



# Standby urbanization: Dwelling and organized crime in Rio de Janeiro

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## abstract

This paper conceptualizes dwelling as an analytical lens to study the effects of combined human-made and environmental threats on the governing of peripheral urbanization. I call this grounded and phenomenological-analytical approach to dwelling *dwelling in limbo* to highlight the improvised and always uncertain nature of low-income populations' forms of residence. As such, dwelling will be explored as a temporal, political, and more-than-human process: as residents' exposure to, endurance while, and ways of navigating towards urbanization. Combining three data sources – semi-structured interviews with residents, politicians, state attorneys; own observations/ fieldwork notes, and local media reports – the paper situates this approach in the northern periphery of Rio de Janeiro. I present cases of once promised, yet suspended resettlement and highlight the role of organized criminal actors in the partial implementation of the Project Iguçu – a disaster prevention program financed by Brazil's Federal Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC). The paper identifies such dwelling in limbo, that is, residents' exposure to criminal actors' dominion, enduring (non)resettlement, and navigating amidst uncertainty, to illustrate the effects of standby urbanization. Standby urbanization, I argue, is characterized by an active passivity of marginalized residents: To secure future dwelling, low-income populations are forced into supporting structures that perpetuate their marginality. In other words, dwelling in limbo is not an accidental side-effect of urbanization, but a form of political violence inherent to the governing of urban peripheries.

## **Introduction: Situated dwelling**

I meet A. and her friend M. in front of A.'s house. A. chose this meeting point for good reason, knowing of my interest in the community's physical and political development. She points to the foundations of her house, which sits about a meter below the level of the surrounding neighbors' houses. These, A. explains, have all piled up their parcels with rubble and sand, gradually and over the years, in order to avoid damage from flooding during rainy season, when the two adjacent rivers overflow their banks. Having been promised resettlement away from this 'risk area' (Vissirini et al., 2016), and to an apartment in the nearby state-financed social housing condominium in 2011, A. and her family abstained from making further adjustments to their house, thereby aggravating its proneness to floods. Instead of costly construction provisions, they invested in a new car, hoping for a new source of income from offering ridesharing services. For more than eight years, A. has been waiting for the delivery of her apartment. Meanwhile, people from other communities, in similar need of protection against rain-induced floods, have been resettled into the apartments originally foreseen for 900 families from her neighborhood.

Together with A. and M., I walk along the dam that separates the adjacent river Iguaçú from a drainage system, a system of canals and polders. These basins are no longer sufficient to keep the water away, M. explains, due to ongoing construction works further down the river. What threatens families like A.'s and M.'s, however, is not simply rainfall, or the decision over whose waiting ends and whose hope lingers on. Rather, it is the irresponsible sealing of polders, as well as the involvement of criminal actors in local housing markets that aggravate the negative effects of 'nature' on residents' livelihoods. To make these processes visible to the public, A. and M. have allied with local social workers, demanding investment and action from local politicians (based on fieldwork notes, March 2019).

This anecdote is based on fieldwork notes which I took during one of my first visits to the community of São Bento, Duque de Caxias, in the northern periphery of Rio de Janeiro in March 2019.<sup>1</sup> In interviews with residents, I avoided addressing militia and illegal or criminal activities. It was my intention to not endanger respondents by raising such sensitive issues. Nevertheless, sooner or later in our conversation most respondents themselves raised the topic of militia activity, usually when the interview focused on topics of local urban development, resettlement and the

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful for the time and willingness of residents of São Bento to respond to my questions during six months of research in 2019. Except for identifiable, public figures, and with their consent, respondents have been anonymized.

difficulties that residents had been confronting in the past when trying to improve dwelling or organizing community activities. Usually respondents avoided to name individuals and spoke in rather vague and abstract terms. In some particular cases however, crime-related topics became the main focus of our conversation. These conversations also triggered personal affinities that facilitated my presence as researcher in the locality, motivated by the willingness of respondents to publicize the illegal activities of criminal actors and the connections of public officials with these.

A.'s story has crucially informed and shaped my case study. In the way in that she shared her experience with me, A.'s main focus was on expressing the constant improvisation and necessity for her and family as well as neighbors to adapt to environmental degradation and changing local power structures. The illegal agency was only one, however effective, additional character of threats that A.'s story revealed. My case study suggests to understand (human) dwelling in Rio's expanding urban periphery – and beyond – as a socio-material, eco-political process, involving floods, houses, residents' alliances, and urban governance. Understanding dwelling this way, following Tim Ingold, blurs the conceptual boundary between 'nature' and 'society' (Ingold, 2005). In this line, from a phenomenological perspective, dwelling can be seen as active and aware engagement of humans with non-human species, objects, and the (built) environment (*ibid.*).

This perspective allows for revealing the violent inequality inherent to the governing of peripheral urbanization. For in the case of the community of São Bento, the expansion of human, so-called 'informal' settlements without official registration is threatened both by ('natural') floods and ('societal') imbrications of legal and illegal urbanization agencies, including the construction of a publicly financed logistic hub on the same 'nature preservation area'. Confining (informal) spaces of habitation and protecting nature preservation areas is in itself a discursive practice of urban governance, deployed for the benefit of particular interests and elites (Müller, 2017). Therefore, dwelling occupies a critical place within the matrix of power: While dwelling on the urban periphery means to perpetually align, reuse and gather housing materials and therefore suggests to conceive of the 'city as assemblage' (McFarlane, 2011: 649), the discursive reconstitution of the boundary between nature and society plays a crucial role in publicly

legitimizing state officials' encroachment in or abandonment of urbanizing peripheries.

Adding to the complex state-non-state, human-non-human assemblage is criminal actors' involvement in (the suspension of) resettlement. A. and her family were promised, and ready to move to, an apartment in the near-by social housing complex, when hope was drowned and local militias continued parceling land for construction in the old community. Interfering into the resettlement process, they decided over who was going to be resettled. These threats, I argue, are not external to dwelling, but dwelling is always already imbued with an alertness to threats as well as strategies to mitigate these, thus pushing residents to take an active role in 'urban resilience' (Koonings and Kruijt, 2015: 16ff.). Marginalized populations' year-long, sometimes life-long search for a safe place to live, thus requires that we understand dwelling as an open, both passive and active process, by and through which residents confront multiple, interconnected threats. Families like A.'s, while being exposed to the threats of river waters and criminal threats alike, endure within a liminal space, at the same time defending the own place and demanding another, better one. *Dwelling in limbo*, then, characterizes as temporal mode of habitation, 'located somewhere between given and new social positions and roles, and between the conditions of the past and the promise of the future' (Povinelli, 2011: 78). A.'s position in a damaged, substandard house locates her on the cusp between her old existence as part of lower-income communities and a new social position associated with the social housing complex. On standby for an effective change of social positions, A. organizes her life in limbo in anticipation of what promises to be a change of social position.

This paper develops the concept of dwelling in limbo as a way to understand dwelling as a mode of 'standby urbanization'. To characterize what it means to dwell in limbo from the perspective of affected populations, I will first provide further background to the case illustrated above, which I will situate within existing literatures on urban peripheries in Latin America. Here, I give specific focus to dwelling in violent contexts, thus specifying dwelling as a conceptual vehicle to understand the governing of 'peripheral urbanization' (Caldeira, 2017). Second, I will introduce three analytic dimensions of dwelling in limbo: endurance (continuously surviving amidst multiple

uncertainties), exposure (being forced into increased vulnerability) and navigation (strategically mitigating the threatening outcomes of contested governance) to account for human-non-human urbanization. Third, I cite from local media to highlight the discursive interlinkage of environmental threats and threats of crime/violence that underlie urbanization and, in particular, the way in which the exposure to these threats relates to increased alertness for illegal activities within urbanization. Drawing, additionally, from own interviews with residents, politicians and a state attorney in Duque de Caxias, I conclude by delineating standby urbanization as a mode of social organization that enables low-income populations to support the very political-material structures that perpetuate marginalization.

### **Dwelling and governing the periphery**

Urban peripheries are not only physical locations, or outer limits, but socio-political spaces, and as such, territories that are prone to (criminal) actors' attempts to expand their dominion (Arias, 2006; Doyle, 2016; Moncada, 2017; Perlman, 2009; Wolff, 2015). Due to these spatial dynamics, the urban periphery has been accounted for as a space which is 'imbued with a sense of insufficiency and incompleteness' (Simone, 2007: 462). Underlying the everyday experience of insufficiency and incompleteness, are 'violently plural' (Arias and Goldstein, 2010: 1) modes of governance. Such relational dynamic of peripheral urbanization and a normative center is constitutive of how urban expansion is governed, both formally and informally. As Brazilian anthropologist Teresa Caldeira has pointed out, peripheral urbanization in the global South is to be conceived through the

instability of formations of legality and regulation and a significant amount of improvisation, experimentation, and contestation shaping the relationships among all involved, from residents to agents of the state. (Caldeira, 2017: 16)

Peripheral urbanization also enmeshes (personal) political and economic interests within complex structures of state-non-state actors. As part of these structures, urban militia, that is, former armed self-defense groups that act in a perceived absence of state security actors on the city's periphery, have intensified their dominion and broadened activities and sources for income in many Latin American cities (Gledhill, 2018; Paiva et al., 2019). Both militias,

seemingly law-and-order groups, and the often antagonistic drug trafficking gangs (Pierobon, 2021) can pose existential threats to livelihood in peripheral spaces, or offer unreliable forms of protection (Davis and Willis, 2021). Against this background, the home plays a crucial role in peripheral urbanization, as both a defensive place to protect oneself and one's belongings, and as a political place from which to engage in state-non-state governance arrangements (Müller, 2019). Dwelling is that process by which home comes to matter within the competing public authorities and criminalized governance arrangements.

The modes of organizing dwelling in the urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro are characterized by contested authority, violence and crime which together shape processes of expanding and densifying urbanization. In Rio's Baixada Fluminense, the northern periphery in which A's community is located and that expands from the border of the municipality of Rio de Janeiro towards the mountains of the Tinguá and the Órgãos nature reserves, and in the western peripheries of Campo Grande and Santa Cruz, militias are effectively influencing the organization of electoral campaigns (Nassif, 2018). Their political influence derives directly from their economic control over urban and infrastructural as well as real estate 'services', managing the ways in which low-income populations acquire land and houses; and thereby of all conditions that underlie dwelling. Through this urban control over residents' lives, militias establish territorial strongholds by which they can decide whose politicians' electoral campaign they support, according to sociologist Ignacio Cano (JDB, 2018).

The periphery is a space that is imbued with endangering processes, unstable physical and political structures that taken together are dominant in shaping its expansion. As a broad literature demonstrates, peripheral urbanization is coterminous with violence and crime, particularly in Latin America, which is accounted for as the most violent region of the world (Vilalta et al., 2016). According to the Homicide Monitor (Igarapé), 104 of the 121 cities with the highest homicide rates in the world are located in Latin America. Here, scholars have long attempted to understand the complex correlation of criminal violence, inequality, corruption and the weak rule of law (Davis, 2010), where police and military are at the same time aggressors and authors of (state) violence as well as addressees of citizens' demands for greater safety

(Auyero, 2015). As Feltran (2010) shows for the metropolitan area of São Paulo, normative orders coexist in which the written law is not the most decisive orientation for legitimate (police) action. Instead, the use or threat of force, that is, ‘violence’ (Feltran, 2010: 112) accompanies state and organized criminal actors’ practices that extend from ‘strictly legal to the frankly illegal’ (*ibid.*).

Such contested authority also shapes modes of urban organization. Witnessing an expanding territorial influence of ‘criminal enterprises’ (Arias, 2017), sociologists and political scientists aim at grasping these enmeshed processes of organizing space – the legal and illegal, formal and informal, social and natural – by novel concepts. Counting in prevalent police corruption, governing can no longer be neatly distinguished into formal/state and informal/non-state modes, but instead we need to understand the co-production of sovereignty (Denyer Willis, 2015; Navaro-Yashim, 2010) between drug trafficking gangs, police and residents (Richmond, 2019). These conflictive cases of ‘hybrid governance’ (Colona and Jaffe, 2016) demonstrate how ‘violently plural’ (Arias and Goldstein, 2010) a contested authority beyond a state-centered monopoly of violence shapes populations’ livelihoods. To capture matters in a nutshell, understanding power structures across the formal-informal divide in the urban peripheries of Latin America locates these spaces’ criminalization within instances of ‘governance with, by, and through crime (and violence)’ (Müller, 2018: 171).

While scholars recognize the necessity to rethink sovereignty, that is, the state’s limited capacity or will to overcome criminal territorial influence as well as to fight police corruption, the mutual relationship of the material conditions of dwelling, peripheral urbanization and contested authority has received little academic attention. This is surprising, since criminal actors are increasingly relying on the benefits that urbanization – the parceling and selling of land, the construction, renting and selling of apartments – adds to sustain their illegal businesses. These benefits do not only potentially aggravate and add to the natural threats that are endangering peripheral populations’ livelihoods. Criminal actors have also developed strategies to take advantage of environmental threats and aggravated their effects on affected populations’ livelihoods. This mode of social organization is maintaining residents ‘in limbo’, urging them to align to (criminally

exacerbated) uncertainties regarding future urban development, property and life-endangering hardships.

Environmental threats add to the uncertainties of dwelling on the urban periphery. Rio de Janeiro's Baía da Guanabara (Guanabara Bay) was once the inspiration for the city's name when the arriving Portuguese sailors in January 1502 thought that they had entered a river, flowing into the Atlantic Ocean between today's famous Sugarloaf and Niteroi on the other bay side. Sparsely populated over centuries, and sharply growing with the arrival of Portugal's royal family in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rio de Janeiro saw its biggest growth with the industrialization around Guanabara Bay around the 1930s to 1950s. This wave of industrialization also brought with it strong population growth between the 1950s and 1980s, particularly in informal working class areas, the favelas, many of them located on the shores of Guanabara Bay. This form of industrialization-urbanization was paralleled by an increase in domestic and industrial wastewater, one-third of which continues to be discharged without treatment into the bay waters (FIRJAN, 2017).

Despite a major investment of US\$ 1.2 billion that had been allocated to clean up the bay by the Olympic sailing contest in 2016 via the Guanabara Bay Pollution Clean-Up Program, it remains contaminated. The promise was officially revoked in 2014 by the then-governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Luis Fernando Pezão (PMDB), thereby implicitly acknowledging political incapacity to confront the area's environmental hazards (Alencar, 2016). On the contrary, the region seems to be economically dependent on one of its major polluters, the petroleum industry. According to recent estimations, the oil platform and the refinery REDUC are the essential motor for 76% of Baixada Fluminense's industrial production (Raulino, 2013: 170).

The dynamic of a lack of political regulation of wastewaters, growing industries, and subsequent population growth and 'informal' peripheral expansion together, provide a scenario that is characterized by various politico-ecological threats. Water and its flows have remained a crucial factor in the coastal urbanization (Maciel Costa, 2015). In this particular periphery, close to the bay and on the northern outskirts of the metropolitan zone, the expanding city soon reached its limits, growing out of them with the so-called '*aterros*': starting in the southern area of Rio, the Aterro do Flamengo, via

central areas, and towards the north, whole islands and neighborhoods today stretch on reclaimed land. Among these are parts of the so-called Maré, a compound of various favelas and home to more than 100,000 residents and, further north, large parts of the municipality of Duque de Caxias in which the cases of (neglected) resettlement discussed above and below are located.

In the face of ubiquitous violent criminalization, toxic environments and disaster particularly in, but not restricted to, the urban areas of the Global South, '[q]uestions about what is inhabitable or not have long defined the nature and governance of urban life' (Simone, 2016: 136). This paper traces this question along moments that are critical to low-income populations' dwelling on the urban periphery: the waiting for resettlement from a provisional form of dwelling to a social housing compound. The following reflections on dwelling in limbo, thus, account for the improvisation that underlies these populations' modes of living. Their attempts to adjust their life rhythms to uncertain and unpredictable challenges, while at the same time, struggling to rebuild and strengthen their own place, is a durable attempt to stabilize their own livelihoods: dwelling constantly conditions their own being-in-the-world.

### **Dwelling in limbo: A situated approach to peripheral urbanization**

Dwelling, as a process, is continuously constructing and sustaining the conditions of inhabiting a space, to make it *one's own* place in the world. Yet, dwelling is, in today's late liberalism, also a particular 'governing technique' (Foucault, 1987) and therefore links techniques of governing the self to those of political domination. In their combination, endangerment, politics, and procedural dwelling add to what Zeiderman has termed spaces of uncertainty (Zeiderman, 2015). An anthropological 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold, 2005: 503) on this politicized uncertainty, starts from the temporality and situatedness of dwelling:

Hence the creation and construction of the dwellings is a lifetime project of change and improvement that is highly responsive to changing domestic circumstances, budgets and opportunities. (Kellet, 2015: 226)

Dwelling is not only a mode of producing one's own material conditions, authored by the people themselves (Ingold, 2005: 504), but subject to political structures and socio-ecological dynamics, and as such both defensive and creative. Dwelling is a defensive act, when the conditions are prescribed by a more powerful political entity, such as the state and/or criminal actors: As the introductory vignette illustrates, A. and her husband, due to their excellent social ties within the community, were 'invited' to become president and vice-president, respectively, of the local neighborhood association; yet, they refused those honorary positions since this association is known for being intimately tied to the local militia – even corporal threats could not 'convince' A's husband to change his mind. Dwelling is creative, when it facilitates people's involvement in the political and economic processes that condition housing: a matter of ad hoc alliances, a social space of exchanging skills and knowledges.

Thus, dwelling cannot be reduced to a harmonic being-in-the world, since 'human lives are lived collectively within fields of power' (Ingold, 2005: 503). Dwelling on the city's periphery encompasses threats that are endangering vulnerable populations the most while turning risk into a principle to manage settlement processes (Zeiderman, 2013). Dwelling is thus an active and passive mode of standing-by-urbanization.

How can this perspective on dwelling be made fruitful for an analysis of peripheral urbanization? I suggest characterizing Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' as a three-fold process and therefore define three concepts to guide the following analysis of dwelling: exposure, endurance, and navigation. I argue, further on in this paper, that suspension of some populations' benefits is not an aleatory side-effect of urbanization, but rather a contested mode of social organization that perpetuates the exclusionary structures of urban peripheries.

Environmental or crime related threats are constitutive of dwelling's active and defensive nature: To dwell safely means to shape a place in which threats to one's livelihood can be overlooked and confined. Residents' affective search for safety affirms their *exposure* to perceived threats as a constitutive element of dwelling. Addressing dwelling's dimension of exposure requires a re-examination of history and aims at an understanding of residents' present

situation as a result of negotiations, struggles and human-non-human interactions that have been initiated in the past. As analytical category, exposure thus looks at dwelling's situatedness as a life 'endangering' process, as one that submerges residents in processes that they can never fully, but nevertheless continuously attempt to, control.

The second category that derives from my characterization of dwelling in limbo underlines the durability of exposure. While being exposed to processes of endangerment, residents are also active and inventive in coping with their life situation. As people *endure*, they perform acts of temporal resistance to threats, and by enduring, align everyday protective routines to respond to the challenges of dwelling. Following Elizabeth Povinelli's conceptualization of endurance, this category provides a lens for examining how people 'suffer, and yet persist' (Povinelli, 2011: 32) over time. Dwelling is furthermore an 'eventful' process, and it is this eventfulness through which we can qualify residents' persistence as their ability to cope with their suffering. Threats, such as heavy rainfalls or the presence of armed actors close to one's home can be accounted for as unforeseeable 'events' that increase residents' alertness. As an affective mode, alertness urges them to re-align by developing new collective or individual strategies of protection. Urban residents' modes of endurance can thus be located along a continuum of coping and alertness. Coping, here, means to endure a harmful situation through pre-reflective automatisms, that is, through acting as if perfectly aligned with the conditioning environment. Alertness, in turn, indicates residents' conscious openness to be affected by threats as they appear as factors that can (and should) be acted upon or against. In alertness, the ordinarily functional and unconsciously absorbed alignment of humans, other animals and objects becomes disturbed, calling upon one's abilities to act.

Lastly, I recall Henrik Vigh's strong metaphor of 'social navigation' (2009: 420) as a potentially powerful category against the context of this paper's unstable, liquid, sandy terrain. Through this metaphor, Vigh aims at understanding how we 'act, adjust and attune our strategies and tactics in relation to the way we experience and imagine and anticipate the movement and influence of social forces' (*ibid.*). This allows us to understand dwelling as a simultaneously affective and projective process. And yet, the navigation through the unstable grounds on which houses are built always needs to

account for the social and political forces that try to command its future direction. An analysis of social navigation alludes to the socio-material connections between people and their dwellings, as they forge alliances in search for the right, successful, or at least, alleviating course of stabilizing their socio-political environment.

In short, dwelling in limbo unfolds into and encompasses three dimensions: exposure as a situation of being forced into increased vulnerability, endurance as the state of continuously surviving within uncertainties, and navigation, as a set of routinized acts to strategically mitigate the various threatening outcomes of contested governance. Dwelling in limbo thus adds an ethnographic perspective to alarming analyses of increased violence and the necessity, yet also, ability to develop resilient urban responses (Koonings and Kruijt, 2015). To be sure, these three categories are *analytical*, not phenomenological ones. In the lived experience, residents always dwell in and through all three dimensions. To distinguish the dynamics of dwelling by these three interrelated analytical angles, however, enables us to highlight the extended temporality and durability as well as the affective quality of human-non-human urbanization.

### **Rio's criminalized peripheral urbanization**

This section summarizes the recent shift in attention that militia activity in Rio de Janeiro has gained, particularly in the aftermath of 2018's state and federal elections and the subsequent ascendance of the extreme right. Adding insights from an analysis of major newspaper reports to existing literature on the phenomenon of militias in Brazil, it details on how environmental and security discourse have enmeshed within the criminalization of the city's urban peripheries. My selective focus is guided by the premise that (coastal-) peripheral urbanization is heavily imbued by the activities of organized crime. To exemplify this, I zoom into the community development of São Bento, the case mentioned in the introductory vignette.

The criminalization of peripheral urbanization is strongly framing the way in which dwelling is organized. In recent years, public media discourse contributed to criminalize peripheral urbanization, and with it: dwelling, by

projecting Rio's periphery as outlaw territory in which militia has taken over all kinds of 'urban services' (Araujo, 2019; Pierobon, 2018). This adds a material perspective to existing literatures on criminal organizations' involvement in urban governance (Denyer Willis, 2009) by detailing on how the provision of urban services opens novel ways for expanding territorial dominion. To support this claim, I review local media production and highlight changes and emergences of (new) linkages between broader narrative assemblages. The broader narrative assemblages of interest in this paper regard, on the one side, the criminalization of peripheral urbanization and, on the other, environmental issues, i.e. pollution and flooding. By doing so I sketch the wider socio-political frame in which the practical dimensions of dwelling – exposure, endurance and navigation – take place. I encapsulate this process of constituting an uncertain reality as process of 'criminalization' in order to emphasize that organized crime is not an institution acting apart from local political elites, neighborhood associations, construction firms and residents. Rather, I call for recognition that the redundant academic and media production on non-state actors' involvement in urbanization also takes part in discursively producing those criminalized peripheries. Urbanization in standby is thus a form of organization which is strongly conditioned by the way we, as writers, make sense of social reality.

Thus, a closer examination of parameters such as legal-illegal imbrications and diverse aspects of threats (security and environmental) illustrates the vagueness in public understandings of the criminalization of peripheries and state responsibility. 'As the Brazilian state refuses to order its urban territory, a parallel power has installed itself and developed', a commentator summarizes the question of militia activity at the end of 2018 (Fajardo, 2018, translation by author). The author refers to militia practices in Rio de Janeiro's western and northern periphery. Militia exercise territorial control via the selling of gas, electricity, 'public' transport and internet services (Garcia, 2019). They have furthermore managed to take control of social housing condominiums, often in violent conflict with the city's two largest drug trafficking organizations (Rio On Watch, 2019; Extra, 2015; Queiroz, 2015). Here, militias are involved in the local real estate market, having invaded and taken over empty apartments in social housing compounds (Estadão, 2015; O Globo, 2015; O Globo, 2014). In addition, militias are producing space for

urban growth, clearing rainforest and filling in swamps and riverbeds (*aterrar*, in Portuguese) (O Globo, 2018). According to Ignacio Cano, two million of Rio de Janeiro's 13 million inhabitants in the Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro live in areas that are predominantly controlled by militia groups (Grandin, 2018).

The expression 'parallel power', referring to the way that criminal activity is being functionally related to the state's claim on the monopoly of violence, is, however, contested. For sociologist Jose Claudio Alves militias are, de facto, coterminous with the state:

They are the state. So, don't tell me that the state is absent. It is the state that determines who operates the militarized control and security in those areas. (Simões, 2019)

Implicitly applauding such collaborative form of authority, newly elected president Jair Bolsonaro's has shown support for militia activity, stating, in early 2018, that

[s]ome are in favor of the militia seeing them as a possibility to live free of violence. Where a militia is present and paid off, there is no violence. (Betim, 2018)

Media reports link security provision, through the co-activity of police and militia, to militia involvement in the production of housing in those areas, maintaining the areas under their control free of drug trafficking gangs. In particular, reports on two cases of intense militia activity, in the community Rio das Pedras and Muzema where 24 persons died when an 'illegal construction' of militia origin collapsed (O Globo, 2019), highlight this active involvement of public officials. In addition, with Muzema, the discursive shift towards militia involvement in construction and real estate market has come to be more widely acknowledged.

Zooming into the (coastal-) peripheral development, the dwelling-related activities are reported particularly by correlating security and environmental threats. Among the dwelling-related militia activities, the provision and parceling of land, and the invasion and selling of pieces and apartments in social housing condominiums as well as the 'hazard-induced' resettlement of whole populations serve to establish this discursive link. The organization of

entirely self-sustaining chains characterize the state-non-state modes of urbanization. Militia fill in swamps and riverbeds; to do so, they carry the necessary sand (from their own sand mines) and rubble (from torn down buildings) (Ministerio Público Federal, 2019), sell the parcels at very low prices and build up a clientele of voters which they can either ‘offer’ to local politicians or mobilize to support their own candidates (UOL, n.d.) (Figure 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Illegal sand mine in Xerem, municipality in the Baixada Fluminense. Taken by author, 2019.



Figure 2: Delivery of sand, Guedes, São Bento. Used with permission. © Archive São Bento, 2019.

Summing up, the media is frequently reporting on the diversified political economy of militias, highlighting a rather entangled than parallel relationship with public officials. The criminalization of peripheral urbanization is, in addition, based on two argumentative patterns of producing threats: threat, on the one side, is an environmental complex in which the rain forest falls victim to illegal clearance and sand is illegally extracted from areas of environmental protection. Within the same politico-economic chain, on the other side, militia exercise strong influence in resettlement, controlling who is allowed to move into a social housing condominium. To secure this business, militia are also heavily invested in the

renting and re-selling of empty (or violently ‘emptied-out’) apartments. Thus, in peripheral urbanization dwelling is imbued with illegal activities. Within such dwelling as being framed, primarily, through illegal, and uncontrollable forces, residents are forced to develop strategies of coping and re-appropriation. The next section will explain these strategies in detail and look at dwelling from the perspective of affected residents. By zooming into cases of resettlement within the mentioned two communities I will characterize dwelling as a mode of standing by criminalized urbanization.

### **Dwelling: Exposure to, endurance while, navigation towards urbanization**

This section zooms further into a few cases of claimed resettlement which have marked the conflictive episode of the above introduced communities that belong to São Bento, Duque de Caxias. It demonstrates how residents of these communities are affected by the criminalized peripheral urbanization as outlined in the previous section. It will look at how terrain/soil signifiers are deployed in interviews with residents of those communities that had been promised resettlement. To make my argument, I rely on my interviews with residents of São Bento, but include also observations and crucial text passages from either my own or the official protocols of formal meetings, in particular public hearings in the municipal chamber and activists’ meetings with the state attorney.

#### *Exposure: ‘Shadow theater’*

Residents of various communities within São Bento have been awaiting resettlement as part of a region-wide infrastructural project, called ‘Project Iguaçu’ (Iguaçu is the name of one of the two rivers that frame São Bento’s northern and southern limits). Project Iguaçu, initiated in 2007 by the State Institute of Natural Environment (INEA) and financed via Brazil’s federal infrastructure development program PAC (Programa de Aceleração de Crecimento), foresaw the resettlement of populations inhabiting the risk areas on river banks and swamps - needed to store rain water during rainy season – and the cleaning of rivers and dugouts, as well as the construction of sustainable housing. Two condominiums within the federal social housing program Minha Casa Minha Vida, financed by the credit company Caixa and

INEA and built by a private developer, were built to provide housing for 900 to-be-resettled families. As said above, and contrary to the initially communicated plan, not the families of Vila Alzira and Guedes, being directly affected by future inundations, but those of other communities along the river Sarapui received apartments in the condominium in 2012 (Figure 3).



Figure 3: House on the riverbank of Iguaçu, community Vila Alzira, São Bento. Taken by author, 2019.

Since then, residents of Vila Alzira and Guedes are reclaiming their right to resettlement. In addition, the urbanization, electrification, parceling and construction, organized by the local militia together with the neighborhood association along the riverbanks of these communities continues (Interviews

with federal state attorney Araujo, May 2019 and Marluçia, director of the community museum of São Bento, April, 2019; own observation).

The mutually reinforcing connection of crime- and natural disaster related threats exposes residents to particular hardships: In a public meeting to which the Public Attorney Office of the State of Rio de Janeiro had invited the municipal government, the State Institute of Environment (INEA), the Council of Environment (including citizens and representatives of the Ministry of Environment) and the general public, on June 26, 2019, the protection of river Iguaçú's dikes was directly related to that of illegal construction and criminal activity. The counselor affirms that a militia with early knowledge, around 2010, of the planned condominium, continued to parcel land along the river banks into lots. This practice of creating the livelihoods at risk in the first place and under their authority had improved the political position of militias in the negotiation of resettlement; both towards the residents to which they could sell at-risk lots together with the promise of resettlement to an apartment in the condominium in exchange for abandoning the newly acquired lot, and in terms of the ability to overlook and organize the resettlement process due to their close links to those residents as a promise towards public officials that explains and constitutes local militia power.

Despite holding authorship of Project Iguaçú, the INEA has frequently denied responsibility for the (promised) resettlement (protocol meeting MPF, 26 June 2019). According to the representative during a meeting in late June, they do have knowledge of further community expansions and illegal urbanization activities. Yet, INEA claims that effectively inhibiting these activities was in the responsibility of the local government. This however denies any responsibility in the process; in addition, the government representative accused the INEA for publicly announcing Project Iguaçú since that

promise, and that of a new polder and new housing units caused increased expectations among the population which subsequently initiated new construction. (Own transcription, meeting at MPF 26 June, 2019)

From the announcement, the government representative implies, the militia sensed business opportunities. As for each inhabited parcel, one apartment in the condominium was promised, they intensified construction in order to

either sell a ‘resettlement option’, or receive an apartment as a strawman resident, one who never actually inhabits a newly constructed house in the risk area, but only pretends to do so (Interview Marlucia, May 14; Interview F., social worker at the community museum of São Bento, May 14).

In interview, residents and activists of Guedes affirmed that daily, and especially during night hours, trucks enter the community leaving loads full of rubble and sand, first on piles along the river banks; then, days later, bulldozers flatten the piles preparing fresh parcels for construction (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Preparing parcel for construction, Guedes, São Bento. Taken by author, 2019.

During said meeting, the government representative asserted that they had, via the Civil and Military Police, attempted to prevent the entrance of those deliveries of construction materials, yet due to the size of the area and vis-à-vis the presence of a ‘parallel state in certain locales’ (own transcription, meeting 26 June, MPF), that control was impossible and the municipality’s executive had therefore capitulated.

In the criminalization of peripheral urbanization, the involved actors represented during this meeting accuse an invisible and absent Other: The

illegal powers. One representative of the local activist group that represents citizenry calls the event a 'teatro de sombra' in an informal conversation:

This is a theater of shadows. Everybody knows who acts behind the scenes, but they never show up. So they cannot be named, nor be made responsible (informal conversation with M., June, 26, 2019).

Thus, what further characterizes the dimension of dwelling in limbo is not only residents' passive exposure to processes which reach back to past settlement processes when dealing with illegal authorities whom they trusted when buying parcels; different public entities are passing the buck back and forth as to whose responsibility the prevention of illegal urbanization and the assurance of residents' life improvement are. A closer look at residents' exposure is thus adding the principle of uncertainty to our concept of standby urbanization. The criminalization of peripheral urbanization is thus, first and foremost, a performative act of covering over responsibilities, while at the same time, blaming an unaccountable Other, beyond one's (state's) control.

*Endurance: 'Fight or leave'*

Yet, this Other is not absent, but very physically permeating the conditions of governing. Looking at dwelling in its temporal duration, memories of past events that shaped community development become important. In interview, residents of São Bento frequently alluded to the early days of buying and developing the soil of their livelihoods (Figures 5 and 6) from the 'administrators of these lands' (Interview with G., April 8, 2019). G was 11 years old when her parents bought their parcel of eight by eight meters on the artificial dam along the Iguazu river, in the year 1995, knowing that the transaction and prior soil preparation were illegal.

But what could we do? The soil was fertile, clean water was nearby, and we were forcefully evicted from our squatted land a few hundred meters from here, where I was born (*ibid.*).



Figure 5: ‘Parcels for sale in this area.’ Courtesy of archive Museum of São Bento, 2012.



Figure 6: ‘Landholdings for sale at this place. Direct deals with Mrs. Genedir, Mr. Ildefonso, Dr. Dalkir.’ Courtesy of archive Museum of São Bento, 2000.

In a focus group, residents remember the weeks preceding their resettlement from the ‘invasão’ – the collectively occupied community many of today’s residents of Guedes and Vila Alzira inhabited until the 1990s. In articulating

these memories, residents sketch their astonishment as to how fast the area became somehow inhabitable as it was lifted from swamp to more or less stable ground. The stability of the soil, however, soon became a major point of disappointment and conflict as when the Iguaçu river rose and land slid down. Despite the continuing presence of those who had sold the parcels, there was no one to be held accountable:

Instead of claiming what we thought we had paid for, we bought materials from the same group of grileiros [those who practice grilagem: land grabbing through clearing forest and/or piling up sand, the author]. They are the same guys until today. (Focus group, April 28 2019)

Not surprisingly, the lack of accountability observed regarding public officials above, counts for the land grabbers, and sellers as well. The reference to 'soil' as an unstable ground for urbanization becomes a metaphor of uncertain futures within an unstable governing structure. As residents endured, back in 1995, a second round of invasion, they became rather individual clients negotiating their parcels per family with local strongmen. Before, and along Avenida Kennedy, they had invaded their land collectively, and without intermediaries. Yet, it was only in the last round of resettlement, starting with the above described promise of an apartment in the social housing condominium and incomplete as of today, that this illegality, and the violence that permeated the grabbing, selling, and subsequent flooding of soil, became a matter about which residents are alert. What public planning today considers to be a risk area, back then was still a viable, and available, matter of hope. Although even in the late 1990s the grabbers and traders were not seen as being part of the community, but business people, they were not referred to as 'militia', residents remember (focus group, 28 April, 2019). The sale of parcels used to be an openly announced enterprise whereas today one needs local knowledge regarding whom to ask.

Such change in referring to the authors of illegal urbanization marks the continuum of coping and alertness. Back then, dwelling on unstable ground was rather a strategy of coping when individual families aligned their lives to the hardships that came with flooding and unaccountable power structures. Today, however, and with growing media, academic and public politics' attention to the illegal businesses of militias, land grabbing has turned into a matter of 'alertness'. The actors that interviewees, in a somehow generalizing

way, refer to as militias, have become the source of alertness precisely when their interference in resettlement sided with their continuous destabilization of the community's soil. Waiting for years for the promise of resettlement to the condominium to come true, collecting paperwork, registering and finally signing a resettlement option has raised both hopes and distrust, two faces of alertness, characterized by a readiness to expect that anything happens. Dwelling in limbo reveals an affective domain in which the feeling of losing ground is more than metaphoric, as Marlucia, director of São Bento's museum and co-organizer of the communities' struggles, pointed out in a public hearing with representatives of all 'legal' actors involved in Project Iguacu:

Can you imagine what it means when everybody [who had been promised an apartment in the MCMV] dreams? Five, six years of meetings, all questions solved, and suddenly you see your dream shattered? Seeing that you will remain in the water, inundated, with only God knowing for how long? (Commission in defense of the environment, 2018)

The affective openness to threats, either from water, or from the militia, pressing residents to pay for the proof of residence needed for receiving an apartment in exchange (interview R., resident of Guedes, May 6, 2019), are conceived as combining factors that can (and should) be acted against. As Marlucia summed up: 'Either you fight, or you leave' (Interview, May 15, 2019). Rather than a silent coping with the endangering process of peripheral urbanization, residents thus stand by, or stand up, alerted by the fact that urbanization itself, and inherent flooding, will render their dwellings uninhabitable if they continue to simply cope. From looking at how residents endure through combined threats, the concept of standby urbanization thus gains a layer of continuous alertness, which at times recedes into quiet coping. In order to illustrate how this alertness is being performed over years, the next section turns to residents' strategies of navigation.

#### *Navigation: 'Know where to step'*

São Bento is built on fluid terrain and, since forming part of the Baixada Fluminense, a territory whose history is marked by inundations. Attempts to mitigate the flow of waters from the surrounding mountains and towards the bay, a 'hidrocracy' (Britto et al., 2019), have had limited success. Continuous flooding of the areas which are protected by auto-constructed, and partially

natural dams and polders, drives the constant acquisition of rubble and sand. Providers of these are the same groups that grab, parcel and sell land: the local militia. As these also expand their parceling activities further towards the bay and within the polder-protected areas, the basins shrink as a response. In residents' narration, during the extreme rainfalls of 2009 and 2011 respectively, the whole community was flooded for weeks. The probability that rainfall and with it, the Iguaçú river, drowns the community again in the near future increases (Britto et al., 2018).

When said group of residents formed a group of activists, they engaged in a process of legal research, albeit self-organized and improvised along the own practical needs. The main vehicle of navigation has remained the demand to reactivate the above mentioned bay-depollution program, after its suspension in 2012. The activists' group legal knowledge has evolved along their work and regular meetings with several consecutive state attorneys who have supported the case since 2013. However, until today, the program remains on standby, and activities to fight future flooding are insufficient. Navigating dwelling in a sea full of pirates and sharks drives them to acquire practical knowledge of, to paraphrase Vigh, the social and political forces that shape future urbanization. On such fluid terrain, consisting of water, mud, rubble and sand, dwelling means to recognize the necessity of a constant balancing of where to step.

First and foremost, and due to the violent presence of militia, the topic underlying the group's activities are not primarily the illegal practices in themselves as described so far, but the threats of urban development on the natural environment, that is, the further sealing of polders and the pollution of rivers, canals and the bay; and – as stated above – the negative effect for their dwellings, combined with the unfulfilled promise to be resettled to a social housing compound. Marlucia explains the need for such carefully navigated ways of articulating criminal behavior and public officials' neglect or even conspiracy, also within public institutions. When the militia activity of *aterramentos* is addressed in the meetings of the Conselho de Meio Ambiente (the Environment Council, a participatory space in which representatives of the Secretary of Environment and the citizenry of Duque de Caxias), the term 'militia' is avoided. This observation, which I made during assistance at Council meetings on March 28 and May 4, 2019, was also

confirmed by my informants' insistent recommendation not to use the term myself in communications with public officials, nor with residents. While the militia is thus, as argued above, a discursively established author of illegal urbanization, the explicit reference to them seems to endure below the surface of the sayable, at least, in many public events.

Instead of naming the actors, or delving further into the illegal governance structures permeating the development of their neighborhood, participants remained focused on naming the mere fact that parceling of land continued, and the current numbers of newly built houses of the course of the last 12 months – 48, all within the area of the (former) basin. Marlucia and R., a second citizen-counselor, explained their reasons to me afterwards. The secretary himself, absent in this meeting yet represented by his deputy, is known (to them) as being enmeshed with militia activity. As such, he is a political friend of the area's city counselor who has demonstrably been involved in militia activity for illegally selling land in São Bento (Antunes, 2017). In order to positively shape the future politics that affect their dwellings, residents thus need to navigate through, without directly naming it, a political structure of hidings: As Marlucia, director of the local museum stated metaphorically, 'You must know where to step, otherwise you will get buried'.

Furthermore, and despite their illegal status, and violent practices, lacking accountability and working against federal development programs, militias have become actors recognized as partners in urban development by public officials. In an interview, the Secretary of Infrastructure stated (May 10, 2019) that in order to organize the resettlement of those communities that are in the way of the last section of the planned connection between Avenida Kennedy and Washington Luiz, he engaged with the bosses of the local militia. Asked how he politically valued the negotiations with illegitimate authorities, he answered that this was precisely his strength and what brought him into his position as secretary: the knowledge of and the political standing within local power structures that facilitated the relatively rapid organization of community resettlement. These militias, he added, have to be recognized as partners in negotiating resettlement and urban development projects, just as much as the local drug trafficking groups (Interview with Secretary of Infrastructure, May 10, 2019). Notwithstanding the secretary's negotiations

with illegal actors and the negative outcome these have had for the residents of Vila Alzira and Guedes, that alliance of residents and social workers of São Bento's museum maintain a dialogue with the Secretary about community development issues, in particular, demanding investment into the improvement of the drainage system and the paving and lighting of streets.

Navigation in such unstable, and dangerous terrain, is thus, both a practice of avoidance to explicitly claim legitimacy of all actors involved and at the same time the attempt to hold actors accountable. At times, the attempt to navigate through and actively shape the conditions of future urbanization drives residents to align their actions to governance arrangements between militias and public officials that further endanger their livelihoods. Standby urbanization therefore pushes residents to acquire the practical skills of navigating within 'submergent' (Zeiderman, 2018), that is, partially opaque and harmful, but nevertheless indispensable structures of peripheral urbanization.

### **Conclusion: Dwelling in limbo as standing-by urbanization**

This paper has drawn from media reports on militia activity, interviews, and protocols of public hearings and meetings to outline a theory of standby urbanization in Rio de Janeiro. I find that the urban periphery is built on a contested territorial authority providing political and economic benefits for mostly unaccountable and illegal actors. The organizing principle of militias seems to be their attempt to benefit from the solutions they provide to hardships which they, at least, aggravate: The sealing of soil by illegally piling up sand and rubble and parceling of polders which then intensifies the negative effect of heavy rainfall. Exposed to such both self-perpetuating, yet still and all the more uncertain, criminalized urbanization are those residents who are pushed to align their livelihoods to the dominion of organized crime. The uncertainties of peripheral urbanization give continuity to both residents' strategies of coping with a harmful situation, and the necessity to stay alert.

I then zoomed into the community development in the fluid terrain of Duque de Caxias, close to the rivers Sarapuí and Iguaçu, and the Guanabara Bay. The

negative effects of illegal governance structures are keeping people on standby as they are waiting for the promised benefits of an urbanization, in relation to which they perceive themselves as rather passive. Such dwelling in limbo, a more-than-human, temporal relation, I presented as a threefold process, encompassing a passive exposure to criminal and environmental (and combined) threats, in the face of which residents endure, at times implicitly coping, and in at times actively alerted ways. To develop strategies of social navigation, residents act between cognitive learning and affective coping, forming alliances with neighbors, social workers and public officials. Recalling Povinelli's understanding of 'limbo' cited earlier in this paper, dwelling in limbo means to negotiate social and political positions anew; a negotiation which underlines residents' ability to condition their own future. As they partake in criminalized urbanization, buying parcels from known militia, or by purchasing electricity and gas or construction materials, they become forcefully complicit of a mode of urbanization that bears profound uncertainties for their own livelihoods. As illegal actors, due to an inherent non-accountability, benefit from territorial control and the terrain's unstable ground, their mode of governance aggravates the effects of technically insufficient forms of land grabbing, and puts the already existing dwellings on even higher risk levels of being flooded. The vicious circle of being urged into situations of support for illegal governance arrangements characterizes standby urbanization as structurally perpetuating violence.

Lastly, this paper hopes to make a conceptual contribution to this special issue's debate. Dwelling in limbo is an example of standby as mode of social organization: In the active presence of militias, resettlement becomes a political space that is organized as to cater to the economic and political benefit of a few, and certainly least to those who cannot afford to leave the urban periphery: the low-income populations that have a constitutionally guaranteed right to adequate housing. The mode of organization that emerges on this unstable ground is maintaining the status quo of unaccountable political structures. Adding to the direct threat that armed actors can exercise on livelihoods, unfashionably suspended resettlement to a social housing development adds to the political violence already permeating state-society relations in Brazil (Alves, 2015). Public institutions negate political responsibility for those life-improving infrastructure projects and thus are

themselves complicit in an urbanization that is keeping residents on hold and at a distance from controlling their own futures. Even if resettlement to social housing condominiums occurs, the uncertainty as to who governs remains a crucial factor of marginalization in peripheral urbanization (Fernández, 2016: 77).

Dwelling in limbo thus means to aptly and swiftly move and organize strategies to confront or at least cope with uncertainty. This adds to Holston's work on residents' strategic attempts to consolidate their dwellings, both physically and legally, on the urban peripheries (Holston, 2008). Residents in the peripheries develop competences to manage multiple threats. These limit urbanization's potential to provide egalitarian citizenship because urbanization's material conditions facilitate the violent exploitation of citizens' attempts to live a stable life. Entanglements of new forms of citizenship and forms of violence, as Holston writes, provide the conflictive ground upon which the in-limbo metaphor materializes: rather than just a volatile space, the periphery is that space from where we can learn how people model ways to endure amidst multiple threats. Standby urbanization is thus characterized by a cruel paradox: To secure their dwellings within diverse uncertainties, residents are forced into actively supporting structures that in turn perpetuate their passive marginalization.

I propose standby urbanization as a conceptual frame to understand dwelling within institutionalized, crime-affected environmental threats. These destabilize urban life. Standby urbanization allows us to conceive of the governing of uncertainties as form of political violence: as a material and temporal process that perpetuates poor residents' endurance. Standby urbanization highlights the active role of residents within what is conceived as calculative and imaginative anticipations of urban futures in Latin America and beyond (Gherthner et al. 2020; Huq and Miraftab, 2020; Samimian-Darash and Rabinow, 2015). Debates on urban resilience, precaution and preparedness should look at residents' dwelling in limbo as forcefully being exposed to, enduring, and navigating amidst combined threats that reinforce the political violence that permeates future urbanization.

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## acknowledgements

I am most grateful to my informants and all research participants in the visited communities in the Baixada of Rio de Janeiro. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their supportive critiques; and the editors of *ephemera* and this Special Section for their enormous work and the chance to engage with the concept of standby. I also thank Paul Talcott for his help. This research has received funding through the German Academic Exchange Service's funding scheme for postdoctoral researchers' international mobility in 2019.

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