Houselessness, Infrastructural Exclusion, and Stigmatization

Giuseppina Forte
Williams College

Giuseppina Forte is an Assistant Professor of Architecture and Environmental Studies at Williams College, where she teaches courses in urban history and theory and design for environmental justice. As a scholar and design practitioner, she has worked closely with historically underrepresented populations in São Paulo, Mexico City, Ouagadougou, Paris, and San Francisco. During her doctoral studies at the University of California Berkeley, she researched and lived in Brazilian favelas in the northern periphery of São Paulo. Giuseppina sits on the executive board of the Italian Association for Women in Development (AIDOS), an NGO supporting gender rights worldwide.
Contact:
gf5@williams.edu

Abstract

At the feet of the Serra da Cantareira forest in São Paulo, land grabbers illicitly seize and sell land to houseless people. In 2019, I conducted fieldwork in a newly established squatter camp along the Tremembé River, inhabited mainly by Black and Brown women who had migrated from rural Brazil. Since they are considered illegal occupants by the authorities and live in an area at risk of flooding, they may soon be evicted without compensation. The criminalization of these houseless people by the government overlaps with the stigma attached to them by the residents of nearby settlements. They associate the squatters with alleged disruptive practices against nature (deforestation, pollution, and garbage accumulation), theft of electricity, and appropriation of federal subsidies. Stemming from hygienist discourses, racialized and gendered ideologies shape this environmental imagination.

Keywords

Houselessness, infrastructural stigmatization, racialized and gendered geographies, Brazil, São Paulo

Since the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1985), land grabbers, who pretend to hold legal title to the land, have illegally occupied, seized, and sold land in the Serra da Cantareira, the Atlantic forest that marks the end of São Paulo to the north.[1] I learned from interviews that these *grileiros* may work for individual profits but often serve the Primero Comando da Capital (PCC), Brazil's most powerful criminal organization, or corrupt politicians. Their

---

[1] Here I focus on land grabbing related to urbanization dynamics in the 20th century. However, this practice is rooted in history, starting with Portuguese land grabs from Indigenous people and intensifying after the 1850 Land Law abolished the right to acquire legal title to public land through simple occupancy.

activities target low-income, often immigrant and Black and Brown people escaping a rampant rental market and suffering from the dearth of low-income housing.

I analyze these dynamics in the northeastern periphery of São Paulo in a recently developed squatter camp (*favela*) along the Tremembé River. Since 2016, mostly Black and Brown women have squatted here in makeshift shacks on public land unfit for housing.[2] They were among the 84,092 Brazilian families under threat of eviction for unauthorized occupations of land or buildings between March 2020 and June 2021 (Zero Eviction Campaign, 2021).[3]

My account aims to connect the criminalization of houselessness, the lack of infrastructure, and the stigmatization attached to people living in the Tremembé camp.[4] Because of their unauthorized land occupation, the houseless people along the river lack sewage systems, garbage collection, and other basic services. The criminalization of the squatters overlaps with the stigma related to their supposed disruptive practices against the environment (deforestation, pollution, and garbage accumulation), theft of electricity, and appropriation of federal subsidies.

A sense of blame and stigmatization by residents living in the nearby self-built settlements emerged when I conducted fieldwork accompanied by João, a community leader in the area, to visit the squatter camp along the Tremembé River.

Trash in the water: Infrastructural stigmatization

João and I walk along a tributary of the Tremembé River close to the camp. We cross a pedestrian bridge. The creek's waters cannot flow underneath it because of trash bags and plastic containers strewn along the banks. 'See? They throw everything in there. They lack any civic education. They are filthy. It was beautiful here; it was green, and there were water springs!' Like many nostalgic residents of the old 'Brazilian Switzerland' (as newspapers used to call the Tremembé district in the 1960s), João criticizes recent settlers who have occupied the areas for their disruptive impact on its 'pristine' nature. He does so despite having lived

---

[2] International agreements over the definition of 'homelessness' (used by governmental organizations and many scholars instead of the political activist term 'houselessness') is vague and the parameters are unclear. According to ETHOS, the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, people living in favelas might be considered in a situation of 'housing exclusion,' not homelessness. However, scholars have advocated for an expanded definition of homelessness that maximizes the number of people identified as homeless and includes 'living in a place of habitation…that is below a minimum adequacy standard' and 'lacking access to adequate housing' (Amore et al., 2011, p. 32). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of homelessness includes 'people who are living in a place not meant for human habitation or in transitional housing' (National Alliance to END HOMELESS, 2012, p. 1). Being susceptible of eviction and lacking adequate housing, the squatters along the Tremembé river can be considered houseless people (*sem-teto*).

[3] Like many dwellers in the global South, they are 'displaceable,' or susceptible to involuntary eviction and loss of access to services and material and cultural resources (Yiftachel, 2020). The greater the threat of displacement, the weaker their urban citizenship. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 14,301 Brazilian families were evicted within the same period.

[4] About the correlation between infrastructural abjection and stigmatization see Baumann (2021); Baumann and Massalha (2022); and Lemanski (2022).

irregularly in the neighborhood for a long time; he arrived in the area when the density of dwellings around the river basin was lower.

We reach an esplanade. In the middle of it, a car is flipped, burned, and smashed. Around it, children play soccer with one of two rusted, crooked goal posts. It is a remnant of the soccer camp that Seu Vito, one of the first residents of the nearby favela Alfredo Ávila, helped set up. Then, Seu Vito states, '*They* came and took it for their purposes.' *They* are the drug dealers from the PCC, who use the space for their business, foreclosing any possibility for public use.

We cross the esplanade toward the Tremembé. Piles of clothes, home appliances, and construction materials are scattered over bushes and grass along the riverbank. A van stops near us. Two men get out, dump a load of trash, and leave. João says that the Prefecture does not police the area and that no one calls the police, who already know what happens. He states, 'It is better not to mess around with these crooks.' The crooks are using this area as an open-air dump. Along the Tremembé River, it is hard to tell where the garbage comes from. However, according to Federal Law 9.605/1998, the squatters who live close to the open dump and scavenge it could be held responsible for the riverbank's pollution and suffer criminal and administrative sanctions.

Figure 1

Car in the middle of the esplanade
Credits: Ralf Korbmacher

Figure 2

Open-air dump close to the Tremembé squatter camp
Credits: Ralf Korbmacher

For anthropologist Mary Douglas, it is against filth that society is formed, or by defining and excluding that which is 'dirty' (Douglas, 2003). Defilement is a practice that marks the boundaries of a social system, a process of cleansing the social-symbolic order from 'filth,' which is perceived as 'danger' (Kristeva, 1982). If dirt is associated with danger and disorder, at the feet of the Serra residents construct territorial identities through degrees of purity and filth and people's placement in the territory (i.e., in the favelas, along the river, in the 'bushes'). The healthier class-A citizens are the elite who live on the Serra's hills, while the morally degraded are the 'dirty invaders' along the river.

Seu Vito shows us the many *gatos* (unofficial connections to the power distribution network) on the electric poles of the esplanade: 'We pay the electricity for these "invaders" [the squatters] so that they don't pay!' João adds that the squatters use energy for free, while he pays 180 reais per month (around $45 in 2019) for his NGO. The local priest continues that they pay 400 reais per month (around $100 in 2019). The practice of *gatos* in Brazil ensures a worthy life to those who cannot afford to pay for power (Jenkins et al., 2016; Douglas, 2020). However, according to Decree 2.848/1940 (article 155, paragraph 3), the squatters in the Tremembé camp could be fined for consuming electricity without authorization.

The meninas: Gendered implications

'Wait until we reach the *meninas* [literally, girls]; there, yes, it is an open dump!' João declares. Not all the squatters in the camp are young, nor are they women. But many of them are single and unemployed, so they are more visible than men during the day. On the one hand, João's diminutive, gendered connotation of the squatters renders them more vulnerable, and hence politically exploitable. He might run as a council member in the next elections, and this tour along the creek might already be part of his campaign in the territory. On the other hand, João's remarks suggest an association of disruptive ecologies along the river with women: a gendering of environmental responsibility that is quite common in the global North and South (Braun & Traore, 2015; MacKendrick & Cairns, 2019; Muposhi et al., 2022). João overlooks the fact that the Tremembé River here has already collected the city's contaminants for several kilometers upstream. Moreover, lacking a sewage system, the shacks discharge gray water directly into the river.

The walk with João reveals other moral divides traced by people living in the peripheries of São Paulo. For example, many residents of Alfredo Ávila maintain that the squatters *beira-rio* (along the river) choose to live in that situation because they do not want to work and expect help from the government while doing nothing to improve their circumstances. Among them, Manuel is particularly animated: he believes that the women *beira-rio* keep having children (some of them have as many as nine) to get financial aid from Bolsa Familia. This welfare program for the poor offers a subsidy for each child in exchange for their attending school and being vaccinated. Like Manuel, many Brazilians believe that Bolsa Familia incentivizes the poor to have more children instead of working (de Marins 2020; Layton, 2020). Their poverty is seen as an 'individual pathology' rather than a structural phenomenon (Amster, 2003, p. 196).

Figure 3

Main pathway in the Tremembé squatter camp **Credits: Ralf Korbmacher**

Concluding remarks

According to Brazilian Federal Law 6.766/79, shelters must be located at least fifteen meters from watersheds. The Forest Code, Law 12.651/12, sets this distance at thirty meters for waterways narrower than 10 meters. However, over the last two decades, opportunities for cheap land in the periphery of São Paulo have dwindled, and houseless people have occupied the riverbanks at the feet of the Serra. While land grabbers have illegally sold preserved land, when it comes to the squatters who buy it, the term 'illegal' should not be made absolute (Rolnik, 2017; Canedo & Andrade, 2021). Squats on empty land in Brazilian cities represent the poor's practices of subsistence and resistance to unequal laws and policies historically favoring elites and denying the poor their right to the city.

The criminalization of houselessness in the Tremembé squatter camp, targeting mainly Black and Brown single women with children, could lead to evictions and sanctions. Criminalization, infrastructural exclusion, and stigma are interconnected. Because of their unauthorized occupation of land, houseless people have no right to infrastructure. Hence, their spaces are seen as dirty and disordered, requiring regulation and sterilization. Lacking water sanitation and garbage collection, they are characterized by filth, supposedly produced by their squatting. My fieldwork reveals, in fact, other causes of environmental pollution. The result is that the squatters along the Tremembé River, who have already lost their rented houses once, suffer environmental stigmatization in addition to facing the risk of being evicted again. Stemming from hygienist discourses, racialized and gendered ideologies shape this environmental imagination.[5]

References

Amore, K., Baker M., & Howden-Chapman P. (2011) The ETHOS definition and classification of homelessness: an analysis. *European Journal of Homelessness* 5(2).

Amster, R. (2003). Patterns of exclusion: Sanitizing space, criminalizing homelessness. *Social justice*, 30.1(91), pp. 195-221.

Baumann, H. (2021). Infrastructural Violence in Jerusalem. In Y. Navaro, Ö. B. Zerrin, A. von Bieberstein, & S. Altuğ (Eds.), *Reverberations: violence across time and space*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

Baumann, H. & Massalha, M. (2022). 'Your daily reality is rubbish': Waste as a means of urban exclusion in the suspended spaces of East Jerusalem. *Urban Studies* 59(3), pp. 548-571.

---

[5] On hygienization in Brazil, see Garmany & Richmond (2020). On cleansing public nature, see Rose (2017).

Braun, Y. A., & Traore, A. S. (2015). Plastic bags, pollution, and identity: Women and the gendering of globalization and environmental responsibility in Mali. *Gender & Society*, 29(6), pp. 863-887.

Canedo, J., & Andrade L. (2021). Squatting as tactics for creative resistance and transformation: The experience of a Brazilian housing occupation. *Radical Housing Journal*, 3(2): pp. 81-101.

de Marins, M. T. A. (2020). Stigmas and Controls on Bolsa Família Beneficiary Women. In T. Sacchet, S. Mariano, & C.M. Carloto (Eds.), *Women, Gender, and Conditional Cash Transfers: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Studies of Bolsa Família* (1st ed.). Routledge, pp. 161-181.

Douglas, M. (2003). *Purity And Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* Routledge.

Douglas, H. (2020). Clandestine Electrical Connections in Favelas: Theft or Distributional Justice? *RioOnWatch*, January 13. Available at: https://rioonwatch.org/?p=63431 (Accessed 15 June 2022).

Garmany, J., & Richmond, M. A. (2020). Hygienisation, gentrification, and urban displacement in Brazil. *Antipode*, 52(1), pp. 124-144.

Holston, J. (2008). *Insurgent citizenship. Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil.* Princeton University Press.

Jenkins, K., McCauley, D., Heffron, R., Stephan, H., & Rehner, R. (2016). Energy justice: A conceptual review. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 11, pp. 174-182.

Kristeva, J. (1982). Approaching abjection. *Oxford Literary Review*, 5(1\2), pp. 125-149.

Layton, M. L. (2020). Welfare Stereotypes and Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes: Evidence from Brazil's Bolsa Família. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 12(1), pp. 53-76.

Lemanski, C. (2022). Afterword: Citizenship and the politics of (im) material stigma and infrastructure. *Urban Studies*, 59(3), pp. 663-671.

MacKendrick, N., & Cairns, K. (2019). The polluted child and maternal responsibility in the US environmental health movement. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(2), pp. 307-332.

Muposhi, A., Mpinganjira, M., Wait, M., & Issock, P.B.I. (2022). Is the use of green shopping bags gendered? Evidence from a gender equality conscious emerging market. *International Journal of Sustainable Society*, 14(1), pp.17-42.

National Alliance to END HOMELESS (2012). Changes in the HUD Definition of "Homeless." Available at: https://endhomelessness.org/resource/changes-in-the-hud-definition-of-homeless/ (Accessed 15 June 2022).

Rolnik, R. (2017). *Guerra dos lugares: a colonização da terra e da moradia na era das finanças.* Boitempo Editorial.

Rose, J. (2017). Cleansing public nature: landscapes of homelessness, health, and displacement. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24(1), pp. 11-23.

Yiftachel, O. (2020). From displacement to displaceability: A southeastern perspective on the new metropolis. *City*, 24(1-2), pp. 151-165.

Zero Eviction Campaign (2021). Available at: https://www.campanhadespejozero.org/acervo (Accessed 15 June 2022).