

# SWEDISH MIGRATION TO NORTHERN ARGENTINA

The Conditions and Possibilities of Settlement  
in the Early Twentieth Century

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**ABSTRACT:** We examine how the settlement of Europeans in the Americas was shaped by colonial processes. We specifically discuss the role of Swedish migrants in relation to processes of settlement in the border regions between Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia during the beginning of the twentieth century. We focus on migrants who settled in different parts of northern Argentina, becoming small-scale farmers or cattle ranchers. Based on an analysis of migration narratives and archival work, we compare settler strategies and socioeconomic positions and discuss how the migrants were affected by structural factors, such as state policies on immigration and land tenure, as well as contrasting models for agriculture and livestock production. We find that although conditioned by these factors, their settlement differed in terms of premigration networks, community building, type of mobility, and settlement depictions. We argue that in our cases, migrants became settlers, however the complicity with colonizing agents is dissimilar.

**KEYWORDS:** Swedish migration, settlement, Argentina, settler colonialism, yerba mate, cattle ranching

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In this article we discuss the role of Swedish migrants in relation to processes of settlement in the border regions between Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia during the beginning of the twentieth century. On one hand, we study Swedish migrants who settled in the province of Misiones, northeast Argentina, who mainly became small-scale farmers. On the other hand, we look at the trajectories of migrants who founded and worked on estates dedicated mainly to cattle ranching in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco.

In contrast to the scholarship on migration to North America, Nordic migration to Latin America remains an understudied topic. There are some works concerning Nordic migration to this region (e.g., Bjerg 2001; Sæther 2016) and only a few focusing specifically on Swedish migration to the border regions we are concerned with here (Ingridsdotter 2020, 2023; Olsson and Álvarez López 2022; Álvarez López and Olsson 2023; Gustavsson 2023). There are historical overviews on the Swedish migration to Brazil (Stenbeck 1973; Friberg 1988; Retsö 2016) and linguistic studies of the Swedish spoken in Misiones (Flodell 1986, 2002). In the case of the border between Argentina and Bolivia, the Swedish presence has been studied as part of Sweden's and Argentina's history of anthropology (Bossert and Villar 2007; Lindberg 2008).

We use the case of Swedish migration to Latin America to discuss how the settlement of Europeans in the Americas was shaped by colonial processes. The goal is to examine the ways Swedish migrants became settlers in northern Argentina. With a discussion of two empirical cases, we seek to identify and contrast settlement strategies and the characteristics of two regionally bounded settler experiences. By looking at migrant trajectories, we examine settlement strategies as they are portrayed in migration narratives and how different contexts condition their options. We hope to contribute to a discussion on Nordic involvement in colonial histories (Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012; Naum and Nordin 2013; Höglund and Andersson Burnett 2019; Hennessey and Fur 2020) and the role of Nordic migrants in settler colonial processes (Hansen 2013; Fur 2014).

We first outline our theoretical approach for understanding the relation between migration and settlement in a Latin American context. Then we present an historical background on the period of mass European immigration to this region (1880–1930), focusing specifically on the Argentine context. This is followed by the description of the two settlement cases, where we discuss the extent to which settlement strategies were structured by state initiatives and local industries. We show how the settlement strategies were marked by the cultivation and harvest of yerba mate in Misiones and by the breeding and caring for cattle in Chaco. Finally, we discuss the similarities and differences between the settlement experiences in terms of structural

factors and particular modes of migrant settlerhood identified as important for understanding how migrants become settlers.

## Migration and Settlement in Latin America

The questions surrounding how migrants become settlers need to be discussed in the light of current debates in Latin American history, anthropology, and settler colonial studies. Building on the idea of complicity of settlers in the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples (Wolfe 1999; Veracini 2010), Laura Madokoro (2018) stresses the need to see migrants as actors in settlement processes by exploring the ways migrants engage in local settler colonial formations based on the relations they have with other groups.

For us it is especially important to clarify how we use the terms “migrant” and “settler,” as the choice of words has conceptual implications. The use of “migrant” rather than “immigrant” or “emigrant” is a way to conceptually emphasize the fluidity of motion, going past nation-state–framed analysis in migration history (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Madokoro 2018). In this study the term “migrants” encircles a wide range of trajectories including those who settle for longer or shorter periods, those who continually move between countries and regions, those who continue their journey, and those who return. Our interest is directed toward the transition from migrant to settler. In this article we use the concept of “migrant settlerhood” coined by Madokoro (2018) to investigate different ways migrants become settlers in terms of subjective experiences, structural factors, and boundary making between groups. It has been argued that settlers in settler colonial processes are a special kind of migrant, that “they are made by conquest, not just by immigration” (Mamdani 1998) and that settlers seek to remake their societies by the process of settlement rather than merely joining someone else’s (Veracini 2010). Thus, being a migrant does not necessarily imply being a settler.

We seek to explore the intertwined relations between migration and settlement by looking at two concrete cases of Swedish migrant groups in Latin America between 1903 and 1940.<sup>1</sup> This calls for considering how the

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1. These years were chosen within the larger study; 1903 because it is the year that Swedish migrants were first registered in Misiones (Flodell 2002, 61) and 1940 as an end year because the Swedish colony in Misiones were largely integrated into Argentine society around this time. This period also encompasses the decades during which various Swedish migrants worked and settled in the Argentine Chaco before returning to Sweden by the Chaco War (1932–35).

period of mass European immigration to this region has been and can be seen through the lens of settler colonial studies. A long and complex process of colonization characterized the region beginning with formal Spanish and Portuguese colonialism followed by a postcolonial period. When the colonies acquired their independence from Europe, a process of internal colonial expansion in each nation-state was eventually initiated. Certain settler colonial logics shaped these nation-building projects (Gott 2007; Lublin 2021). This was especially prominent in some contexts such as Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile (Goebel 2017). In Eric Wolfe's widely employed theory of settler colonialism, a common assumption is that in settler states there exists a drive to "eliminate the native" in order to give way to settlers (Wolfe 1999). One critique raised toward this assumption is that outside of Anglophone settler societies, the exploitation of Indigenous labor was intrinsically intertwined with logics of elimination (Englert 2020; Taylor 2021). Much of Latin American colonialism has been characterized by both land dispossession and labor extractions to which Indigenous peoples were simultaneously subjected (Speed 2017).

As is well known, Argentina's nation-building in the second half of the nineteenth century was underpinned by a whitening process, in which mass European immigration was aggressively promoted in conjunction with the systematic expropriation of Indigenous lands. As Lublin (2021) suggests, for mass European migration to benefit from Indigenous dispossession, it was essential for them to embrace a "settler colonial ethos." Since settler colonialism is a theoretical framework initially developed to explain colonial structures in Anglo-Saxon contexts, it is not possible to mechanically apply it to the case of Argentina (Taylor 2021). Nonetheless, we consider that this framework may offer insight and help us situate and locate the case of the Swedish settlement studied here in more generalized structures of settlement and dispossession in the Argentine context as well as regionally and globally.

## **European Migration and Indigenous Dispossession in Argentina**

The migrants in our material moved through the border regions of Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia, and Argentina is the focus in our material and analysis. The period after Argentina gained independence from the Spanish Crown in 1816 was characterized by political unrest and the state's quest to expand and establish its national borders. Inspired by liberal ideas about state building, nineteenth-century intellectuals and politicians acted according to the idea "to govern is to populate," giving rise to state policies that fostered European

immigration through legislation (Devoto 2002). Although not always fulfilled, the state offered subsidized journeys for migrants and free stay in Buenos Aires on arrival, as well as passage to one's final destination—often agricultural colonies and low-priced land (Bastia and vom Hau 2014, 478).

The migrants in our material were not necessarily affected by these state policies. While the Swedish migrants who ended up in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco belonged to the more educated and well-off sectors of society and traveled by their own means, most of the migrants arriving in Misiones had come through Brazil, benefiting from similar state policies. Although less accentuated than in Argentina, the Brazilian state regarded European immigration as a civilizing force. Dating from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, state policies fostered a combination of immigration as labor force and for settling as colonists in the southern states. This fostering of immigration was also tied to the abolishment of slavery (Seyferth 2013). For Bolivia, a tardy nation building, beginning late in the nineteenth century, when the local elites promoted a unified institutional project centered on exploiting and exporting silver, resulted in a weak state with poor knowledge and control over vast portions of its national territory and a void concerning immigration policies (Soifer 2015).

As historian José Moya argues, during the early period of capitalist modernization in Argentina, European migration was conditioned by five main movements: “demographic expansion, liberalism, the commercialization of agriculture, industrialization, and advances in transportation” (Moya 1998, 44). Moya shows how factors such as the construction of and development of railroads and steamers combined to transform Argentina into a migrant destination in a global network of capital accumulation where migrant bodies and agricultural commodities moved through interlaced patterns (Moya 1998, 58–59). Another factor to take into account when considering the European immigration to Argentina is the military expropriation of Indigenous land that made livestock and agricultural exploitation possible (FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014, 303). The combination of European settlement and military intervention on Indigenous land occurred especially in the border regions of Argentina. In these cases, it is relevant to recognize that settlement often took place in this context of Indigenous dispossession.

The nineteenth century nation-building projects in Latin America implied the configuration of different national formations of alterity (Segato 1998), informing state practices of extermination and tutelage toward a number of “internal others.” These practices responded to the varied interests that the economic and political powers had in the territories that were still partially under the control of Indigenous groups (Pacheco de Oliveira 2019). In Argentina, the Europeans came to embody the desired future of the nation,

while Indigenous peoples who lived in the territories the new independent state wanted to incorporate were brutally excluded (Nouzeilles and Montaldo 2002, 525). In this particular national formation, various regions were called “deserts” (Halperín Donghi 1982; Wright 2008). This term was used not because of geographical characteristics or lack of human inhabitants, but because they were discursively constituted as “wastelands,” in accordance with prevalent colonial logics, perceived as lacking state control, capitalism, and Western civilization (Gordillo and Hirsch 2004, 4; Wright 2008). The discourse of the desert ultimately justified a long series of military interventions against the Indigenous population who kept resisting the advance of the state.

Although there existed strong immigration policies in Brazil, European migrants there played a more minor role in its imaginary of national formation than in Argentina. In Brazil, Indigenous peoples have traditionally been depicted in the national historiography as either exterminated or protected when in fact, as Pacheco de Oliveira (2019) points out, these populations suffered various intermediate fates that cannot be conceived in this dualist fashion. As mentioned, nation building in Bolivia was a slow process by which the vast territories pertaining to the lowlands and inhabited by a plethora of Indigenous peoples remained unexplored and lacked state control. Unlike Argentina, the advancement on Indigenous land in the lowland Chaco region was not characterized by systematic military action but was left to the will of foreign companies and religious missions (Dalla-Corte Caballero and Vázquez Recalde 2011).

## Materials and Methods

We combine the analysis of published migration narratives with archival work. Our aim has been to identify and analyze mobility patterns as well as settlement strategies in relation to types of entanglement with state authorities and local industries by comparing two different cases. Our main material consists of published texts written by Swedish migrants and first-generation settlers regarding settler experiences in the border regions between Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia.

For Misiones, our analysis draws on a literary account based on interviews with migrants who arrived in Brazil and later settled in Misiones, in the 1960s (Pehrson 1970). For Chaco, we look at the memoirs of Swedish migrants who lived and worked shorter or longer time periods in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco (Jespersion 1942, 1943; Kraft 1943). These texts, all written in Swedish, are partially autobiographical aimed for larger audience and are characterized by a certain literary quality. Although these literary

sources contain personal narratives (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008), which can be considered documents of action as much as of self-construction and of memory, we approach them in terms of content and patterns of lived behavior to get insight into migrant and settlement experience. Very little has been written about this migration, and these narratives provide clues as to the motivations informing mobility patterns and settlement strategies. Thus, we look at these narratives for their content rather than as genres of migration narratives.

The published sources are put into dialogue with different types of archival material: interviews made by a linguist in the 1960s and 1970s with first-generation settlers in Misiones, Argentina (Institutet för språk och folkminnen; see also Flodell 1986) and unpublished sources such as maps, correspondence, postcards, manuscripts, newspaper articles, and photographs, related to Swedish settlement in the Bolivian and Argentine Chaco, consulted at the archive Jespersen efterlämnade papper, Lund University, and the Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm. We explore the archives as field sites, focusing on meaning making and the micro-details of human experience while contextualizing this with the structures that shape human life-worlds (see Lennartsson 2017).

### **Settling as Colonists in Misiones: The Possibilities of the “Green Gold”**

At the turn of the twentieth century, Misiones was a disputed and sparsely populated territory in northeast Argentina with unstable economic and political links to the Argentine state (Rau 2009, 53). After the Paraguayan war in 1876, Misiones was ceded to Argentina and inserted into the national immigration law, as well as subjected to the 1876 Avellaneda Law that promoted the establishment of rural colonies (Schmidt 1991, 8). Argentina sought to populate the territory to extract woods and agricultural produce. In this way, public land was made available for the European migrants while the Indigenous Guaraní Peoples were pushed further away (Bartolomé 1975, 246). For Swedish migrant settlement in Misiones in the early twentieth century, one agricultural produce in particular played an important role for this: the cultivation and harvest of yerba mate.

Yerba mate (*Caá-Matí* in Guaraní or *Ilex paraguariensis* in Latin) is a shrub that grows only in the soils of the Atlantic forests of northeast Argentina, southern Brazil, and eastern Paraguay. Its dried leaves and parts of its stem is handpicked, dried, and consumed as an infusion. The consumption of yerba mate has a long history in the region, its use as a stimulating drink dating to before the colonial conquest of the Spaniards. Yerba mate grew in

great varieties in the forest. At the time of the colonial conquest, Indigenous people had specific expertise on how to locate the yerba trees and harvest them (Folch 2010, 11). In the sixteenth century, the yerba trade became a source of revenue for the Spanish Crown, which regarded it as a mineral that could be used as a currency in the system of tribute requirements.

Before the colonial conquest there had been no need to insert yerba mate into agricultural plantations. The greater demand required larger harvests and knowledge on how to germinate the seeds and cultivate the plant (Folch 2010, 11–13). Between the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, plantations of yerba mate were increasingly becoming a substitute for the harvest of wild yerba. In Argentina, the early twentieth century saw a new form of state-initiated cultivation of yerba mate achieved through a colonization program that promoted small-scale family-based agricultural exploitation (Daumas 1930, 7; Rau 2009, 52). The narratives we draw on here regard migrants who arrived in Misiones through Brazil and Buenos Aires attracted by the possibilities this colonization program provided.

The first empirical source is the writing of Gerda Pehrson, a writer who was a former migrant to Brazil. During the course of her life, she returned to northeast Argentina and Brazil to document the Swedish migrant's experiences in a number of books published in the 1970s. For this article we have looked at *Svenska pionjärer i Sydamerika* (1970; Swedish Pioneers in South America), where Pehrson describes Swedish migrant experiences in Brazil and the reasons Argentina emerged as a possible destination. The second empirical source is an interview with Julio Torsten Graucob, who arrived in Misiones in the 1920s through Buenos Aires. He was interviewed by linguist Gunvor Flodell in 1984 (ARG00072).

Starting with Pehrson's text, we pay particular attention to the history of Anna Emilia Zelesko (née Carlsson), whom Pehrson met in Oberá, Misiones, in the 1960s. Pehrson and Zelesko were born years apart at the turn of the nineteenth century, and both left Sweden in 1911. Pehrson interviews Zelesko and tells her story in a first-person narrative. Zelesko migrated with her family from northern Sweden at the age of fifteen. Her father, whose possibilities for making a living were reduced after the mining strikes of 1909, hoped for a prosperous future in Brazil. Her grandfather sold his homestead to buy the whole family tickets on a ship that departed from Hamburg to Porto Alegre. Their reasons for leaving Sweden are common for many of the migration narratives about Brazil at this time. In total, three contingents, amounting to about three thousand to five thousand people, traveled to Brazil from Sweden between 1868 and 1911 (Álvarez López and Olsson 2023; Retsö 2016). These migrants were working class, formerly employed

in agriculture, sawmills, factories, or mines in Sweden (Friborg 1988, 78; Retsö 2016). They were escaping poverty, unemployment, or political persecution. Like many other Europeans at this time, they aspired for a better future in the Americas and learned about Brazil from agents who recruited migrants across Europe.

The Carlsson family consisted of twelve persons upon arrival in Brazil: Anna Emilia, her five siblings, parents, grandparents, an aunt, and uncles. Like many of the other Swedish migrants who arrived through Porto Alegre (Álvarez-López and Olsson 2022), it seems that this family accepted the Brazilian offer of acquiring a colony in the interior forests. Immigration to Brazil from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was regulated through laws that also governed colonization. The government was interested in sending European migrants, primarily toward the southern provinces, which were considered demographically “empty” and under threat from Argentina. The migrants were to form “colonial nucleuses” through family smallholding (Seyferth 2013, 120).

Anthropologist Giralda Seyferth notes that in legislation, the official designation *colono*, meaning colonist or settler, often appeared as a synonym for immigrant. She points toward how migration was linked to the eventual abolishment of slavery in late nineteenth century, tracing in legislative texts the uses of the word *colono*, which could mean a migrant “working to contract (almost always on abusive terms) in coffee cultivation,” or how the drive to foster European immigration was sometimes referred to in similar terms to the trade in slave labor, for example, through phrases such as “import” of European settlers (Seyferth 2013, 129). Others have noted how the interlaced character of immigration and abolishment of slavery affected Swedish migrants’ conditions and routes through southern Brazil (Olsson and Álvarez López 2022; Álvarez López and Olsson 2023). These conditions also affected the Carlsson family, who started to fall ill after arrival at their assigned colony. Within a year, Zelesko’s grandfather, mother, and younger siblings all passed away (Pehrson 1970, 79–82). These kinds of fatal events are often accounted for in the migration narratives from this time. Although some of the migrants adapted relatively well, many struggled with tropical diseases, floodings, and exploitative circumstances (Flodell 2002; Olsson and Álvarez-Lopez 2022).

Even if Brazil strived for migrants to settle in colonies, many found a living in the growing big cities (Seyferth 2013). After suffering great losses and failing as colonists, the family, now reduced to Zelesko, her father, and her uncle, returned to Porto Alegre, where her father could work in the construction industry. There she met a Swedish man whom she married; together with her father, they decided to set out for yet another colony.

Interestingly, Pehrson highlights the search for a Swedish community as one reason they decided to try their luck again in another colony. They had heard of a place toward the border of Argentina, where Swedish migrants had settled as colonists. Just like Olsson and Álvarez López have shown in their study on emigrant letters from Brazil (2022), Zelesko followed the route of previous migration, and it seems that it was important for her to establish a social network constituted by other Swedish migrants.

The colony assigned to the most recently arrived Swedes was located too close to the river that occasionally floods. The most recently arrived Swedish colonists had lost their houses and possessions and had either returned to Sweden or crossed the river into Argentina. Zelesko, her father, and her husband however had no other option than to stay. Pehrson pays attention to the personal relations; at this site Zelesko gave birth; lost her husband, who drowned in the river; struggled with the farm work alone; and then married a German migrant. Her family had a hard time making ends meet. As they heard news about the Swedes who had successfully settled across the river, in Misiones, Argentina, the decision to start all over gradually ripened. Pehrson quotes Zelesko:

Då och då under de åren kom det folk som berättade från Misiones i Argentina. Fler och fler svenskar flyttade över. Där kunde man få sälja det man odlade. Dit flyttade också svenskar direkt från Sverige. De odlade ett te som hette yerba. Varför skulle inte vi flytta dit också? (Pehrson 1970, 88)

(Once in a while people who came by told us about Misiones in Argentina. More Swedes moved across. There they could sell what they grew. Swedes from Sweden were also moving there. They grew a tea called yerba. Why would we not also move there?)

The market for yerba mate was quickly expanding at the turn of the twentieth century, and it provided possibilities for those looking to settle as colonists. The same year that Swedish migrants were first registered in Misiones, 1903 (Flodell 2002, 61), was also the year that the extended colonization of the Misiones region through small-scale farming was initiated by the Argentine government (Eidt 1971, 95). This colonization program was mainly based on agricultural exploitation; like Leopoldo Bartolomé has noted, yerba mate functioned as a “settler crop” since planting yerba conditioned the granting of land (Bartolomé 1975; see also Rau 2009, 52). Between 1903 and 1935, the area of Misiones where yerba mate had been planted increased from 16 ha to 58,500 ha (Rau 2009, 5). Bartolomé suggests that the factors behind the Argentine state’s successful colonization of Misiones were, on one hand, the political framework that made land accessible for those with small economic

means, and, on the other hand, the drive to cultivate yerba mate, “the green gold of the epoch” (Bartolomé 1975, 247).

As was the case with many migrants who had not succeeded the way they had hoped in Brazil, Zelesko appears to have been attracted by the possibilities of having an income from yerba cultivation in the colony, as well as by the prospect of living in a vibrant Swedish community. After some difficulties, the family decided to leave Brazil and go across the river. With help from fellow Swedish migrants, they arrived in a place called Yerbal Viejo where Swedes had settled, forming a colony. Yerbal Viejo was a primeval rainforest area, which as the name suggests was a location of old yerba trees, opened for farming in 1908. They claimed a piece of land and for the third time engaged in the arduous work of clearing the forest. But this time, “it was fun,” Zelesko said, as she had longed for a larger Swedish community and nearby neighbors (Pehrson 1970, 91).

Just like Zelesko, many working-class migrants who failed as colonists in Brazil crossed the river into Argentina, motivated by the prospect of cultivating yerba. In this sense, her history is part of a collective migrant experience where yerba mate played a crucial role for their possibilities to subsist. The emerging market of cultivating yerba also attracted Swedish migrants who came through another route. One of them was Julio Torsten Graucob, who was born in Stockholm in 1900 and was interviewed by linguist Gunvor Flodell in 1984 (ARG00072). He came from a family of good standing, had attended school for seventeen years, and then worked at a bank for two years. According to what he expresses in the interview, he wanted to travel and see the world. In 1919, he set out for Buenos Aires and from there made his way through various adventurous travels through Argentina. One day, when he was in Chaco, where he worked at a cattle ranch, he was reading a newspaper and saw an article about the possibilities of yerba cultivation in Misiones. He then went to Misiones where he met a Swedish colonist who showed him how to manage in the forest—which woods to work with, how to eat mandioca and black beans, and how to cultivate and consume yerba mate.

Through the acquaintance of other Swedes, he arrived in the Swedish colony in Yerbal Viejo in 1925. He decided to settle among the Swedes who had claimed land next to each other there. He built a small hut with a dirt floor and started to work the land, planting crops and yerba. Even if he came from other circumstances than the migrants who left Sweden out of necessity, he engaged in the same kind of initial work on his new land. He remembers suffering from loneliness, weight loss, parasites, wounds that would not heal, and sand fleas, which he had to wash away from his legs with kerosene. Remembering the initial time, he points toward a difference

between colonists that seems to be characterized by class, emphasizing that those who arrived from Buenos Aires were more likely to invest in and cultivate yerba in larger scale, whereas those who had arrived through Brazil planted yerba in small scale:

De hade en 3–4 hektar med yerba och sen höll de på med sin *mandioca* och *poroto* och svarta böna men det kunde man ju köpa för nästan ingenting i lanthandeln och då behövde man inte heller vakta för att *peon* . . . arbetarna, stal ju så att det var fantastiskt.

(They had their 3 or 4 hectares and then they carried on with their *mandioca* and *poroto* and black beans, but these could be bought in the store for nothing and you did not have to watch the *peon* . . . the workers stole so much it was amazing.)

The interviewer asks if he means that the migrants who had arrived through Brazil did not have visions. He replies:

Ja de brydde sig inte om det, det var flera som jag frågade varför planterar du inte mer yerba? Själva Gustav Nilsson . . . man tyckte han skulle ha det han hade ju inte heller någonting han hade ett stort ställe med alla sina mulåsnor för han jobbade mycket med kontraband / . . . / Men han brydde sig inte om yerba, ingen egentligen tyckte om där. Den som fick upp lite var Carlos Pettersson och Sand fick några större *yerbaler* annars var det egentligen mest vi som kom över Buenos Aires och den vägen, vi jobbade mest för att få ut pengar och det gick bra, yerban gick upp. Och 1937 for jag till Buenos Aires.

(Yes, they did not care, I asked a lot of people why they did not plant more yerba. Even Gustav Nilsson . . . one would think that he would have had a lot even if he had a big place where he had mules and worked with contraband / . . . / But he did not care about yerba, actually no one did. Those who had some were Carlos Pettersson and Sand who had larger *yerbales*, otherwise it was just us that came over Buenos Aires and through that route. We worked in order to make money, and it went well, the price of yerba went up. In 1937 I left for Buenos Aires.)

Graucob sold his yerba farm in the late 1960s when he left Argentina and went to live in Sweden with his family. He was not the only migrant with economic means to arrive to Misiones through the port of Buenos Aires who made a living out of cultivating yerba mate and maintaining a certain mobility.

Anna Emilia Zelsko and Torsten Graucob are regarded here as examples of two different categories of migrants who arrived in Misiones in the early twentieth century attracted by the state's policies on settlement on fiscal land (Eidt 1971). The cultivation of yerba mate is central for their settlement

here; however, their class positions affected the way they regarded and made use of the opportunity. Zelesko is one example of the migrants who traveled as families and arrived through Brazil, where they had failed to settle. Their livelihood was tied up in small-scale farming; for them yerba mate cultivation became a way to successfully settle as colonists; the access to land meant surviving. Graucob is an example of how the state policies also attracted migrants who had more economic means, mostly single men, who arrived through Buenos Aires, traveling across Argentina looking for adventures or possibilities. For this category of migrant, the access to land meant possibilities to make a living and invest.

However different their situations, the cultivation of yerba mate was instrumental for the settlement of these different types of Swedish migrants, as well as other European migrants, in the region at this time. Nevertheless, for both groups, the possibilities to live among other Swedish migrants, speak the language, gather socially, learn from each other, and cooperate on agricultural matters also stand out as important drives to settle in this particular place. Once installed, the migrants actively worked to create societal structures that resembled the way Swedish society was constructed, even naming their colony Villa Svea after the Swedish nation.

We suggest that yerba cultivation informed the organization of colonist society in Misiones, but there were clear differences in the class positions and resources different migrants brought with them—in this way, the state-initiated yerba cultivation allowed a migrant settlerhood in which both small-scale and larger farming became possible, depending on the previous class positions of the migrants. Interesting to note here are the diverging motivations for migration of the different groups in these narratives. For Zelesko, the narrative is focused on sufferings and failures in Brazil. Like many of her migrant peers, her family had been compelled to leave Sweden out of need and in hopes of making a better future in the Americas. The hardships of some of these migrants were familiar to the Swedish public at the time through Pehrson's and other literary work on the group who settled in Misiones (Wilhelm 1948; Barney 1952). On the other hand, the narrative in Graucob's interview is rather focused on adventures and success. Graucob left Sweden with the intention to travel, and he speaks of his journeys before arriving to Misiones as adventures. This places him closer to the other group of migrants we examine next: those who migrated to Formosa and the Bolivian Chaco and saw themselves as travelers.

When it comes to discussing the role of Nordic migrants in the dispossession of Indigenous land, we can consider that Zelesko and her peers became settlers in a process of colonial settlement that involved a lot of toil, and much of their efforts went into surviving. This process did not imply social

mobility for them. They left Sweden as part of the working classes, seeking a better future only to have their marginal position reconfirmed in their new “homeland,” be it Brazil or Argentina. This marginality suggests a low or more indirect agency in the process of dispossessing Indigenous lands. Nonetheless, social marginality is not the only factor to consider.

What is interesting to point out is that although Zelesko and Graucob represent migrants with contrasting class backgrounds resulting in different ways of engaging with the yerba industry, their actions and strategies as small-scale farmers or larger-scale yerba cultivators were strongly regulated by state land tenure policy. We argue that this protagonism of the state in the Misiones settlement process undermined the level of agency of any type of migrant with regard to the more generalized process of Indigenous dispossession.

### **Settling and Exploring the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco: Swedish Migrants and Cattle Ranching in the Hinterlands**

The Argentine Chaco is part of a larger geographical area called the Gran Chaco characterized as a lowland alluvial plain that also comprises parts of Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil. This region in northern Argentina covers the provinces of Formosa and Chaco, Salta, Santiago del Estero, and the northern portion of Santa Fé. The archive material and migration narratives analyzed here particularly refer to experiences of Swedish settlement in Formosa and the mobility of migrants across the Pilcomayo River into what was considered the Bolivian Chaco before the Chaco War (1932–35).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Formosa was a national territory administered by the central government in Buenos Aires. It was inhabited by Indigenous people over which the Argentine state finally gained control in 1911 when the last military campaign was carried out (Beck 2007). The military interventions in the region were meant to “pacify” rather than exterminate the Indigenous population to provide the local industries with the labor force they required (Gordillo 2004). The latter gave rise to systematic attempts to sedentarize the Indigenous population by dispossessing them of their territories and gathering them in reductions, missions, and reserves (Wright 2008).

Simultaneously, European immigrants and other non-Indigenous settlers were encouraged to populate the lands gained through military intervention against the Indigenous population. Law no. 5559 from 1908 was destined to “promote the national territories” in this colonizing sense. For Formosa and Chaco, this meant incentivizing the colonization of the interior of these territories with settlers by creating various state-sponsored agricultural, pastoral,

or mixed colonies (Maeder and Gutiérrez 1995). Where the soil was deemed unfertile and unfit for agriculture, an expanding cattle ranching took hold.

The narratives and biographies analyzed here are intimately linked to cattle ranching, which was expanding in the National Territory of Formosa and spilling over into the Bolivian Chaco at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike other parts of the Argentine Chaco, where forestry, cotton production, and small-scale agriculture prevailed, in Formosa cattle ranching rapidly expanded, although it could not compete with the same activity developed on the humid Pampas region (Maeder and Gutiérrez 1995). Instead of supplying the European market, cattle ranching in the Argentine Chaco catered the internal markets (especially neighboring provinces Salta and Tucuman) and parts of Chile and Bolivia, where the livestock would be taken by foot (Beck 2007). Unlike the forest and cotton industries, cattle ranching was often practiced on fiscal lands, where abundant wetlands and natural pasture areas were available, enabling extensive cattle breeding without large investments (Maeder and Gutiérrez 1995).

The narratives we examine concern the biographies of two Swedish migrants: Mauricio Jespersen and Eric Kraft. Both published autobiographical narratives in Swedish about their migration and settlement in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco. In his two autobiographical novels *En svensk caballero vid Pilcomayo* (1942; A Swedish Gentleman by the Pilcomayo) and *I vildmarkens våld* (1943; At the Mercy of the Wilderness) Jespersen recalls his arrival in Buenos Aires and his experience as a ranch worker, estate owner, and colony administrator in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco. Kraft writes a short chapter included in the edited volume *Chacofarare berättar* (1943; Chaco Traveler Stories) about his work on different estates owned by Swedes in the same region.

Jespersen and Kraft are representative of another type of Swedish migration to Argentina that contrasts with the more well-known case of Swedes settling in the agricultural colony of Oberá in Misiones. Although scarcely documented and studied (Bäckmann 1910; Paulin 1951), this more disperse type of migration was characterized by educated male migrants arriving through Buenos Aires alone or in small groups and working and settling in different rural areas outside the established Swedish colonies in Buenos Aires and Misiones. This migration cannot be neglected when studying Swedish migration to Latin America. When it comes to the Argentine Chaco, there are various cases of highly educated Swedish migrants who engaged in the local industries, eventually becoming estate owners, as did Jespersen (Bäckmann 1910).

In July 1921, Jespersen, Kraft, and another Swede found themselves in Formosa building an estate together with Paraguayan workers. The estate

was eventually dedicated to cattle ranching and cotton production, receiving the name Campo Luminoso by Mauricio Jespersen, who was a law student at Lund University when he emigrated from Sweden in 1912 for personal motives and without a fixed destination. After working as a sailor on various ships that took him to Australia and the South Pacific, he finally decided to try his luck in Argentina, which he called “de stora möjligheternas land” (Jespersen 1943, 11) [the land of big opportunities]. After arriving at the port of Buenos Aires and failing at securing employment through the Swedish community in the city, Jespersen studied the map of Argentina and decided to head to the area that was least marked by names of towns and villages (Jespersen 1943). This is how he ended up in the Argentine Chaco in 1913, according to his narrative.

In 1921, when Jespersen enjoyed the company of his fellow countrymen Carl Hage and Eric Kraft in the construction of his estate, he had lived in the Argentine Chaco for eight years, first in the province of Santa Fé, where he had worked side by side with *peones* and *gauchos* learning how to manage cattle ranching, and later heading north to Formosa. In his memoirs, Jespersen (1942) highlights how he combined his work on cattle farms with expeditions to unknown parts of the Gran Chaco, eventually gaining vast knowledge of the region and its Indigenous inhabitants. He was employed by members of the rising Swedish bourgeoisie and local financial entities and governments to undertake different type of prospecting activities (Gustavsson 2016). Nonetheless, Jespersen was not only a man with great practical knowledge in the field, he also engaged in the documentation of these “vanishing” societies, writing film scripts and publishing texts with certain ethnographic qualities (Lazzari and Gustavsson 2024).

Because of this knowledge, Jespersen was hired between 1922 and 1933 by a financial firm in Buenos Aires to administrate a colonization project based on cattle ranching north of the Pilcomayo River on land that was considered to belong to the Bolivian Chaco before the Chaco War. On these lands were many Indigenous groups, most of them pertaining to the Nivaclé People, who were being dispossessed of their land as Argentine cattle ranchers settled there. The colonization effort lasted ten years. It was interrupted by the outbreak of the Chaco War in 1932 and finally destroyed when the area was eventually declared part of the Paraguayan Chaco (Jespersen 1942). This led Jespersen to return to Sweden, where he lived for sixteen years, becoming a prolific writer (among other things) before moving back to South America to administrate a new cattle ranching project in the lowlands of Bolivia where he stayed until his death in 1969 (Gustavsson 2016).

After helping out at Campo Luminoso, Eric Kraft ended up working for six years on another estate, Laguna Blanca, owned by Swedish settler Gustav

Forselius in the Bolivian Chaco. In 1921 the communications between both estates were fluid since Jespersen regularly provided Forselius with supplies delivered through the Argentine railway system by personally transporting them into Bolivia by crossing the Pilcomayo River. For Forselius, it was easier to access supplies by crossing over the international border than by traveling to the closest cities in Bolivia. Kraft (1943) narrates how he came to Bolivia through Formosa. He remembers how he quickly got fed up with the city and found himself on a boat to Formosa. “Redan efter fem månader hade jag fått nog av civilisationen” (Kraft 1943, 145) [Already after five months I got fed up with civilization]. In Buenos Aires he met a Swede who had warmly recommended he travel there. Once in Formosa, Kraft was introduced to Forselius on one of Jespersen’s journeys to Bolivia, becoming his cattle supervisor, also called *mayordomo*. Forselius’s estate held three thousand cows, a few hundred horses and mules, around a thousand ovine and caprine animals, ten semi-domesticated pigs, and a number of hens and ducks (Kraft 1943, 157). Just like Jespersen, Kraft fled the region and went back to Sweden at the outbreak of the Chaco War.

When it comes to comparing migrant narratives, it is interesting to point out that Kraft’s story is similar to that of Jespersen. Kraft had not emigrated directly from Sweden to Argentina. Born in Gothenburg, he left Sweden in 1905 at the age of twenty-eight and headed for Africa, where he was employed for eleven years by the Congo Free State (1887–1908), renamed the Belgian Congo in 1909 (Kraft 1943). With a pension for his years of service in Africa he returned to Sweden, where he was unable to find employment. Combined with a certain lust for adventure, the situation made him accept a job offer in Buenos Aires. Kraft describes how a certain “äventyrlustan ännu satt kvar i kroppen” (Kraft 1943, 144) [lust for adventure still remained in his body].

As mentioned, Jespersen’s and Kraft’s experiences, either as estate owners or ranch workers, is intimately linked to the cattle ranch industry flourishing in the region. Jespersen had learned how to localize and use natural pasture areas in northern Santa Fé where he was employed as a *peon*:

Som jag nämnt omfattade estancia El Mogote tjugotusen hektar, men Schultz använde i själva verket ett betydligt större område till betesmark åt sina kreatur. Där fanns ingen lantmätare, som läste lagen för honom, och ingen granne, på vars mark han gjorde intrång. (Jespersen 1943, 26)

(As I have mentioned the estate El Mogote comprised twenty thousand hectares, but Schulze actually used a considerably larger area as pasture for his livestock. There was no land surveyor who would read out the law to him nor any neighbors on whose land he was trespassing.)

Although Santa Fé did not have as much fiscal land as Formosa did in the 1910s and 1920s (Maeder and Gutiérrez 1995), the comment suggests that the use of pastures did not necessarily correspond to legal land tenure agreements.

It is also interesting to note that even if Jespersen refers constantly to the presence of the Indigenous population as a threat to the *estancieros* and settlers, he affirms here that the land around the estate El Mogote was free of neighbors. It seems like the status of “neighbor” was reserved for people with land titles or who were willing and able to expand the cattle ranching frontier northward. Stripping the “Indians” from the possibility of being considered “neighbors” is an example of how the migrant experience of the cattle ranchers explicitly contributed to the erasure of Indigenous people in the region.

Although Jespersen never wrote in detail about the status of the land on which he established his estate in Formosa in 1921, we know that it was located in an area that historian Hugo Beck (2007) points out functioned as a military zone between 1917 and 1938. Most of the area was declared fiscal land, although various Indigenous groups practiced a limited type of hunting and gathering activities on it. According to Beck (2007), the military status of the area largely benefited non-Indigenous settlers, such as creole cattle ranchers, who were easily granted permission on behalf of the military authorities to use the area as pastureland, instead of having to go through bureaucratic procedures. It is also worth mentioning that the benefits for the non-Indigenous population crossing and living in the military zone should be considered random outcomes, not part of a state-sponsored settler policy. As we have seen, this was not the case in other parts of the Argentine Chaco, where laws promoted the formation of colonies.

Although there is no documentation indicating Jespersen’s relations with the military authorities controlling this area, we know that he was generally on good terms with the police and military forces in Argentina. He recalls accompanying military expeditions to different parts of the Argentine Chaco. He tells how he participated in a punitive military expedition which had the main goal of returning stolen horses to their rightful owner. After Jespersen showed captain Pedro Gomez where to find water for his troops and indicated in what direction the Indian bandits might have taken off, Gomez “blev till och med artig och inbjöd mig ivrigt att följa honom på jakten efter hästtjuven” (Jespersen 1943, 51) [even became polite and anxiously invited me to join him on his pursuit of the horse thieves].

To sum up, it is important to clarify that these migrants who settled as ranch owners were very few in number and did not travel with their families, nor did they form them in the reception countries, making it impossible

to speak of the formation of a Swedish colony in the region but rather of networks. Neither did the individual settlement endeavors last due to political and social circumstances. This means that instead of speaking of a Swedish migration wave to the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco, it is more suitable to speak of a reduced number of Swedish migrants settling and working in this region between 1910s and the outbreak of the Chaco War. Although the settlement projects did not last and were not part of a collective enterprise, these migrants were inserted in networks connecting them with the influential members of the Swedish community in Buenos Aires. Another important point to consider is that these migrants were educated and socially accommodated. The term “privilege” can be used to classify the migration trajectories of Jespersen and Kraft because they had different forms of capital (especially cultural) facilitating their mobility and settlement as well as their acquisition of relative positions of power in relation to local communities (Duplan and Cranston 2023). This position of privilege and the type of colonization work they engaged in can be seen as a particular type of migrant settlerhood that implied becoming powerful actors in settling land that was inhabited by Indigenous groups and helped Bolivia lay claims for great extensions of the Chaco. The scarce presence of the state in this region during the first half of the twentieth century placed the settlement process in the hands of a plethora of smaller colonizing agents.

Although they were partially motivated by social and economic ascension, one of the main drives expressed by these migrants was a certain lust for adventure and desire to position themselves as explorers of unknown territories, as well as pioneers in bringing progress, “civilization,” and productivity to these regions, far away from the metropolitan centers. When their autobiographical narratives were published in the 1940s, they were commercialized as travel and adventure literature. In their texts, the authors present themselves as self-made men without any ties to family or relatives in the old or the new countries. They assume a celebratory tone when attributing their prosperity and good fortune to their own doings. Rather than narrating the toil and hardship of making a living and settling in a new country they present their work with cattle as part of a travel experience or as adventures from their youth.

This means that although they speak indirectly of their migration experience, there is no place for the term “migrant” or “migration” in their texts. We argue that framing this experience as travel and adventure rather than migration can be understood as a class-bound rhetoric used to differentiate their mobility from that of the lower classes. We argue that labeling and classifying these narratives as a product of travel and adventures has historically invisibilized settlement practices of privileged migrants and has

downplayed this type of migrants' role in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

## Conclusion

We discussed two cases of Swedish migration to Latin America, comparing socioeconomic positions and how settler strategies were conditioned by structural factors, such as state policies on immigration and land tenure as well as the local industries. We found the category "Swedish migrant in Argentina" to be quite versatile; within it exists a broad span of socioeconomic positions. In Misiones, the first Swedish settlers consisted of families mainly of a working-class background, whereas in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco the settlers were unmarried male migrants with a certain degree of higher education and economic standing. In the sources from Misiones, we also find examples of more socially accommodated migrants who were attracted to the Swedish colony by the prospect of cultivating yerba.

When it comes to the structural factors, our comparison reveals that local policies of land tenure and industries took different forms in Misiones and Formosa. It is thus necessary to consider the regional processes of internal colonization, which involved contrasting models for agriculture and livestock production as well as state policies and how settler strategies responded to these. The national interest of populating Misiones while advancing the national industry of yerba mate laid structural groundwork for migrants to settle as colonists there. On the contrary, in Formosa where state initiatives to "populate" the region were few and often unsuccessful, the state highlighted its presence in the form of military outposts to protect the growing cattle industry from the Indigenous population. In this sense, we see that yerba mate cultivation indeed acted as a "settler crop" (Bartolome 1975) in a process of dispossession of Indigenous land mediated by the state, while in Chaco the cattle industry became a driving force for settlement and dispossession. We also found that yerba mate production and cattle ranching played instrumental roles for which type of migrants were attracted to the different regions and how they found different opportunities in these settings.

We analyzed other factors that explain how the migrants in our material became settlers. By analyzing the migration narratives and the archival material about the different regions, we found that migrant settlerhood can differ in terms of premigration networks/routes, community building, types of mobility, and depictions of settlement.

First, we look at premigration networks/routes (see Bjerg 2016). The migrants that moved through Brazil to Argentina followed the routes of previous Swedish migrants who entered into Misiones after failed settlement

attempts. For Argentine and Bolivian Chaco, premigratory networks between Argentina and Sweden were weak. Even so, the ethnic community of Swedes in Buenos Aires either retained migrants in the port city or directed them to new destinations where work was available or investments could be made. In our material, migrants were routed toward Formosa from Buenos Aires and in some cases also toward Misiones.

Second, we have noticed different types of community building. In Misiones a closely knitted community of Swedish-speaking families built a colony that flourished amid a larger context of European migrants. The possibility of speaking one's native tongue, participating in social gatherings, and engaging in networks of reciprocity attracted migrants with different socioeconomic backgrounds. In Chaco, the fewer migrants, who were spatially dispersed over large areas, formed a loose network with fellow countrymen in Buenos Aires, connecting the port city with the cattle ranching regions.

Third, the migrants who became settlers in Misiones were quite mobile before settling down, moving between different colonies and across national borders, searching for a reasonable livelihood and in some cases also an ethnic community with cultural affinity. The more socially accommodated migrants who settled in Formosa and Misiones showed even higher levels of mobility. It is possible to consider the Swedish settlement in the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco as a result of a privileged experience of migration, linked to choosing a place to settle after vast travels to different parts of Latin America or the rest of the world. It is especially this position of privilege that allowed them a social and a spatial mobility that most of the families who arrived to Misiones through Brazil lacked.

Fourth, we found different depictions of settlement. Pehrson writes explicitly about the hardships of a migration and settlement experience, describing her protagonists as "Swedish emigrants" while the term "migrant" is completely absent in the Jespersen's and Kraft's narrations in which migration is disguised as travel and settlement is presented as a story of success until the Chaco War breaks out. These different portrayals of settlement represent specific configurations of migrant settlerhood conditioned by regional context; they are also informed by the author's class position. We argue that the absence or emphasis on narrating an experience of migration need to be considered in the light of broader semantic dynamics in which mobile people become ordered and categorized as "migrants" or not, being part of or left out of a process of "migranticization" (Amelina 2021).

Finally, when regarding the process by which migrants become settlers, we have seen that the migrants that arrived through Brazil to Argentina engaged in remaking their society by building a colony. This makes it possible to understand their settlement in terms of a settler colonial logic, as it

has been described by others (Wolfe 1999; Veracini 2010). Meanwhile, the migrants who settled in Formosa and the Bolivian Chaco did not participate in ethnically bound community building in the same organized way. They worked with cattle ranching or settled as estate owners rather than as colonists. In both cases, migrants became settlers, however the complicity with colonizing agents is dissimilar. In Misiones the dispossession of Indigenous land was mainly regulated by the state through settlement policies in which migrants were encouraged to settle as yerba mate cultivators. In Formosa and the Bolivian Chaco, the state was more preoccupied with patrolling the border between Argentina and Bolivia and containing the large Indigenous population through military vigilance than with planning and executing settlement strategies. The settlement process here was thus driven by other actors, such as cattle ranchers and other spontaneous land grabbers who profited from the absence of land tenure regulations while being protected by the military outposts.

We argue that for Chaco, the migrants need to be seen as colonizers, not only because of their privileged social and economic position but also due to cattle ranching's structural role in the dispossession of Indigenous land in this region. In Misiones the migrants' participation in dispossession was more limited because of their marginal position in Argentine society and the active role of the state as a powerful colonizing agent. Thus, we have seen that migrants, and in these particular cases Nordic migrants, can be part of settlement processes although they are not necessarily to be considered "settlers" in a settler colonial sense (Wolfe 1999).

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