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**Never quite abandoned, never sufficiently studied:  
Brazilian indigenous objects in European Museums**

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**Citation**

Françoço, M., & Vander Velden, F. (2020). Never quite abandoned, never sufficiently studied: Brazilian indigenous objects in European Museums. *Indiana*, 37(2), 9-24. doi:10.18441/ind.v37i2.9-24

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3159891>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Never Quite Abandoned, Never Sufficiently Studied: Brazilian Indigenous Objects in European Museums. Introduction to the Dossier

Nunca totalmente abandonados, nunca suficientemente estudados:  
objetos indígenas brasileiros em museus europeus. Introdução ao dossiê

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The year 1992 marked the five-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Europeans in what was then, for them, the ‘New World’. This anniversary was both (critically) celebrated and often contested all over the Americas, generating a wealth of scholarship on the socio-historical context of this landmark and the disruptive consequences of the conquest, as well as much post-colonial critique about the enduring legacy of colonialism. As part of this moment of reflection and self-reflection, anthropologists and historians in Brazil – including indigenous scholars – engaged in a series of events that used this ephemeral occasion to take stock of the socio-cultural, demographic, economic and political circumstances under which the native peoples in Brazil were living, in order to create more positive scenarios for the future.

This intellectual and political appraisal was also undertaken with regards to the indigenous material heritage kept in museums, particularly the objects that had been either illegally acquired or collected under dishonest or violent conditions. In this sense, two particular publications from this general intellectual milieu stand out as they attempted to carefully identify and describe the museums in Brazil and abroad that housed indigenous collections. Interestingly, both publications emerged as part of the activities of the workgroup “História Indígena e do Indigenismo” led by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha at the University of São Paulo, a collective effort to research and



critically reconceptualize the history of indigenous peoples and of the ‘indigenista’ movement in Brazil.

Anthropologist Berta Ribeiro (1924-1997), considered to be the ‘founding mother’ of indigenous material culture studies in Brazil, authored an important article about the importance of material culture for ethnohistory. Her article discusses the by now well-known case of the Krahô axe once owned by the museum of the University of São Paulo, which was returned to that indigenous people in 1986 (Ribeiro 1987-1989). In this essay, she begins by acknowledging that, while the study of material culture – in museums or ‘in the field’ – was once a fundamental part of the anthropologist’s work, by the 1970s and 1980s it had been relegated to the fringes of the discipline, an activity mostly carried out by anthropologists employed in museums or by archaeologists. In order to discuss the possibilities and limitations of the study of indigenous objects and collections, she reconstructs the history of the three largest Brazilian ethnological museums – Nacional (Rio de Janeiro), Goeldi (Belém do Pará), and Paulista (São Paulo). In doing so, she identifies the main collectors of indigenous material culture from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries as well as the final repositories of their collections. In a particularly interesting passage of this essay, Ribeiro joins Frei Custódio Alves Serrão (1799-1873), director of the then National and Imperial Museum in Rio de Janeiro between 1828 and 1847, in lamenting the magnitude and duration of the still-ongoing transfer of important indigenous material heritage from Brazil to European museums. Should the country want to learn more about its own (‘primitive’) history, it would have “to go to the great capitals of Europe in order to study these precious documents there” (Ribeiro 1987-1989, 497 - our translation). A century and a half later, Ribeiro reiterated this concern by demanding renewed attention to the making of collections together with indigenous peoples, so as to prevent the current situation in which ethnographic museums “in Geneva, Basel, and Berlin” (Ribeiro 1987-1989, 507) have more complete collections than their Brazilian counterparts.

Indeed, as early as 1500, upon the first arrival of the Portuguese on the shores of South America, natural specimens and objects manufactured by indigenous peoples started to be sent to Europe. While first an occasional practice on distant American shores, by the seventeenth century collecting *naturalia* and *artificialia* had become an established European habit, and indigenous material culture soon started to be exhibited in cabinets of curiosities and, later, national museums (Ribeiro and Van Velthem 1992). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the collecting mania was replaced by systematic collecting as part of early anthropological and archaeological scientific practices. As these disciplines developed, so did the scope and profile of indigenous collections.

The creation of the *Conselho de Fiscalização das Expedições Artísticas e Científicas no Brasil* in 1933 is a landmark in the history of collecting in Brazil (Grupioni 1998). This governmental organ’s duties included controlling the export of collections to museums abroad, which would be permitted only if the collection to be exported was of equal

or lesser value than collections already kept in national institutions. This was meant to prevent looting and the displacement of Brazilian cultural heritage to foreign countries. In practice, the work of the *Conselho* generated an important paper trail documenting the activities of anthropologists and collectors in Brazil, allowing for the reconstruction of the networks of museums and researchers involved therein, as well as the controversies and power struggles that shaped the conditions in which indigenous collections were made and shipped to foreign countries (for the notable example of Curt Nimuendaju's collections, see Tambascia 2020).

This takes us to the second aforementioned study, namely Sônia Dorta's catalogue-compilation of Brazilian ethnographic collections published as part of an edited volume on the history of indigenous peoples in Brazil. Dorta's (1992) work is precisely an attempt to inventory, describe, and locate the dozens of indigenous collections assembled in Brazil and kept in museums worldwide. Her list includes 191 entries organized chronologically from 1650 to 1955, and presented by collection/collector from the earliest to the most recent museum acquisition. In presenting information about the contents of each collection, including names of collectors and museums as well as types of collection profiles and numbers, this catalogue allows for cross-temporal comparison between museums as well as for the identification of patterns in collecting and the whereabouts of specific (types) of objects made by distinct indigenous groups through time. This is, without a doubt, the most complete and accomplished inventORIZATION so far of the Brazilian indigenous collections in museums, and remains an essential go-to guide for scholars in the field. Of comparable importance is the essay by Ribeiro and Van Velthem (1992) in the same volume, in which the authors present a brief historiography of anthropological museums and their collections, and then go on to explain methodologies and approaches used in research in museum collections.

This is not to say, of course, that Brazilian indigenous objects in museums had not been given proper attention prior to Ribeiro's and Dorta's publications. Needless to say, archaeologists working in the Brazilian Amazon and other areas had long been delving into museum collections in the country and abroad, with Helen Palmatary and Betty Meggers being respectively the earliest and the most obvious examples (Palmatary 1939; Meggers 1945; see also Sombrio and Vasconcellos 2018). The archaeological study of ethnographic collections seems to have been less frequent (Gaspar and Rodrigues 2020). Anthropologists working with or on museum collections were fewer and far between, yet even a quick bibliographical survey reveals that the topic had never quite been abandoned, thriving instead through the competent hands of a number of anthropologists who have chosen to incorporate material culture and its transformations either as the main subject or an essential component of their studies of indigenous ways of life. One of the most eloquent examples is the *Suma Etnológica Brasileira* project, in which Berta and Darcy Ribeiro proposed a Portuguese version of selected chapters of the *Handbook*

of *South American Indians*. Of the three volumes published before the project was interrupted, two (*Arte India* and *Tecnologia Indígena*) included works related to the study of materialities and artifacts (Ribeiro and Ribeiro 1986a; 1986b).

In addition to Berta and Darcy Ribeiro, the commitment to the study of indigenous aesthetics and indigenous graphism by scholars such as Regina Müller (1990), Lux Vidal (1992), Lucia Van Velthem (2003, 2012, among many others), and Aristóteles Barcelos Neto (2004) are just a few examples of the vitality of the topic. In this sense, Lagrou and Van Velthem's (2018) bibliographical review of advances in the study of indigenous arts over the last three decades is a valuable resource for understanding when and how museum collections were activated as subjects of research in Brazilian ethnology. Lagrou and Van Velthem's study includes a particularly valuable section on exhibition and collection catalogues. The authors argue that "[...] publications devoted to describe and qualify ethnographic collections have a significant role to play in informing about indigenous cultural heritage, their constitution and their localization in Brazilian museums" (Lagrou and Van Velthem 2018, 143 - our translation), emphasizing, however, that Brazilian museum collections are still understudied. In doing so, they remind us of Ribeiro's call to open up space in graduate programs for the study of material culture (Ribeiro 1987-1989, 506).

Now, more than 30 years later and despite all the odds against it, the study of Brazilian indigenous collections in the country and abroad is gaining momentum once again. As explained by Silva and Gordon,

[...] the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [...] saw the surge of anthropological interest in the study of material culture. A series of reasons, external and internal to the discipline, caused a return to objects and museum collections in anthropological research, especially as they started to be understood analytically as mediators and materializations of diverse social relationships, agencies, subjectivities, knowledge, memories, that circulate in and help to manage different regimes of meaning and value within the most varied social, cultural and political contexts (2013, 430).

Likewise, Gonçalves identifies the 1980s as the beginning of this renewed interest in museums and collections on the part of anthropologists, influenced, in part, by the reflexive turn in the discipline that allowed for a sort of coming to terms with its own history (Gonçalves 2005, 10). Museums, having been part and parcel of the development of anthropology and archaeology, started to be examined in terms of their involvement in regimes of oppression and the creation of modernity (Dias 1991; Ames 1992; Pacheco de Oliveira 2007), and the collections they keep – material witnesses to and victims of these regimes – demanded fresh attention through modernized theoretical lenses, one that finally took communities of origin as participants, not objects, of study (Clifford 1997; Peers and Brown 2003; van Broekhoven, Buijs and Hovens 2010).

The twenty-first century has indeed witnessed numerous transformations in museum praxis and in the museum landscape worldwide, pushing for a radical reconfiguration

of the discipline of anthropology itself. In the case of Brazil (as elsewhere), perhaps the most important shift has been the creation of museums by indigenous peoples as well as the increasing number of indigenous scholars writing about museums (Gomes and Neto 2009; Berno de Almeida and Oliveira 2017).

The rise of academic research on Brazilian indigenous collections can be seen in numerous conference panels and presentations (see, for instance, the latest editions of the meetings of the *Associação Brasileira de Antropologia*, the *Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, the *International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*, among many others), PhD dissertations defended (Oliveira 2015; Santos 2016; Rodrigues 2017; Petscheli 2019a), and the publication of books, articles, and special journal issues such as the present one (for other examples, see Françaço and Van Broekhoven 2017; Pereira and Lima Filho 2018; Arruti 2020). Likewise, literature about the anthropology of museums as institutions, including reflections on their history, their role in the construction of ‘otherness’, as well as their contemporary social potentials, has also developed substantially (Cury 2016; Athias and Lima Filho 2016; Pacheco de Oliveira and Santos 2018), forming now a considerable corpus. While the number and diversity of recent studies are too broad to be listed here, three currents are particularly worth mentioning.

First, in the realms of history and historiography, a series of scholars have devoted their time to revisiting the *oeuvre* of some of the founding figures of Brazilian anthropology, often foregrounding their work on material culture. In this sense, see the renewed efforts to contextualize, critique, and understand the role of Curt Nimuendaju in the history of anthropology in Brazil, particularly concerning his collecting activities for museums in the country and abroad (Schröder 2011; 2019; Sanjad 2019; Tambascia 2013; 2020; Welper 2019); the same applies to the important Carlos Estevão de Oliveira collection (Athias 2016).<sup>1</sup> Renewed attention has also been cast on the activities of German ethnologists in Brazil (Kraus 2004; Petscheli 2019b) and other (sometimes lesser-known) collectors who helped to define the way indigenous materials were collected and eventually sent to foreign museums (Lima Filho 2017; Santos 2019a; Bolletín 2019). Many of these works emphasize the role of ‘local’ and indigenous men and women who either occasionally assisted or fully participated in the process of making collections, thereby questioning the heroic role given to (often male) anthropologists in the formation of museum holdings.

Second, the role of indigenous researchers and experts as part and parcel of current museological practice has become increasingly highlighted. This is sometimes called “collaborative museology” (Russi and Abreu 2019) or, simply put, “intercultural dialogue” (Velthem, Kukawka and Joanny 2017). Marília Xavier Cury, for instance, has been developing important work in the last decades in coordinating a collaboration between the Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia (MAE-USP) and indigenous museums

1 For an overview of the collection, see <http://www3.ufpe.br/carlosestevao/> (accessed 21.11.2020).

and peoples living in the State of São Paulo, under the framework of decolonizing collections and curatorship (Cury 2016; 2020). At the same museum, anthropologist Cesar Gordon and archaeologist Fabíola Silva recently completed a project in which the Xikrin (Kayapó) collection assembled by Lux Vidal in the past was re-analyzed by Xikrin experts together with the collector and the authors themselves (Silva and Gordon 2011). In an essay reflecting about this project, Silva and Gordon explore the potentials of this type of collaboration for the anthropological study of ethnographic collections. They argue that a collection is a “combination of diverse perspectives” and that the curatorial process necessarily includes relational and disputed dimensions that should be made visible (Silva and Gordon 2013, 426-427).

Similarly, at the *Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi* in Belém (MPEG, Pará), the work of Lucia Van Velthem, Claudia López, and Glenn Shepard Jr. with the ethnographic collection kept at the “Reserva Técnica Curt Nimuendaju” has been done within the framework of international collaborative projects with often very interesting results (Shepard Jr. *et al.* 2017). In a tone similar to that of Silva and Gordon (2013), López *et al.* (2017) discuss the methodology, the challenges and the outcomes of their work with the Ka'apor indigenous people and the Museum of Ethnology in Leiden in the context of a collaborative exhibition that took place at the MPEG in 2014 – *A Festa do Cauim*. In both cases, allowing space for opposing views and conflicting agendas to emerge is considered an essential part of the curatorial process. A number of such collaborative projects have been taking place in international collaborations between cultural institutions and museums in Brazil and Europe, reflecting the markedly connected nature of the collections kept on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, recent literature shows that these collections demand ‘undisciplined’ perspectives – approaches that go beyond strict disciplinary boundaries and do not conform to the limitations of academic tool-kits – merging anthropology, ethnobotany, and indigenous knowledge systems (Kruel *et al.* 2018). Also for these initiatives, the effort to de-centralize and de-Europeanize curatorial and intellectual authority remains crucial (Scholz 2017).

Last but not least, the question to whom museum collections belong reveals, in fact, an important concern about the future: “Esto incluye el atribuirle la calidad de ‘encarnar’ no solo el pasado, sino también el presente y el futuro de los herederos en cuestión” (Kraus, Halbmayer and Kummels 2018, 10). This is particularly visible in the work of historians and anthropologists registering and raising awareness about the many indigenous museums and collections from areas of the country not normally directly associated with the presence of indigenous peoples. Specifically, indigenous peoples in the northeastern region of Brazil have typically been considered as no longer existent, having been decimated by the impact of violent conquest in the first and second centuries of colonization. Nonetheless, indigenous peoples in the northeast are alive and struggling to reclaim and maintain their rights to land and cultural survival (Pacheco de Oliveira 1999). An interesting manifestation of

this crucial link between indigenous peoples in northeastern Brazil and museum objects took place in 2000, when the *Mostra do Redescobrimento* marked the celebrations of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country. On that occasion, the Tupinambá de Olivença – a still little known indigenous group – claimed ownership of the Tupinambá feather mantle displayed at the *Mostra*, which is part of the collection of the Nationalmuseum in Copenhagen: “We are Tupinambás, we want the mantle back”, stated the indigenous leaders.<sup>2</sup> The Tupinambá understood that the ownership of this mantle – one of the iconic artifacts of South American indigenous art – would be of enormous significance for their recognition as an indigenous people. The more or less simultaneous discovery of dyed domestic chicken feathers among the feathers of wild birds adds another dimension to the case (Due 2002). This revelation in fact suggests that, as early as the sixteenth century, indigenous peoples on the coast of present-day Brazil already creatively used exotic materials in their most valuable objects, calling attention to the need to reevaluate indigenous artifacts today made with chicken or even synthetic feathers, and generally relegated to the less prestigious categories of kitsch or tourist art (Grünewald 2001; Vander Velden 2012). This means that the recognition of indigenous material culture is a vital aspect in the process of obtaining recognition and respect for their cultures and ways of life. Like other developments discussed above, also in this field a number of scholars have been working on the subject of indigenous museums and collections, raising awareness about this important yet sometimes undervalued cultural patrimony, and exploring the processes connected to the reinvention of museums as instruments for indigenous affirmation and emancipation (Athias and Gomes 2016; Athias 2018; Gomes 2019).

Naturally, the idea that museum collections (should) serve the interests of indigenous peoples is not new in Brazilian anthropology. In the 1980s, for instance, Berta Ribeiro already argued that museum collections are important for the processes of reclaiming self-knowledge and self-representation by the peoples who produced such objects (1987-1989, 491). Yet, the recent revival of this notion on a global scale has led to the multiplication of articles, books, projects, fellowships, and events aimed at revealing the colonial violence in which ethnographic museums are rooted (Hicks 2020, for a recent view), thereby suggesting paths forward in the transformation of museums from places of oppression into platforms for constructive confrontation, creativity, collaborations and, to use the latest term, hope (Thomas 2016).

This global trend became even more meaningful and urgent after the night of September 2, 2018, when a fire destroyed the *Museu Nacional* in Rio de Janeiro, including a significant part of its material collections and their documentation.<sup>3</sup> This irreparable material

2 See the news on <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrad/fq0106200006.htm> (accessed 26.11.2020).

3 For a beautiful digital exhibition about the Museu Nacional before and after the fire, see: “As Duas Vidas do Museu Nacional, um ensaio fotográfico de Cristiano Mascaro” in: <https://expo.abant.org.br/as-duas-vidas-do-museu-nacional/> (accessed 23.11.2020).

loss of historic collections generated an almost immediate response from museums and researchers worldwide who offered their solidarity and help in different formats, from reviving the discussion on repatriation of collections to sharing photographs and research data in order to try to reconstruct the original collections digitally. Soon after the tragedy, a careful and meticulous archaeological excavation was conducted in order to find objects and fragments that might have survived the fire. At the same time, researchers connected to the *Museu Nacional* started to produce important reflections about the collections that remained – either in other premises of the museum in Rio de Janeiro or in different institutions and museums worldwide – thereby taking stock of the loss but also announcing possible (perhaps digital) futures (Santos 2019b; Faulhaber and Martins 2019). In the particular case of anthropology, the keeper of the ethnographic collection, João Pacheco de Oliveira and his team, are leading a series of initiatives to reconstruct (or recreate) the collection together with indigenous researchers and indigenous peoples (França 2019). Likewise, they are working on gathering data about Brazilian anthropological collections from museums in Europe and elsewhere in order to compile a comprehensive catalogue of Brazilian indigenous material culture.<sup>4</sup> This ambitious and necessary effort will result in a catalogue that can serve not only the needs of researchers but that will also form a rich resource for indigenous peoples looking to reconnect to their objects kept abroad.

This important project brings us back to Sonia Dorta's historical overview of Brazilian indigenous collections, which addressed the question of where these collections can be found and what they are composed of. In addition to her work, a number of exhibition and collection catalogues (Indios del Brasile 1983; Mogne 2003; Hermannstädter 2005; Augustat 2012; Muñoz 2012, among others) help to create a general image of the Brazilian materials in Europe. Likewise, the ongoing and growing line of museum- or collection-specific studies also contributes to a better understanding of this indigenous material heritage, from Thekla Hartmann's publications (Hartmann 1982; Schuman and Hartmann 1992) to more recent works inspired by theories of “the agency of things” (Byrne *et al.* 2011) and collection trajectories (Françaço 2016; Silva 2018; and Bollettin 2019 among other examples). Finally, many museums have been working towards digitizing their collections and making them freely accessible online, to various degrees of completeness and thoroughness. Despite these efforts, an updated and comprehensive overview of these collections, including an annotated bibliography of the latest research documenting the collections and/or specific objects – such as Feest (1992, 1993, and 2020) has done for North America – has yet to be achieved.

4 For some news about this initiative, see <https://bricspolicycenter.org/bpc-sedia-reuniao-entre-representantes-do-royal-british-columbia-museum-e-do-museu-nacional-para-discutir-os-novos-horizontes-das-colecoes-digitais/> (accessed 26.11.2020). The topic was also discussed at a dedicated workshop during the 2020 meeting of the Brazilian Anthropology Association. See [https://www.32rba.abant.org.br/trabalho/view?ID\\_TRABALHO=3178](https://www.32rba.abant.org.br/trabalho/view?ID_TRABALHO=3178) (accessed 26.11.2020).

The present volume aims to be one more stepping stone in this direction. We bring together papers by researchers working on studies of ethnographic and/or archaeological collections from both a material culture perspective presenting in-depth object analysis, and from a historical perspective focusing on histories of collections. The volume includes nine articles. The first one, an essay by archaeologists Carla Jaimes Betancourt and Diego Ballesterro, opens our volume by drawing attention to the fact that the deep (cultural) history of the Amazon region is often left out of European museums' displays and storage rooms. In doing so, they set the scene for the following articles in this issue, which focus on specific collections or types of objects kept in museums across the continent and in Brazil. Christian Feest then presents a novel analysis of the as of yet understudied ethnographic collection of Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied kept at the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart. Leandro M. Cascon and Caroline F. Caromano take us on a journey through the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Amazon by means of a detailed study of five feather-decorated hammocks, showing the fine line between colonial impositions and indigenous agency. Advancing the notion of "multispecies artifacts", Felipe Vander Velden addresses a set of objects that refer to animals introduced with the European conquest of the New World, highlighting the materialities that emerged from the encounter between indigenous knowledge, practices, and techniques and exotic species introduced after 1492. Konrad Rybka looks at South American fire-fans to engage in a discussion about how Western epistemologies are sedimented in – but can also be removed from – museum classification systems. Continuing the reflection on understudied objects and unexpected connections between these and other objects, Caromano studies indigenous artifacts "from the family of fire", proposing that collections can be approached through functional relationships between artifacts that gravitate around a particular practice or structure. Igor Rodrigues and Meliam V. Gaspar study a large selection of Wai Wai plaitwork and ceramic objects from a number of museum collections, using different analytical scales to address the materiality of Wai Wai ontology through time. Finally, Manuela Fischer and Adriana Muñoz explore the connected histories of the South American Lowlands materials at the ethnographic museums in Berlin and Gothenburg, paying special attention to the idea of an "archive for the future" that gave rise to the collections and to how this idea can be again mobilized in the present.

These eight articles bring original contributions to the study of indigenous material culture in European museums. In the last paper, and by way of conclusion, Claudia Augustat offers a critical reading of each of the eight articles in this issue, reflecting on how our authors use the concept of 'heritage' and its many variations, and what these conceptualizations entail – theoretically, methodologically, and also politically – with respect to the study of Brazilian indigenous material culture kept in European museums. By ending this special issue with a paper by Augustat, curator of the South American

collections at the Weltmuseum in Vienna, we also acknowledge and express our gratitude for the occasion that allowed for the original research papers in this volume to be presented and discussed. During the XII Sesquiannual Conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) in June 2019, we were fortunate enough to hold two days of presentations and debate with an enthusiastic group of anthropologists, archaeologists, curators, and historians of the Lowlands – some of whom appear in this volume as authors of contributions, others in the bibliography, and all of us as a community of academics and practitioners committed to the study and preservation of indigenous collections. In trying to advance the field, we seem to have arrived at a research agenda that aims to de-mystify heroic collection narratives, reveal hidden histories still concealed in the materiality of things, transcend academic boundaries to include indigenous understandings of objects and, much as in 1992, continue to push forward the democratization of collections in order to advocate for indigenous rights.

### Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the European Research Council (ERC) Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreement No. 715423), ERC Project *BRASILLAE: Indigenous Knowledge in the Making of Science*, directed by Dr. M. Françaço at Leiden University, the Netherlands. The authors would like to thank the organization of the XII SALSA Sesquiannual Conference in Vienna for the opportunity to organize a panel on museum collections, as well as the panel participants and audience for the inspiring discussions and the suggestion to produce this special issue. We also express our gratitude to Leandro M. Cascon and Caroline F. Caromano for the many insightful intellectual exchanges along the way, and to Iken Paap and the editors of *INDIANA* for their support of our work.

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