, p. 103).

Acts of writing presume the enunciation of messages and the fabrication of a specific artefact validated by authentication mechanisms. As in other acts of language, the empirical approaches involved in acts of writing tend to highlight the presence of a performativity. Like oral acts and graffiti, acts of writing also present a spectacular dimension, as in the case that interests us here, stemming from the fact that they were produced in a region with low levels of literacy and by subjects who did not customarily make use of written expression, even less in the production of texts intended for presentation and circulation in a public space.<sup>5</sup> This exceptional act of inscription thus became a kind of “blow by writing” (Fraenkel, 2010, p. 34), aimed at the notions of those who asserted that the hydroelectric dam was being implanted in a social and historical vacuum,<sup>6</sup> “in the jungle far from the great civilized centres” (Eletronorte, 1989, p. 15). By representing the area planned for the dam as wild and uninhabited, backed by the juridical-political state of exception then prevailing in Brazil, the promoters of the construction work proved oblivious to the possibility of facing significant collective mobilizations and, perhaps more reasonably, people whose demands were documented via the written word.

Printed material is undoubtedly a source of ideas and images, but also the support for a system of relations (Davis, 1979, p. 311). In the case of rural, rivershore and fishing communities – which constitute most of the families affected by the Tucuruí dam<sup>7</sup> – the systematic production and circulation of printed texts resulted in the establishment of new relations between the world

of written culture and the world of subjects who, predominantly linked to the oral tradition, had a more limited and circumstantial contact with writing, whether due to a lack of literacy skills, or because they only occasionally developed their use. Such relations were constituted through the production of both written documents intended to be read by the group of affected people themselves, and documents aimed at the literate public of the villages and towns of the affected region, as well as specifically to the representatives of the electricity sector and public authorities in general. These different recipients match the description of the phases currently identified in the evolution of the disputes over time (Felstiner; Abel; Sarat, 1980): in the first, the injury is named, identified and constituted as such – an experience perceived as a grievance shared by a determined community; in the second phase, responsibility for the injury is imputed to another actor who is directly accused; finally, the accusation is made known by other people, beyond those causing the problem, from whom reparation is demanded. The experiences perceived as a source of grievances crystallize when they strengthen to the point of becoming inscribed in forms of mobilization over time.

In the case of Tucuuruí, the contents and forms of the texts initially reflected the activist memory of the experiences of earlier movements. The testimonies record, in particular, the influence of the memory of those people affected by the Itaparica dam:

The content of the printed material reflected the experience of the movement of people affected by the Itaparica dam – the only reference point available back then, brought by an advisor from CONTAG [National Confederation of Agricultural Workers]; the only experience with dams concerning how to deal with a state company and negotiate with a government. It was the only reference point that the movement possessed. The campaign was developed on an emergency basis. One question initially unaddressed and that only later became an issue was the claim for land on the lake shore, which came from Itaparica. We included this [demand] in the Tucuuruí campaign, but later it was seen to be inapplicable to Amazonia. For farmers in the Northeast, having a house on the lake shore means access to water. But for farmers in Amazonia, in Tucuuruí, this didn't apply. It was realized that in Tucuuruí this would be unviable – the lake had a lot of rotting organic matter, breeding swarms of insects and creating an unhealthy situation – nobody managed to stay near the lake shore. Nobody had this reference point before – the reason for staying on the lake shore or not, because we had no other experience. After practical experience showed that the reality was



different because of the outbreak of insects and mosquitos, which made it impossible for people to live there... (Silva, 2018)<sup>8</sup>

On the transformation of a 'case' into a 'cause,' that is, the transformation of private conflicts into collective and politicized causes, Boltanski argues that

in the course of an affair, its very nature – individual or collective, singular or general – is the principal issue in the dispute in which the various protagonists are engaged. Depending on the way the affair is configured, certain actors work to 'deflate' it, trying to show that it is a 'complete fabrication' and seeking to 'put it back into perspective,' while others, on the contrary, go to great lengths to reveal its 'true nature,' to show 'what lies behind it' and thus to demonstrate that it concerns, 'in fact,' many more people than might have been first supposed, that 'everybody' is involved. This is what it takes to forge a collective cause. (Boltanski, 2000, p. 25)

The Tucuruí cause involves a multitude of protagonists, people, entities, proofs and feelings. The demand of singular individuals or groups is presented as relating to a common good valid for everyone – the transformation of a case into a cause.

A very large number of letters were sent to Eletronorte directly by the population, the Bishop of Cametá and the priests, questioning what would happen – concerning the compensation processes. People wrote on an individual basis. It was an initiative undertaken by people, the Church, organizations. It wasn't a communication representing the collective. It became a document communicating with Eletronorte when the movement began to manifest and speak as a group and a collective, rather than as each person or social segment separately. It only began to be the communication of a movement from the end of 1981 when the movement of dam-affected people was organized. (Silva, 2018)

Causes tend to be elaborated, constructed, established, proved and, however solidly established they may appear, they can also be subject to contestation (Boltanski, 2000, pp. 25-26).

ELN [Eletronorte] always used the mainstream media – the big newspapers of Pará. IT had paid materials in the newspapers and on TV Liberal and other channels – and even with all this, it also had its own little newspaper that it used to

distribute at various moments in the affected area, contradicting whatever the movement and the Prelacy had said. (Silva, 2018)

The constitution of the cause of dam-affected people and the debates associated with it show that the construction of the dam constituted a turning point in the history of the Tocantins River. It is probable that never before had so much been written about the river, including documents, reports, pamphlets and press articles. What I intend to suggest, as will be developed in the next section, is that a turning point also appeared, therefore, in the history of this writing itself involving the Tocantins River, since a new author appeared – the people affected by the dam, responsible for the documents analysed here.

#### REFERENCES TO THE TOCANTINS AND THE RIVERSHORE LIFE

The concerns with the threats to rivershore life had already appeared well before the dam was filled, as demonstrated by these verses from the Prelacy of Cametá songbook:

*I'm alive and I'm worried / About the projects that are planned  
My real concern / is over the Tucuruí dam  
Poor people of the islands / I don't know what will happen  
I don't know what will happen  
When the waters flood the land / I don't know where they'll dwell  
Our everyday diet of little fish / Shrimps and catfish  
Our tasty little fruits / It will all soon dispel*

(A crise da barragem. In: Prelazia..., n. d., p. 3)

The damming of the river meant the destructuring of ways of life: “The farmworkers and fishermen of the Tocantins’s shores are fighting against the impacts of the dam, which will alter the entire life system of the rivershore population” (Raimundo Nonato de Azevedo, pres. do STR Tucuruí, Carta ao Congresso do STR, 26 August 1984), and “[the] Dam will not only have negative consequences for us, but for all the region’s people; when they close the Dam, the Tocantins River will dry up, making it impossible to travel. Making things worse, saltwater will enter our river” (Comissão dos desapropriados pela barragem, “Companheiros, vamos dar uma parada para pensar”, n. d.).

A short while before the reservoir was filled, in a letter to the president of Eletronorte and the governor of Pará state, the expropriated population of Repartimento denounced the indifference of the company's employees: "They mock our situation, saying: 'Those who can swim won't drown!'" (Documento dos Moradores da Vila do Repartimento, 22 February 1984).

Staying close to the river shores became, then, a means of adding pressure to achieve the unmet demands and the unfulfilled promises:

The deadlines set by Eletronorte itself to pay its debt to the population of Jacundá have all run out. We announce that we are going to stay on the shores of the Tocantins, in the former Jacundá, helping each other collectively until Eletronorte meets all its obligations to Jacundá's population. (Expropriados de Jacundá, "Manifesto ao público", February 1984)

On the edge of the Amazonian river network, the dam and the compulsory relocations meant that the supply of water had become a problem:

The expropriated people with the right to relocation asked for artesian wells to avoid having to consume water from the lake and, consequently, diseases that this would provoke. (Documento de denúncias e reivindicação dos expropriados dos três municípios – Tucuruí, Jacundá e Itupiranga atingidos pela construção da barragem de Tucuruí, 14 December 1983)

Following the relocation of families from old Repartimento to the new settlement, the need for water and electrical power has worsened, in part because the agreement has not been fulfilled, that is, water distribution trucks do not deliver daily. (V Documento de Denúncias e reivindicações dos desapropriados pelas Centrais Elétricas do Norte do Brasil S.A., 21 March 1984)

The company, in turn, responded that: "The company's tendency is not to open wells since the technical information available indicates that the water quality is within acceptable limits" (Ata, 11 October 1984).

The specific situation of the *vazanteiros*, whose activities are closely bound to the seasonal hydrological dynamics of the Tocantins River, was, according to the documents signed in their name, ignored by the advisors and technicians from the electricity sector:

We have to make them understand that during the period of the *vazante* [low river], the only agricultural production is on this wet ground; you cannot work

anywhere else because of the drought. Hundreds of *vazanteiros* work for six months in the dry season to grow enough for the entire year, stockpiling beans and maize. With the derisory compensation offered by Eletronorte, we are unable to load the belongings for *terra firme* at the end of the *vazante* season (the beginning of the *enchente* [high river]). With our *vazante* we live, but with your ridiculous compensation we are destined for the swamp. (Documento dos Vazanteiros de Itupiranga à Eletronorte, 2 November 1981)

In the area around the reservoir, after the compulsory relocation of the residents, Dona Maria Nazaré, resettled from Remansão to the Rio Moju site, related that

everything here is difficult, it's something I've never adapted to, the land here isn't good... here you can work to you drop dead and produce nothing... there's no water; you die drawing up water from the well... there we had a lot of water, it was next to the marsh, next to the Tocantins, assai palms, a lot of fish, lots of everything. (Nazaré, 1984)

After the reservoir was filled, on the shores of the river situated below the dam, the riverside population asked for clarification “concerning the quality of the water, the restocking of fish, the seasonal floods” and asked for “the construction of fish ladders and sluices” (Silva, 1983).

Downstream of the dam, the problems multiplied:

With the damming of the water, the population has been sensing the change in the water, its colour and quality. It has becoming noticeably more silted. This has increased the problem of diseases, principally, diarrhoea, which cannot be combatted with homemade remedies. The fish are disappearing from the river and when they do appear, they have little durability and quickly rot. The fishermen and residents of the islands are forced to leave in search of another activity and are unable to find land to work. (Ata..., 29 March 1987)

The solutions presented failed to eliminate the problems. Discussing the difficulties in accessing water, at a meeting within the electricity sector, the head of Eletronorte's Real Estate Assets Sector asserted: “We began by drilling semi-artesian wells in each lot but after each dry season the well stops providing water and has to be deepened another two, three, four or five metres, a soap opera that seems to have no ending” (Caso de Tucuruí – Eletronorte, n. d., n. l.).

Another Eletronorte director added: “the populations downstream are much more problematic than those upstream. They are more numerous and a lot smarter. In the case of the Tocantins, they have been there since the seventeenth century, with very strong indigenous roots and a strong element of religiosity and involvement with nature” (Caso de Tucuruí – Eletronorte, n. d., n. 1.).

It was these kinds of polemics, established around the social and environmental impacts provoked by the dam, which justified the production of a considerable volume of graphic artefact by the movement of people affected by the dam. I turn now to the conditions of this production, seeking to characterize the scenes, acts and collective subjects involved in this writing.

## THE PRODUCTION OF WRITING

The collective character of the formulation and fabrication of the printed material associated with the mobilizations suggests that the writing scenes can be interpreted as similar to work situations with distributed and interconnected tasks (Fraenkel, 2007, p. 103):

The production of the printed materials was indeed a collective process of work and elaboration. Before the scheduled meeting with Eletronorte, a meeting was held of the commission of dam-affected people with the advisory team. The agenda was discussed along with the justification for each demand and the document was produced. A time was set to hold a debate, record the debate and then produce a framework document to be taken to the meeting with ELN. In the case of the other documents too – after the meeting, there was another assessment meeting and the formulation of a newsletter telling the population everything that was agreed or the issues on which no agreement had been reached, and calling on them to attend a new assembly and mobilize. (Silva, 2018)

The *cordelista* Goiano described this process of collective formulation of demands by the population affected by the Tucuruí dam as follows:

*After the liturgy / We sang to lift our spirits  
Aida on the blackboard / Began to copy  
The results of the groups / for us to take down  
After copying / all the results  
D. José photographed / very carefully*

*And called the comrades / to present themselves  
Comrade Zelito / said the report should be read  
Whoever was highlighted / could say straight away  
And during the reading / I saw highlights appear*

(Goiano, “Assembleia de Trabalhadores”,  
Cordel do Goiano, Anilzinho 5º, n. d., n. l.)<sup>9</sup>

Produced by a variety of minds and hands, the printed material thus resulted from a sequence of acts of writing, composed of distinct and concomitant sources of enunciation, by different interconnected texts and acts. Based on the annotations of a meeting or a debate, a final text was produced, as Goiano’s Cordel describes:

*Comrade Dilton immediately / raised a concern  
To produce a document / with everyone from the region  
And send it to the entities / to learn about the issue  
The committee was appointed / to elaborate the document  
Afterwards the discussion / could start straight away  
And it was Manoel Maria / who began to speak  
After Manoel Maria / made a reading  
Of the protest statement / very clearly he read  
Signed by the comrade / who was told to write it*

(Goiano, “Assembleia de Trabalhadores”,  
Cordel do Goiano, Anilzinho 5º, n. d., n. l.)<sup>10</sup>

The printed documents thus address the intended recipients – ministers of state, governors, directors of Eletronorte, the general public or the community of affected people – in the name of subjects who take on the collective status of an identificatory social ‘we’ – farmworkers, tenant farmers, residents – that is situated spatially, such as “We, *vazanteiros* of Itupiranga,” “We, farmers of the Trans-Amazonian Highway” or “We, tenant farmers and residents of the areas that will be flooded by the Tucuruí reservoir.” In certain cases, reference is also made to the formal status of people with rights as “Brazilians on the electoral register” who “are making public the indifference with which Eletronorte” was treating them. Gradually, this localized self-presentation was replaced by terms designating organizational forms such as “The Commission of Expropriated...” or “The expropriated, through their representative committee,” reflecting the growing articulation between the people affected by the

dam from different areas with rural workers unions, advisors and pastoral workers. The signature added to the documents has the power to transform the support on which it is inscribed. It changes the quality of the document, therefore, making it attributed to someone, possessing an author who validates it. The combined value of the addition of diverse signatures – as is the case of innumerable documents of the dam-affected people movement that mix the signatures of entities and individuals – confers particular strength and validity to the written act.

The printed object is distinguished from the oral enunciation by connecting its authors through a signature that allows the signatories to emerge into the foreground. The signatures thus connect the content of the printed material to the bodies of subjects as acts that verify the statement expressed therein, attesting to its authenticity. Given the absence of the body of the subject of the statements in the spatial trajectory of circulation of the printed material, the signature has the effect of a quasi-juridical attestation of its content. The signatures of entities associated with places – like *Vazanteiros* of Itupiranga, Residents of Nova Jacundá, Farmworkers of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, the Repartimento and Mojú Residents Committee, for example – spatially situate the feeling of injustice in determined places of the affected region.

Moreover, the written act mimics the oral act by creating a speaking object, with the difference that its enunciation is not ephemeral but lasts for as long as the material artefact on which it is written. The expressions “hereby...” or “through this document,” made explicit or implicitly presumed in the texts, aim to extend the temporal durability of the messages contained in oral acts, made in fleeting communicative contexts with speakers face-to-face with their addressees. The graphic act is revealed, therefore, as a recourse of primary importance, not only for recording as the basis for constituting a memory, but also for action:

Most of the printed material was produced with the objective of mobilizing the expropriated population. The content was discussed – both with the advisory team and with the negotiation committee. The questions and information contained in each item were then decided. The task of producing the document, the graphic element, drawings, was the responsibility of the advisory team. Many information releases were made via the small Christian Communities newspaper produced by the Prelacy of Cameté – which circulated among all the Catholic Church’s base communities, was cheap for people to subscribe to and contained themes of potential interest to the communities. This newspaper very often

tackled the question of the dam both upstream and downstream of the hydro-electric plant. The assembly reports and minutes of meetings, the campaign evaluation committee, and the farmworker encounters were accounts of meetings noted not only in order to retain a record of those negotiations and processes but also to tell the population what had been happening, what was agreed and what had not obtained agreement – the steps of the campaign. Making these records was a regular work activity. (Silva, 2018)

The performative character of the printed material containing denunciations and demands is manifested, on one hand, at the time of reading for the purposes of approval by the collective that sustains it, when the cohesion of the subjects present is constituted; on the other hand, the performance is also realized at the moment of handing these documents over to their intended recipients, the authorities from whom these collectives seek to obtain information, explanations and actions that meet their demands. These writing acts – understood as “social acts of language” (Reinach, 1989, p. 60) – are characterized by being necessarily, at the end of the process of mobilization and discussion, exteriorized in the form of demands addressed to recipients with the power to meet them. Since they do not result from written acts in the private sphere, it suffices for these social acts of language – as is the case of collective demands – to be exteriorized in some way in order for “something to change in the world” (Fraenkel, 2006, p. 10). It is necessary to consider that the place where the printed material circulates, as well as the conditions of action of the intended recipients of the discourse it contains, are transformed in the process (Fraenkel, 2007, p. 106) and that the performative force of the printed materials derives from the very dispersal of the written material:

The process of circulation of the printed material was made by people directly hand to hand – body to body. Communication did not make use of the postal service. Points existed where people knew they would receive documents and clarifications. The parishes in the localities served as a point of support, afterwards the unions joined the parishes. Afterwards some people linked to the movement – certain people who had fixed points – someone who worked for the Church but had a small store. Things were left there. Belém, who was a PMDB councillor at the time, was on the committee and also distributed this material. Juarez and Bete had a drug store. And the Committee itself took and delivered the material, either walking in the streets or going to the house of people who lived in the villages, like Manelito who was a union delegate – because many



members of the committee lived in rural plots along the Trans-Amazonian Highway. The target public for these publications were people affected by the dam, but they were also sent to international bodies like Cebemo, a Dutch organization providing financial support to the project, O Ceres, the Catholic Church in Rio, Fase, CPT, CNBB, afterwards the Comissão Pró-Índio [Pro-Indian Commission], CONTAG, federal deputy Ademir Andrade, federal deputy Fabio Feldmann – the institutions and people who supported the movement. Although the area was extensive, the material reached everyone. It reached them because it was carried by people linked to the movement, who, wherever they went, encountered someone affected by the dam, handed them the material and explained the current situation. (Silva, 2018)

The visible signs, imprinted on the written support, thus make up the act of demand, which will be consummated when delivered by hand to those deemed authorized to receive it. In this regard, the frequent absence of any concrete response on the part of the recipients of these demands – as demonstrated by the reiteration of the pleas addressed to the directors of Eletronorte and the public authorities – undoubtedly indicates that these documents are taken to convey their enunciations for a considerable period of time, generating variable effects and reactions depending on the distinct conjunctures.<sup>11</sup> The force contained in the printed artefact is associated, therefore, with the fact that it can last the time needed for it to be received and formally recognized by its intended recipients. Far from being limited to an isolated instant in time, the present moment of these acts of writing presumes a restoration of past events and situations, looking towards the future that its authors hope to achieve:

Once again we have to make public the indifference with which Eletronorte has been treating us. Everything has been ignored as usual. From 9.1.1980 to the present, nothing has happened to our benefit. Things always become worse. Just one thing did happen: our revolt increased with each day that passes.

(Denúncia e reivindicação da população dos vazanteiros de Itupiranga, Tauri e moradores da localidade da Rainha e Morajuba Direita, atingidos pelo projeto da Usina Hidrelétrica de Tucuruí – Reservatório. Documento III, jun. 1982)

As the act of writing is characterized by the absence of non-verbal signs of the kind normally present as a complement to oral language, and cannot be supplemented by other expressive means – with the exception, certainly, in the present case, of the *cordéis* and the *cânticos* – the writers of the manifestos face

the challenge of making written language the support for all the signifying elements. Hence, the eventual recipients and their capacity to locate themselves in the evoked universe are undoubtedly taken into account, seeking to clarify, as a consequence, what needs to be said in appropriate fashion. For this reason, the cognitive activities required for writing demand a strong contextualization, a series of referential calculations capable of reasonably anticipating the future reception of the enunciations (Faure, 2011). Given the impossibility of the supposed readers of this printed material asking for a clarification at the time of their reading, therefore, or, in the conflict-ridden case under discussion here, the fact that the promoters of the hydroelectrical project alleged a lack of sufficient information in delaying their response – the writers are forced to predict and anticipate the effects of their words, seeking to recontextualize them in order to respond in advance to potential objections and any requests for additional information (Deauvieu; Terrail, 2007, p. 303). A document from 1984, for example, began with a history of the campaign, asserting that “the families affected by the Tucuruí dam have been losing their lands, houses, customs and traditions ever since 1975 when Eletronorte, through its contractors, began to register families in the area of the reservoir” (Histórico da Luta, Tucuruí, out. 1984). A document dated May 1982, signed by union delegacies and ‘representative commissions,’ begins by referring to “Document I, dated 12 December 1981, submitted to Eletronorte, in which diverse denunciations were made to which the following are added: ...” (Denúncias e reivindicações da população de Repartimento e adjacências, atingida pelo projeto do reservatório da usina hidrelétrica de Tucuruí – documento II, 1982). Another document containing denunciations, dated June 1982 and signed by the Commission of People Affected by Eletronorte, starts by repeating the titles, dates and terms of documents issued prior to 1980 and 1981. The reconstitution of previous moments and contexts of the campaigns thus allows the composition of narrative formats that in turn enable people to trace the thread of the histories and provide proof of the capacity to show and demonstrate the legitimacy of the causes in question.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the Greek myth of the invention of writing by the gods, the god Theuth boasted that writing was a resource capable of saving memory and knowledge. King Thamus refuted the claim, alleging that writing could, on the contrary, lead to men neglect memory, since they could end up relying too much on

writing texts rather than recording living memories in their own souls (Jaeger, 1957, p. 996). While the written documents discussed here formed part, in the past, of the campaigns then in progress, they endured as elements in the disputes over the representations of the campaigns concerned and, at the same time, as a means of discussing and activating living memories of the same.

The archives of printed material produced by the movement of people affected by the Tucuruí dam express the set of actions design to maintain and order document collections, aiming to render perennial everything that could testify graphically to the experiences of social groups affected by the damming of the Tocantins River. In these collections we find recorded the knowledge that the movement of dam-affected people, the advisory bodies and individuals employed during the conflict, making this knowledge accessible in the form of a repository of the past that seeks to express the nature of these experiences (Cunha, 2004). If the acts of writing gathered in these collections are political acts by definition, so too were, undoubtedly, the initiatives of assembling and preserving these documents over time as part of the disputes surrounding the representation of these struggles.

Wolf (2016) shows how the relative lack of familiarity of the popular writer with the universe of writing has as a corollary a certain primacy of the heart and body. The presence of the sensory body is affirmed, indeed, in the act of writing through the popular script that describes the destabilization of the person's material and cultural environment.

*Comrade, why / are you so sad  
What was / it that happened to you  
Malaria arrived / there at home  
And my head / almost went mad*

(“O Companheiro/Jardineira”, Folha de canto avulsa. Encontro de lavradores, 1985, n. 1.)

In addition, the lack of intimacy with writing was no impediment to the politicization of the discourse of the dam-affected population:

*I am writing these verses / because I always liked  
To speak about injustices / in a lawless place  
But I cannot excuse myself / because I never studied*

(Helena, “História de um Povo”, Acampamento de Atingidos de Tucuruí, Paróquia Luterana, 1987)

Aristotle established an opposition between the animal voice – which allows the signalling of pleasure and pain – and the voice of the human *logos*, which enables the just and the unjust to become manifested and discussed (Rancière, 2017, p. 169). As Rancière argues, the wronged who speak out evoke the dramas of politics given that in the latter beings taken to be mute can be heard. And do so not only to express their suffering, but also to affirm their capacity to speak – and to speak of justice. To make the justice of their demands heard, they first have to make their voice heard. Political dissent thus assumes the form of a collective speaking out by those who seek to give proof of what they voice (Rancière, 2017, p. 170). The printed form of the manifestos, letters, bulletins and *cordéis* of the people affected by the Tucuruí dam expresses not only speaking out, but, more specifically, making the written word heard. Faced with the violence represented, for them, by the damming of the Tocantins and the expropriation of the ecosystemic base of their existences, they aim to give material and durable proof of their capacity to speak and write about their sense of injustice.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> CNPq researcher.

<sup>2</sup> “The community sings” is a mimeographed publication of the Prelacy of Cametá of Tocantins, probably published in the mid 1980’s. It mainly deals with religious themes but also addresses the peasant condition and the struggle for land in the region of the Lower Tocantins river.

### SONG OF THE TOCANTINS RIVER

*Looking at the Tocantins River, where many live in hope / today there is nothing left, only the memory / of what the Tocantins River was in all its beauty. / Today it has become a lake, leaving only sadness. / Various towns changed forever and never will return. / We can take as an example the town of Jacundá. / Various rocks and calm waters that drew admi-*

*ration. / Only a memory remains in each heart. With the beautiful calm backwaters, / with the birds singing, / the canaries with their tasks live and fish in that quiet place, / the beautiful flowers on its shore, and the beautiful beaches for us to bathe. / All of that has gone / since everything has been transformed. / Nothing is left in Jacundá. Tocantins River, nature has vanished, / the biggest wealth that God left man to enjoy./ Tocantins River, what we wanted has gone, / we don't need this energy / that you produce to export.*

<sup>3</sup> “As well as Eletronorte’s failure to make any resettlement plan, the families were thrown into the forest, without an infrastructure of roads or conditions for traveling to medical centres or schools. Forced to confront malaria and other serious problems” (“Documento de denúncias e reivindicações dos expropriados assentados na Gleba Parakanã” [Document of denunciations and demands of the expropriated population settled in the Parakanã Gleba], Tucuuruí, 17 October 1984).

<sup>4</sup> The corpus of printed artefacts studied for the present analysis included the material produced by various entities from the movement of people affected by the construction of the hydroelectric plant. These documents were stored in the collections of social movement advisory bodies such as the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) and the Centro de Educação, Pesquisa e Assessoria Sindical e Popular (Cepasp), non-governmental organizations like CPI-SP and the Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e Informação (Cedi) – whose collection was subsequently incorporated into the archives of the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA) – as well as in the archives of the different researchers who have produced academic works on the theme. This material added up to 168 different printed texts, published between 1979 and 1990, totalling around 800 pages.

<sup>5</sup> According to a former advisor of the movement of dam-affected people, “it is true that there were very many illiterate people unable to read anything, but at that time there was no other way of communicating with this population. Because there was no community radio – there was a radio station in Tucuuruí that belonged to the mayor linked to Eletronorte. So there was no vehicle capable of speaking to the dam-affected population aside from writing on paper. The advice given was for each person who knew how to read to read and explain to the others. And this ended up working. We never had a problem with the printed material ending up in a person’s hands and nobody knowing how to read it. People read the document and it performed its function of mobilizing and informing” (SILVA, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Citing documents from the electricity sector on energy in Amazonia, Sonia Magalhães had already emphasized “the lack of awareness that preceded and accompanied the construction of the UHE-Tucuuruí expressed in the preconceived notions that informed the procedures adopted towards the rural population, notably the premise of a social and historical vacuum, associated with the idea of a ‘virgin forest’ that needed to be ‘dominated’” (MAGALHÃES, 1988, p. 113).

<sup>7</sup> In relation to the Amazonian rivershore population, Mauro Leonel (LEONEL, 1998, p. 28) emphasizes that “few river dwellers focus exclusively on fishing. [...] the majority practice agriculture and extractivism, combined with the periods of small catches.”

<sup>8</sup> In an interview granted in Belém, in August 2017, Raul do Couto, former technician of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra of the Prelacy of Cametá, stressed: “Something interesting happened for the people of Tucuruí: a priest from the Prelacy of Cametá was in the Northeast attending an event on dams in Brazil. In 1979 or 1980, I believe. The Prelacy of Cametá tried to take part, principally the parish of Tucuruí. So, on this priest’s trip to the dam encounter, he made his pronouncement, recounting what was happening in Tucuruí. An advisor from one of the federations of workers from Alagoas or Pernambuco then said: ‘I’m going to take holiday leave and travel there with you.’ That was how the movement of people affected by the Tucuruí dam began.”

<sup>9</sup> The memoir of the advisors records that “a substantial volume of material came from the population, such as music and *cordéis*. Very often we helped print and distribute them since they helped animate the campaign, providing better information, and not allowing a negotiation that failed to achieve its objective to disillusion the population. This helped keep people’s spirits buoyed. It had this animating role” (SILVA, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> In his research on the organizational procedures of rural workers associations and unions, John Comerford observed rituals in the state of Minas Gerais similar to those described here, showing that the actions and mediations promoted by distinct actors involved in the movements united advisors – lawyers and pastoral workers – union directors and peasant leaders, with all these agents becoming involved in the intellectual work of formulating demands, including in written form (COMERFORD, 1999, p. 16): “There are stages of the meetings prioritized by members of the coordination team for written annotations” and “the discussions undertaken in the group work are also annotated” (p. 57); “During the meetings, members of the coordination team assumed the task of noting the outcomes of the discussions and these annotations (which may be made on paper, cardboard or a blackboard) can be used at other stages of the same meeting and/or give rise to a report” (p. 52).

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy argues that although the actions of the agents promoting large-scale projects are geared towards a pre-established end, “this end will never be the effective conclusion of the unending process that all action unleashes within the network of human relations” (DUPUY, 1991, p. 99). On this point, it is well-known how conflicts associated with large-scale projects become prolonged in historical time in a flow of phenomenon that extend far beyond the moment when the works are concluded. In the case of the UHE-Tucuruí, whose survey and viability studies were begun in 1972 with construction work begun in 1984, a legal agreement was finally concluded only in 2016 for payment of compensation to 2,343 families expropriated by Eletronorte for construction of the hydroelectric plant (“Expropriados da Eletronorte vão receber R\$12 milhões de indenização” [People expropriated by Eletronorte will receive R\$12 million in compensation], *Ver-o-Fato*, Tucuruí, Sunday, 14 August 2016. Available at: <http://www.ver-o-fato.com.br/2016/08/expropriados-da-eletronorte-va-receber.html>. Consulted on: 11 January 2018).

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