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Neighbourhood Portraits

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The Neighborhood in the Morro. Heterogeneity, Difference, and Emergence in a Periphery of the Global South

The Neighborhood in the Morro

Heterogeneity, Difference, and Emergence in a Periphery of the Global South

Giuseppina Forte

Read through its most visible characteristics, the neighborhood in the *morro* (hill) can be anywhere in the peripheries of São Paulo, Brazil, and cities of the global South. Its specificities might disappear within general frameworks used to study urban peripheries, including center-periphery dichotomies, informal urbanism, and the essentialized identity of the poor. This portrait, instead, is about the neighborhood as a landscape of multiple histories, where heterogeneity and difference have produced specific spaces, rhythms, and their sensory emanations. Such an ethnographic approach provides a deeper understanding of emergent forms of the periphery assembled around certain visibilities, practices, and subjectivities, and engaged in uneven patterns of democratic city-making.

Helicopters over Tremembé

Against the bright sky of a weekday summer morning in São Paulo, I have counted 24 helicopters in an hour. They fly from the business center in Itaim Bibi to the Guarulhos airport to the closed condominium of Alphaville, fifteen kilometers northwest of the city. Some of them may land at on-demand heliports disseminated across the Serra da Cantareira, the Atlantic forest that marks the end of the municipality of São Paulo to the north. By helicopter, brides descend amid their wedding guests in the Serra and residents of the residential complex Alpes da Cantareira reach their 1.5 million-dollar houses. One thousand meters below them, a skin-like fabric of dwellings is perched on the hills, along the basins of rivers, and on areas at risk of flooding and landslides in the Tremembé district. As in other urban peripheries of the global South, Tremembé residents have auto-constructed (DIY) their houses in favelas, illegal and legal land subdivisions. If the elites *up there* in the Serra can still enjoy the luxuriant vegetation of the “Brazilian Switzerland,” as newspapers used to call Tremembé in the 1960s, people *down there* in the hills and valleys have been exposed since the 1970s to the effects of massive urbanization.

One of 41 neighborhoods in Tremembé, Furnas has developed around the homonymous power plant. Under the pylons of the power line, squatters have built their wooden shacks. Many of them have been removed; others will be in the future. However, for now, their kids play under high voltage wires – where picnic areas and football fields also dot the neighborhood. Squatters are not the only illegal aspect of Furnas: the neighborhood itself is illegal. Right after the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship (the so-called lost decade of the 1980s) and facing an enduring lack of low-income housing policies, organized invasions of private and public lands became technologies of land democratization for the working classes. In Furnas, *grileiros* (land swindlers) seized the lands belonging to the religious organization Santa Casa da Misericórdia to illegally sell them before squatters could invade

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them.¹ Immigrants, mostly from poor rural areas of the Northeast of Brazil, bought pieces of land here, usually 20 meters deep by 7 meters wide, lacking any basic infrastructure and services.

The politics of difference

These immigrants have carried with them the racialized identity of rural and Northeastern backwardness, in contrast to the *paulistanos*' (of São Paulo) exceptional capacity for modernity and progress, associated with whiteness (Weinstein, 2015). Some of them have also reproduced this racialized geography by considering the new squatters (mostly black) along Tremembé's rivers as "bandits."

The poorer, and possibly darker-skinned, are always to blame. The first evident division is between those who bought the land, therefore entitled to full citizenship, and those who squatted, associated with moral failure (Holston, 2008, pp. 254–260).

All day long, music and construction work from the houses nearby produce a mixture of low-frequency noise: hammers, drills, and funky basses

Stereotypical urban identities are constructed around people's placement: *ao longo do rio* (along the river), *na mata* (in the bush), *na favela*. These narratives are not only representations, but they also shape social interactions and erect barriers among city dwellers (Caldeira, 2000, p. 19). Some of the residents in the valley and the Serra set a clear divide with the *grileiros* in the *morro*, as they call Furnas and its adjacent neighborhoods, for their disruptive urban ecologies: drugs, violence, and the destruction of uncontaminated nature. I myself was influenced by these narratives the first time I visited Furnas by car. Locked doors and windows separated me from people, smells, and humidity. For every curve and person, I could imagine a potential assault. This sense of uncanny would eventually disappear after I learned to walk in Furnas under the scrutiny of residents' "eyes on the street"² and take the public transit like the majority of the residents in the peripheries of São Paulo. These citizens spend as much as 2 to 2,5 hours to reach their workplace in the center. Over them, on-demand *aerotáxis* (helicopters) cover the same urban fabric in 15 minutes.

"Building codes"

Two years after my cruising and strolling explorations in Furnas, I visited the neighborhood with M, who has lived there since 1995. He showed me the endless fabric of concoctions in brick, mortar, and sheet metal that have reached stability on the steep slopes on the hills. The steadiness of each house relies on the consolidation of the terrain provided by the adjacent unit below. Residents expand their houses in three dimensions in an uneven way, wherever there is space to do so. These practices of *puxadinho* (little nudge) have given birth to complex overlapping and entanglement of floors, activities, and people. "Several people live on the same piece of land on different floors of the same building. Who should own the land below them?" M asked me. The process of land and house legalization in Furnas and many neighborhoods in the *morro* by Sehab-Municipal Housing Agency has become more and more complicated. These settlements now have the primary infrastructure, but the land tenures are not yet legalized. Residents do not pay taxes on land and houses, but they receive utility bills.

In Furnas, illegal owners have managed to fraction or multiply their properties to create apartments, ground-level lodgings, and outdoor parking lots, making profit from their rents. M is one of them. He

¹ The Santa Casa took charge of social outcasts (e.g., the terminally or mentally ill) in the Jaçana district (adjacent to Tremembé) on behalf of the government. For example, their Hospital Luiz Gonzaga operated as a Leprosarium until 1930. Many ailing members of the rural aristocracy would transfer land to the religious organization.

² In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jane Jacobs wrote that for a street to be a safe place, "there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street," p. 35.

told me about the negotiations he had with his neighbor to build three flats destined for the rental market. Controversy arose when his apartment got flooded because of damage in the courtyard of the adjacent house. Since most of the homes in the area share a wall, daily interferences occur, such as leaks, noise, and structural movements. M's neighbor did not have the money to repair the slab so, in the end, he had to pay for it. According to the "building codes" of Furnas, the newcomers pay, for they know the preexisting conditions and therefore assume any risk associated with a new construction.

While a proud M was showing me his in-progress auto-constructed apartments, a black teen removed a pack of white powder from a hole in the unfinished brick wall at the entrance and quickly disappeared. "They are using my wall to store their drugs," said M, and continued with the tour. While struck at the moment, I would soon get used to similar everyday scenes, when I rented one of his apartments the following year.³

The unstoppable periphery

Although a dormitory neighborhood, Furnas is anything but quiet. All day long, music and construction work from the houses nearby produce a mixture of low-frequency noise: hammers, drills, and funky basses. People living here always improve their homes at different stages of construction. Jobless people on weekdays, and workers on weekends, mix concrete, pour it into wood molds, mount windows, lay down floor tiles, repair entrance slopes, and paint the walls. Some have been working on their houses for 30 years. The noise of auto-constructors at work embodies modern beliefs in always-progressing conditions for all, funneled by the developmental nation-state since the 1930s—*São Paulo não pode parar!* (São Paulo cannot stop!).

The urban unrest continues at night: youth walk the streets, chatting and laughing out loud. One after another, cars pass with their mounted subwoofers at unimaginably high volume. The funky basses deafen the nerves as the aluminum sheets of my flat's doors and windows become vibrating percussion disks. Subwoofers mounted on cars are the infrastructure used by youth in the peripheries to mark their presence in the neighborhood. Two or three sound-equipped cars in a row can create a pop-up *baile* (dance) funk in the middle of the street.

When the "bandits" of the night end their day, the "workers" and their kids start theirs.⁴ At 5.30 am, the school bus organized by the Prefecture repeatedly honks in the street: the kids living nearby are not ready for the pickup. At 6 am, the noise of rolling shutters of garages saturates the air: some residents are going to work and, by then, I have hardly slept—an Uber driver would tell me that many people in Furnas have chronic insomnia.

The sound of power

On the first weekend of my stay in Furnas, the car wash in front of my apartment organizes a *baile* funk: six hours (12–6 am) of uninterrupted loud bass to which slabs, walls, windows, and doors resonate. On the roof slabs of the nearby rented houses, entire families are awake like me, but no one calls the police.⁵ Young girls and boys are smoking pot by the fence of my flat's entrance. Bouncers are policing the access to the car wash. At times a luxury car stops by them: they exchange packs (of

³ In Furnas, the slopes of private garages make sidewalks uneven. Hence, people tend to walk in the streets. The few walkable sidewalks are used for parking. People from other neighborhoods used to park and leave their cars for days on the sidewalk near M's house. After pleading with cars' owners, M asked the Subprefecture of Tremembé/Jaçana to plant small trees on that sidewalk.

⁴ Gabriele de Santis Feltran (2008) describes the dichotomy between workers and bandits as a sedimented discourse in the peripheries of São Paulo.

⁵ I have been told that there are several reasons for this behavior, such as avoiding the organizers of the *baile* or police violence against teenagers, should they respond.

drugs?) with the driver through the car windows; then another car arrives. Poorly dressed girls walk in the street entirely drunk; the hands of the boys are all over them.

At 8 am, the scream of the priest from the Evangelist church underneath my flat wakes me up: “Fornication brings to hell!” Three times a week, the church has services: the preacher and the believers pray and sing using microphones in the tiny rented room. In those days the whole apartment trembles. An acoustic engineer told me that his Evangelical clients always ask him to oversize their sound equipment. The ministers intend to create an atmosphere of constant tension through high volume services, to produce an experience of peace afterward.

At times, the “state meets the street” (Zacka, 2017), starting with the earsplitting noise of drilling rigs of the operation *Tapa Buraco* (Hole Cover). Many residents lament that the asphaltting of street holes is a superficial yet visible intervention for the Regional Prefecture of Tremembé/Jaçana to gather consensus while neglecting more substantial issues. Another day the operator from Sabesp-Basic Sanitation of the State of São Paulo rings the doorbell. He has to check if there are any sources of standing water in my flat that might allow mosquitoes to breed. The *Aedes Aegypti* is endemic here, responsible for multiple illnesses, including Zika and dengue fever. On the next weekend of the *baile funk*, a squad of the federal military police patrols the neighborhood. On the day of rest, we walk surrounded by machine guns.

The church, drug trafficking, and the state are the three systems of power that dwellers in so-called “informal” settlements in the peripheries navigate in their everyday life – what is informal about them?

Re-imagining spaces of scarcity

Like many illegal settlements in the peripheries of São Paulo, Furnas has neither squares nor green spaces. The necessity for housing has prevailed over the need for public space. People occasionally gather in the streets, sitting at the entrance stairs of their houses, on chairs on the sidewalks, or leaning on parked cars.⁶ They meet in bars, bakeries, car repair shops, and beauty salons. They sometimes celebrate birthdays in the garages, the largest rooms of the house. “We made a terrible mistake” admits C, who lives in an adjacent neighborhood in the *morro*: “We focused on building our houses, and we forgot to build the city for our children.” During the 80s and 90s, C’s generation claimed for access to land, housing, and infrastructure while neglecting public spaces, green areas, and services. “My daughter does not know how to ride a bicycle because there is no street to ride one. We do not have streets; we only have dangerous pathways!” If public space is at the core of modern urbanity (Caldeira, 2000, pp. 299–304), residents of many peripheries of São Paulo are dispossessed of public spaces for outdoor activities at birth.

However, new generations born in Tremembé are repurposing these urban spaces of scarcity. Standing against working-class exploitation and class and race segregation, street artists perform visual, bodily, audiovisual, and popular culture in public spaces and abandoned buildings in neighborhoods near Furnas. Urban farmers and educators challenge capitalist modes of food production and consumption through diffuse urban orchards and pedagogic workshops in interstitial semi-public spaces. Cyberfeminists articulate the periphery as a political territory for feminist strategies of visibility and resistance. Such transforming imagination may turn highly political under the current crisis of Brazilian democracy. These collective identities are marking new territories of belonging and difference and add other meanings to the landscape of Furnas.

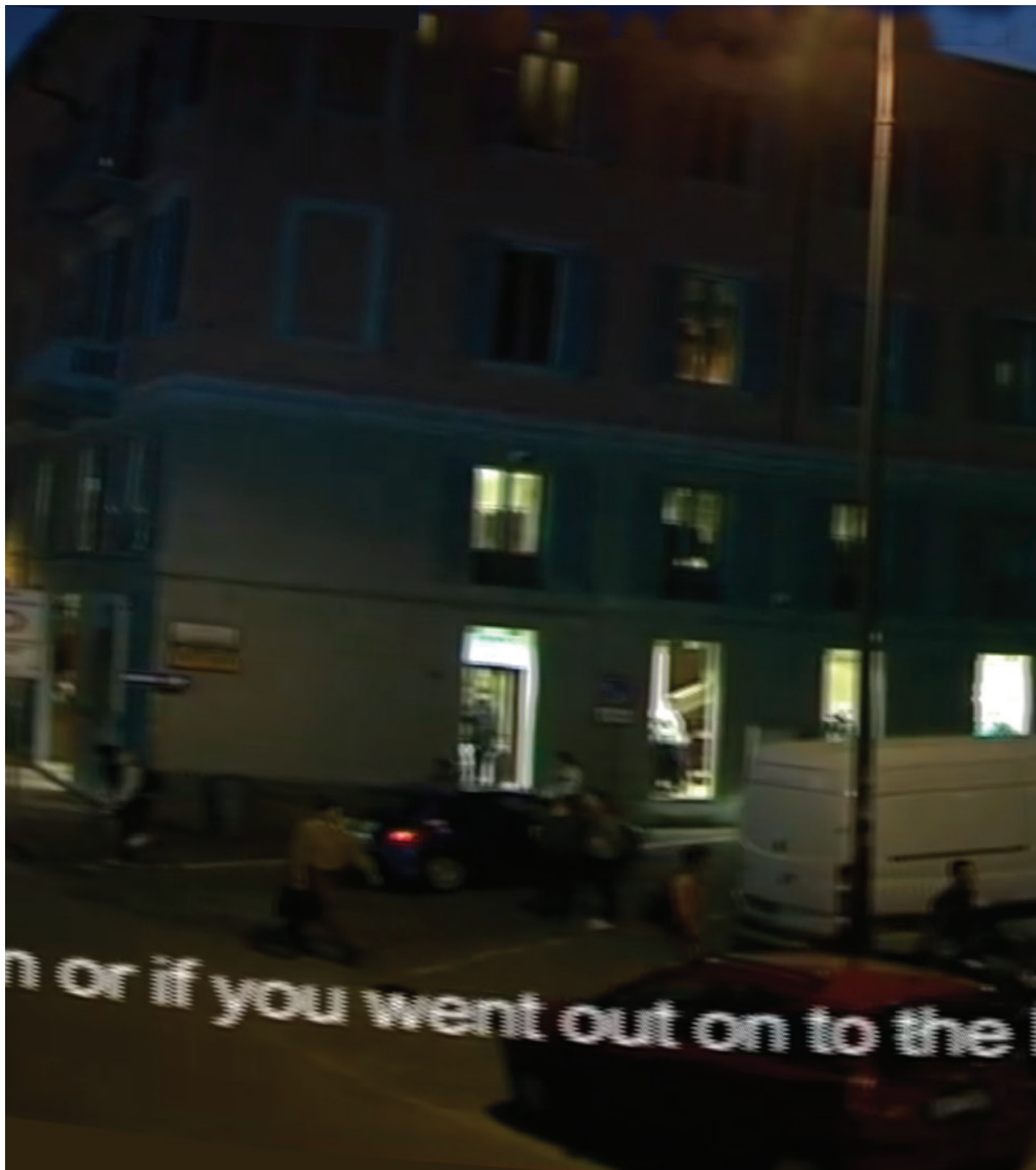
⁶ The main streets in Furnas are wide enough for one or two cars to pass; the paths between the houses are wide enough for “a man to carry a refrigerator” (Danielle Cavalcanti Klintowitz talking about public spaces in the favelas, Instituto Pólis, March 17, 2018).

The neighborhood emerges as a fragmented territory assembled around geographies of race, gender, class, and age—ranging from the level of auto-constructors negotiating personal interests with regulation and drug trafficking, to residents marking their presence through acoustic territorialization at night and those who need to (re)organize their everyday school/work schedules, to the three systems of power and the geography of “internal orientalism” (Weinstein, 2015, p. 25) that always displaces difference beyond one’s neighborhood.

Furnas’ portrait forces us to rethink the periphery as an assortment of cultures, histories, and practices assembled in multiple ways by different actors. Ultimately, this implies connecting with its various spatial networks affecting everyday life and opening to new political possibilities.

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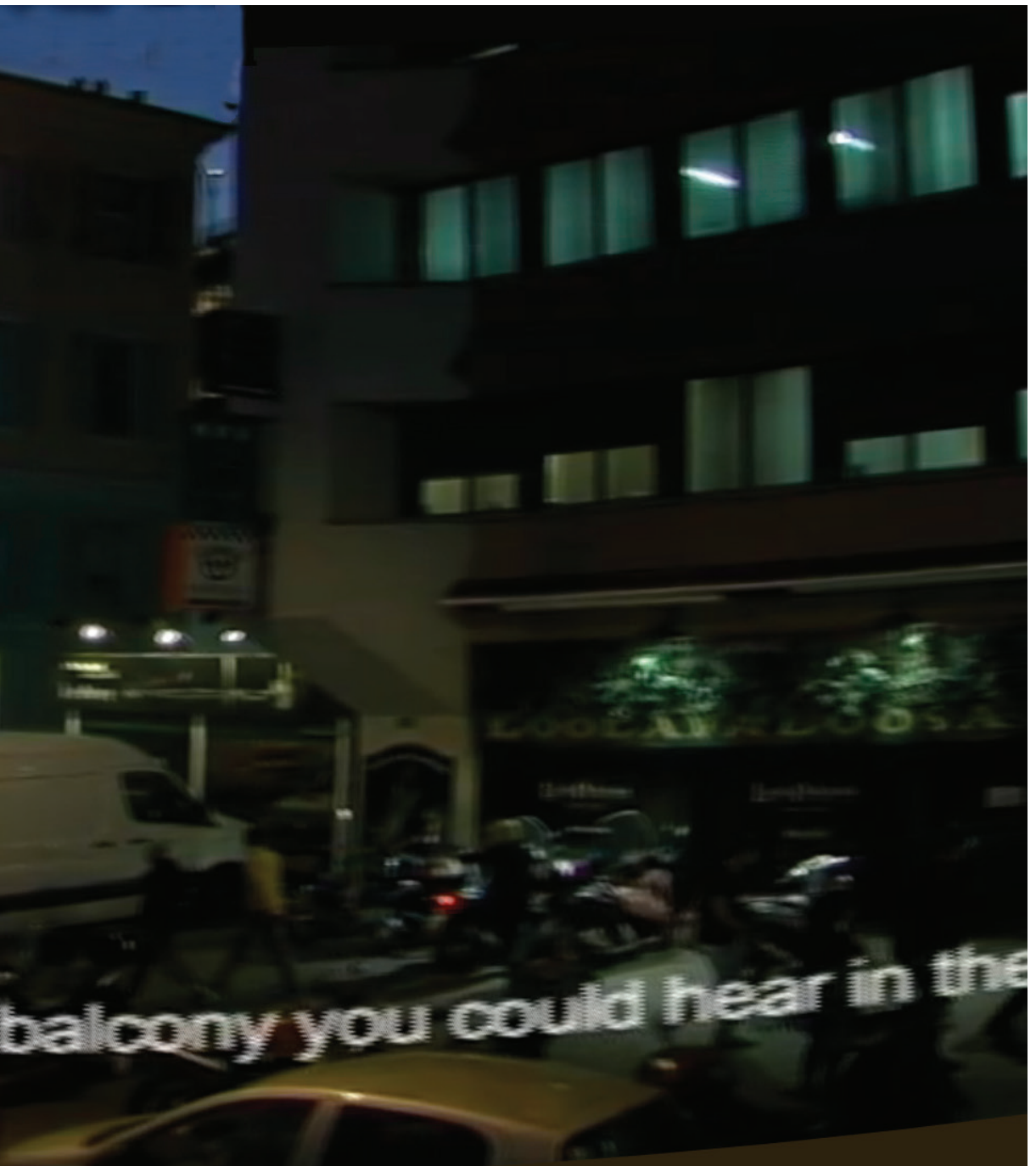
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