Understanding Bottom-Up Territories of Culture in Unequal Cities

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ABSTRACT

'Contestation' is a term often used to describe various kinds of conflict in 21st-Century urban areas. Yet Urban planning literature lacks a cultural approach to such resistance — an oversight that this paper seeks to redress. We argue that the concept of 'contested territories of culture' plays a key role in the informal construction of urban areas, highlighting them as heterogeneous drivers of 'contestation' and the fight for rights in Latin America's inequality-riven cities. The authors use two methodological approaches to define said 'contestation': (1) contextual analysis of the literature on the concept of 'territories' to discover their cultural character, and (2) ethnographic analysis of a case study on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The example of the Realengo Flyover Cultural Center, a cultural appropriation of a leftover site under a flyover on Rio's outskirts, shows the complexity of improvised, bottom-up squatting through cultural activities. The study reveals the need to understand these territories in order to draw up more equitable public policies and urban plans. It also highlights that such territories are both culturally rich and socially vulnerable.

Keywords: contested territories,cultural territories, decolonial theory, inequality, Latin America

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of 'contested territories' or 'contested urban spaces' are increasingly present in the recent literature of Urbanism and Urban Planning (Satgé and Watson, 2018; Schwarz and Streule, 2020). Still, a clear definition of them is hard to come by and might be enriched with some help from the Cultural Studies field. Some authors use these terms in a more literal sense to address areas or times of political, military, religious or ethnic conflict (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004; Vicino and Fahlberg, 2017). Others focus on disputes centered on natural resources and environmental issues (López, 2016). Some even mention more abstract terms, such as "contesting time spaces" (Massey, 2005: 177). Yet, after years of transdisciplinary research in Urban Planning and Social Anthropology, we have still not come across works that mention how the development of cultural and artistic activities can lead to the crea-

tion of complex territories, and which go beyond issues of racial dispute (Rolnik, 2007). In this paper, we argue that certain self-organized, bottom-up cultural spaces in Brazil consist of more than just cultural territories. They are often *contested territories*, filled with many-sided objective and subjective conflicts both within the groups involved and with the outside city. When such groups also enshrine an element of 'resistance', they contest the imposed order and historic inequalities because they come up with alternative activities that do not necessarily operate within the formal economic system. These territories may help guide future inclusion policies and create scope for informal, adaptive transformations of urban space.

Since 2004, we have studied several cases of self-built cultural spaces in outlying areas of Brazilian cities, with most of them sparking controversy among the locals. From museums and urban parks in *favelas* [shanty towns] to improvised cinemas, these spaces often bear the mark of tension and dispute. They are living proof that communities do not unanimously accept constructed territories, and that they present different facets once one analyzes the actors and interests behind them.

Our main goal is to build on the original concept of *contested territories of culture* as a planning and methodological tool of (and for) the oppressed (Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser, 2004), and a key in the fight for cultural access and for questioning inequalities in Latin America. We argue that bottom-up cultural spaces have long been seen through rose-tinted glasses as a uniform phenomenon (Vaz, 2007; Hollanda, 2012) — a vision that ignores their complexity and what they can teach us. We understand these complex territories as stemming from conflicting leaderships and clashing human relationships. Accordingly, we consider they merit much deeper analysis.

Our research used a mixed-method methodological approach that combined: (1) a critical review of the existing literature on the concept of territories and

their potential for resistance; (2) an ethnographic analysis of a case study.

The paper begins with a discussion of how cultural territories are symbolically defined, seen as the product of everyday lives (Lindón, 2019) and as the outcomes of collective action and cultural identities (Bonnemaison, 1981). We then highlight the importance of the concept of territories for Latin American Studies and for the local social movements (Zibechi, 2015; Saquet, 2018). We stress local authors who can provide us with more situated perceptions and post-colonial approaches fostering the decentralization of knowledge production (Porto-Gonçalves, 2001; 2008) in accordance with decolonial theory. These references show us how today's Latin American territories are highly fluid, and are undergoing constant "multiterritorialization and reterritorialization" (Haesbaert, 2004)— processes that contribute to their multiple, contested facets. These authors shed light on how territories can help in drawing up more efficient public policies and in achieving more sustainable development (Flores, 2007). After this analysis, we build on our own concept of *contested territories of culture*, clarifying how they can also be territories *contesting* the established order and the site of counter-hegemonic struggles seeking greater equality. To illustrate our arguments, we examine the case of the Realengo Flyover Cultural Space in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

THE CULTURAL FACET OF TERRITORIES

The concept of territory has become a popular research topic during the transition from the 20th to the 21th century (Debarbieux, 1999; Delaney, 2005). Claims of 'An End of History' and of Geography (Fukuyama, 1992; Virilio, 1998) and the crisis of modernity led scholars to take a closer look at "deterritorialization and reterritorialization" phenomena (Haesbaert, 2004), which proved that spatial appropriations were acquiring facets that were different from ones experienced earlier.

Many authors have long stressed the need to understand territories through their symbolic dimensions as cultural territories. Bonnemaison (1981) highlights the subjectivities involved in the construction of territories and the meaning given to space by those appropriating it. He stresses that culture and territory are inseparable. This relationship reflects a dialectic, symmetric composition between the visible/material aspects of space (landscape) and the invisible ones (culture, relationships and human experiences). Lindón (2019) uses this relationship to describe a hybrid vision of territories, which mixes society and nature; politics, economy and culture; materiality and ideality in a complex time-space interaction.

In the field of Urbanism, Vaz (2018) highlights the network of daily itineraries as an important component of territories. She points out the essential role of public spaces linking these itineraries (i.e. streets, avenues, and squares), presenting them as key areas for the encounter of different groups and the development of social relationships. This definition is made clearer when we analyze the concept of "lived space" (Frémont, 1980), which links the social construction of space to people's daily routines, attachments and affections to different places. Brazilian Geographer Milton Santos (2006) also describes the territory as a web of complementary and conflicting relationships as a way of grasping the vital role played by human agency in territories, as well as the links between place, socio-spatial formation and our unequal world.

Some authors even compare the development of territories to "power games," or "power-geometries" between the various actors appropriating space (Massey, 1999; Raffestin, 1980; Flores, 2007). They distinguish the "given territories," established through public policies of regional development, from the "constructed territories" (Pecqueur, 2005), which emerge from the gathering of social actors seeking to solve a common problem. The territories discussed in this article fall under the latter head because they are often created through the improvisation and collective action of groups fac-

ing similar challenges when it comes to (unequal) cultural access in the city.

In marginalized regions of Brazil, these cultural territories are often created by groups in areas that are neglected by the real estate market— a fact, which allows a certain freedom to pursue activities shaped by their needs. These individuals bring fragments of their own biographies to the construction of territories through a multidimensional process (Lindón, 2019; McFarlane 2019). By (inter)acting together in space, they produce a type of "place consciousness" (Saquet, 2018), which helps to identify and interpret their role in the world.

Once individuals understand their potential, they can act together in an effort to change their realities. This link between collective action, self-organization and cultural identity rooted in space is what identifies the special character of territories in Latin America (Zibechi, 2015; Porto-Gonçalves, 2008). In these regions, marked by plurality, hybridity and inequality, territories paired with social movements often spawn *territories of resistance*.

## LATIN AMERICAN RESISTANCE: CONTESTED AND CONTESTING TERRITORIES

In Brazil, not all cultural territories are constructed in a bottom-up manner or enshrine resistance. Still, those that are play a very important role in allowing cultural access by those who are neglected by public policies. The link between "territory" and "resistance" is a strong one within Latin American decolonial literature. In the fields of Geography and Urbanism, this pairing is often used as part of counter-hegemonic approaches fostering situated knowledge production (Porto-Gonçalves, 2008). These approaches value dialogue, debate, cooperation and solidarity, assuming conflict and the existence of diverse opinions as a positive way to build popular knowledge. We argue that this knowledge should be legitimized and incorporated in today's policy-making schemes.

In Brazil, urban reality is characterized by great inequalities that are largely a hang-over from colonialism (Saquet, 2018). The latest Human Development Report of the United Nations (2019) names this country as the seventh most unequal in the world, with a Human Development Index of 0.761 (the 79th globally), behind other South American nations, such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.

In Rio de Janeiro, the nation's second largest metropolis and biggest tourist destination, these inequalities are reflected through an imbalance in the distribution and maintenance of basic infrastructure, urban services and public facilities throughout the city (Figure 1). The neighborhoods in the more affluent South and Central zones account for the greatest number of traditional cultural and leisure options, and most of their attendees are White (Rocha, Barros and Santos, 2018). The dwellers of the fringe neighborhoods in the West and the poorest ones in the North usually have to come up with their own self-built cultural spaces to access cultural production and consumption.

Figure 1 **Map of Rio de Janeiro's officially recognized cultural facilities (2010s), also highlighting the Realengo Flyover Cultural Space.**
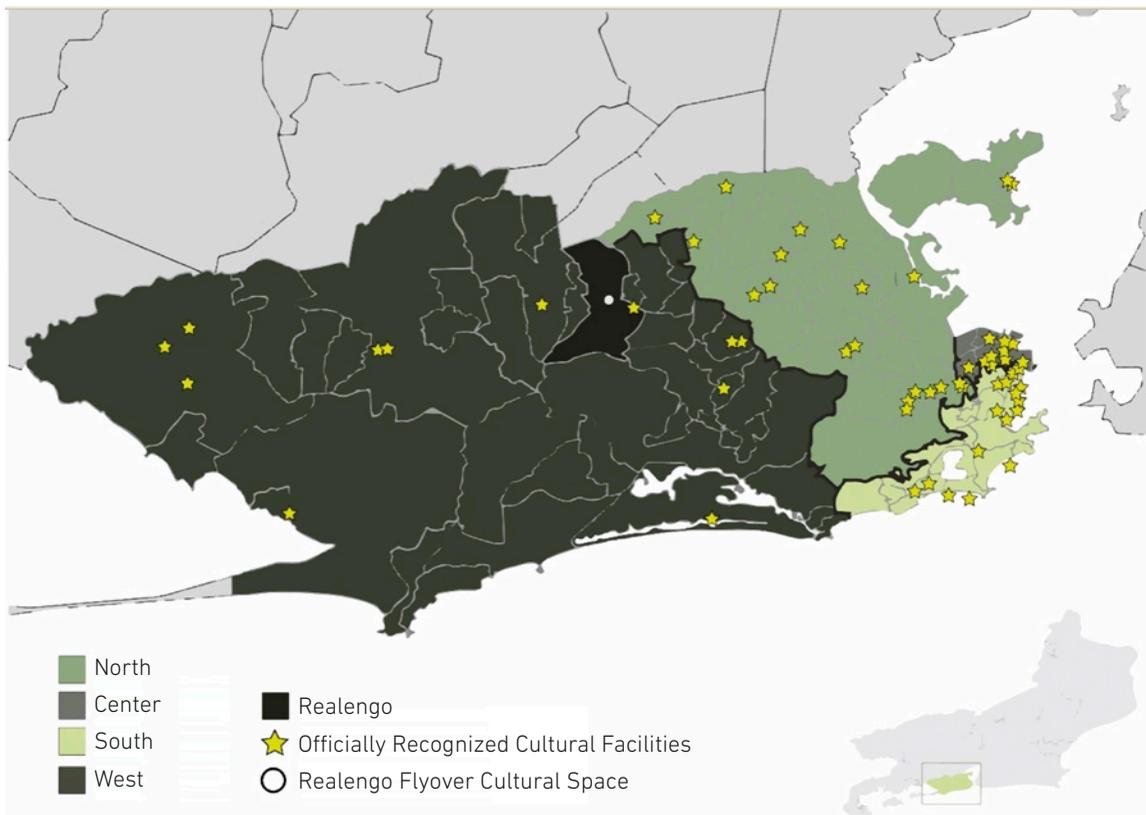
Source: Authors.

These self-built spaces configure new types of territories of culture and of resistance because they operate outside the rules in the tactical manner proposed by Certeau (1994), taking a gradual approach and as circumstances allow. Their spatial singularity is also often incorporated in their names as part of their identities, with examples such as "Us from the Hill" (*Nós do Morro*), "Alley Cinema" (*Cinema no Beco*), "Favela Museum" (*Museu de Favela*), and so on. These cultural territories seem proud of their spatial roots and encourage networks of participation and cooperation.

Zibechi (2015: 88) refers to those who move forward with non-Capitalist initiatives in Latin America as "castaways" of the system that marginalizes them, and as producers of a type of resistance that is "silent and underground." For him, Latin American territories are resistant and heterogeneous by nature, following a logic that is not necessarily economically driven, even though they often give rise to informal economies (Canclini, 2019). The concept of informality is relevant to these contested territories once we approach informality as a "mode of urbanization," in the words of Roy (2005), who sees it as "a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another." In this sense, conflictive, informal territories can be seen as tactics at the local level that can teach us how to frame future policies.

Once a group begins to develop new activities in a space that was traditionally linked to other types of uses, they are deterritorializing these activities, and, in a way, subverting the existing urban order. Haesbaert (2004) considers that "deterritorialization" is accompanied by "multiterritorialization," which reflects the multiplicity of territories that today are marked by fluidity, immateriality and subjectivity. He explains that the new dynamics of deterritorialization-reterritorialization-multiterritorialization are intrinsic to the globalized world, where mobility is constant. Delaney (2005: 146) adds that these new territories are "often contingent, contested, or unstable, we – each and all – participate in the

never-ending processes of making and remaking our worlds." The concept of contested territories of culture proposed here reflects all these ever-changing fluid space-time dynamics, and also the disputes and struggles that take place in the everyday lives of cultural spaces. It reflects a "pluralism of spatialities" and the "multiplicity of temporalities' proposed by Schwarz and Streule (2020: 13). They are territories of movement in different senses: of social movement, and of different and varied spatial arrangements with configurations that alter in line with present needs. In our case study of Realengo, for instance, the activities vary constantly and the site presents a different facet depending on the time of the day, ranging from an empty site to a crowded reference point for social encounter and resistance.

Our long investigation of several examples of bottom-up cultural territories in Brazil shows us that they are naturally marked by contestation. Their trajectories are filled with objective and subjective disputes, configuring ever-changing "geometries of power" (Massey, 2005: 180). Realengo's case is an example of simultaneous racial tensions, gender bias, regional inequalities, leadership issues, conflicting perceptions of urban violence, and land use disputes – inner conflicts and conflicts with the outer city.

Other studied cases show a similar trajectory: the Maré Museum, in one of Rio's largest *favela* [slum district] complexes, and faces regular threats of eviction stemming from conflicts between the real estate owners and the squatters (Vaz, 2018). The Sitiê Park is a former garbage dumpsite turned into a cultural and environmental sanctuary in another *favela*, where disputes abound between its founders and local drug dealers, with the latter often closing the site (Seldin, 2018). All of them also face inner conflicts regarding their dynamics and relationships, configuring true *tense spaces*, where contestation is a normal part of their daily lives.

These tense spaces are also *contesting territories* given that they challenge the pre-established order and dare to: occupy voided/hidden areas outside the

realm of the dominant, mainly exclusionary formal urban planning; produce culture beyond the official industry; openly discuss social issues; build a fringe network for spreading their ideologies and values. By self-organizing and self-building, they act outside the planning rules driven by the neoliberal policies spawning the centralization of wealth and power for a few.

In Rio's outskirts, contesting the given order is a big step towards gaining autonomy. For Flores (2007), societal autonomy is vital for fostering more sustainable development, as is the recognition of local conflicts. Acknowledging complexity, local disputes and processes of contestation gives us a better grasp of the various interests and power games at play, which in turn facilitates the quest for greater equality. With that in mind, we present the Realengo Flyover Cultural Space case (Espaço Cultural Viaduto de Realengo) – a "leftover space" (Aral, 2009; Angin, 2011) under a flyover, which has been turned into an improvised cultural center with a focus on the hip-hop scene.

THE REALENGO FLYOVER CULTURAL SPACE

The Realengo Flyover Cultural Space is located in the Realengo neighborhood in the West part of Rio de Janeiro. This macro region contains the second highest number people living in *favelas* in the city, and accounts for 41% of its total population (3 million) (IPEA, 2010). Most of those dwelling locally belong to low or low-middle classes.

The municipality built a 300-meter-long flyover near a train station in 2012. The aim was to enhance transport links for the 2016 Olympic Games. The Aloysio Fialho Gomes Flyover, better known as the Realengo Flyover, resulted in the demolition of 80 family homes in Realengo and eviction of their occupants as part of the larger Transolympic highway and Bus Rapid Transit system urban project (Bastos, 2012). It had a huge impact on the neighborhood and, in 2013, the underpass was occupied by the ar-

tistic collective Original Black Sound System (OBSS). Led by one artist, who stands out among the group, this improvised cultural territory was praised by some and deplored by others.

Methodological notes

Following the feminist, subaltern perspective of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), our research used ethnography to approach the Realengo site during various events, focusing on the weekly "Holy Tuesday Rap Battle" (Sagrada Terça-Feira do Rap). Participant observation shed light not only on how the Flyover's activities were organized but also on the power relations among the artists, who construct their own narrative around this territory. We argue that researching the OBSS's actions consists of building-situated knowledge because, even though many of their activities center on hip-hop, they do not simply replicate this genre, whose origins lie in 1970s New York (Barros, 2020). They take this as one of their references but are more inspired by Brazilian rap bands (i.e. the Racionais MC's), with their rhymes addressing local social problems and historic injustices from their marginalized perspective. In fact, hip-hop music is just one of many activities present in the Flyover's calendar, as we will see later on.
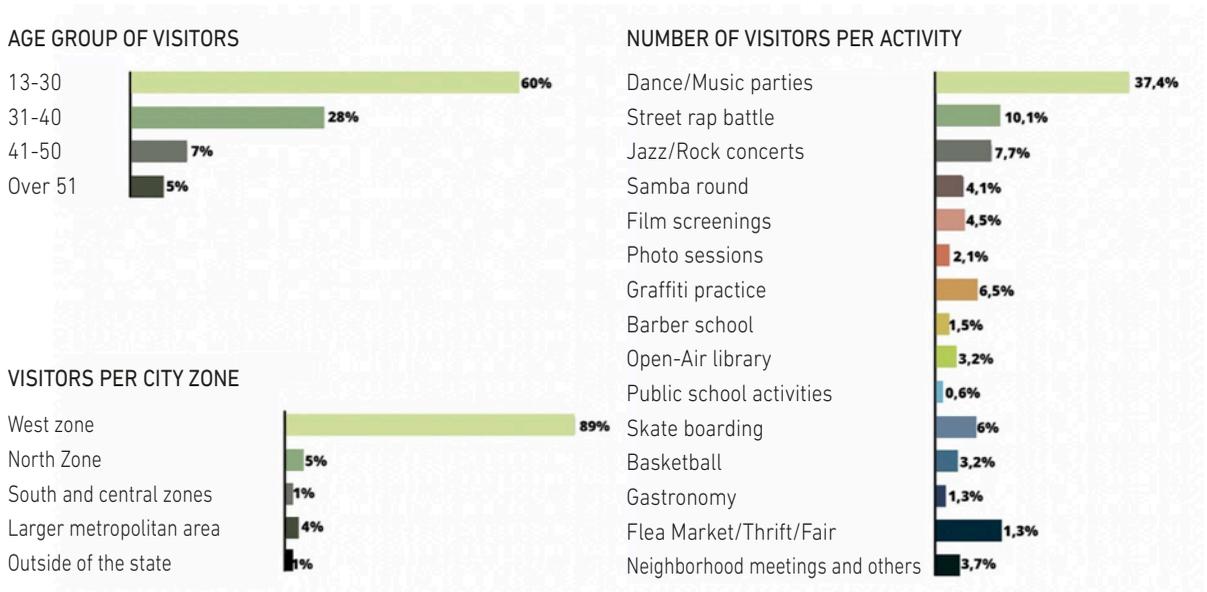
Our field research also involved the analysis and interpretation of behaviors, song lyrics, and visual data produced for the events, following the methodological approach proposed by McFarlane (2019: 213) when dealing with "urban fragments" in subaltern geographies. In other words, understanding the existing narratives becomes a tool to comprehend locally produced "fragments of knowledge". The research also encompassed the analysis of official documents and web portals by the local municipality (i.e. permits, public calls), and iconographic material, including those posted on the Flyover's social media (i.e. photos, videos, merchandise).

From 2018 to 2020, we visited the site periodically to observe and conduct in situ semi-structured

interviews with OBSS members, event participants and Realengo inhabitants. We also shot a short video documentary with such accounts as part of a broader contextualized project about leftover spaces resulting from the construction works on the outskirts that were linked to The Olympic Games in Rio. Ethnography helped us to understand the Realengo Flyover as a socially constructed territory with different levels of participation from the locals while letting us capture the various site

temporalities. Because of the intermittent nature of the events, the visits at different times, days, and seasons yielded valuable insights on the space. It is a dead passageway during most of the day and a lively open-air cultural center on certain nights. Furthermore, we also carried out an online survey for two months in 2018 with 105 attendees in order to profile them. This enabled us to gather relevant quantitative and qualitative data (Figure 2), and to create our own mixed method design.

Figure 2 **Graphs detailing selected information from the 2018 survey**

AGE GROUP OF VISITORS

13-30	60%
31-40	28%
41-50	7%
Over 51	5%

VISITORS PER CITY ZONE

West zone	89%
North Zone	5%
South and central zones	1%
Larger metropolitan area	4%
Outside of the state	1%

NUMBER OF VISITORS PER ACTIVITY

|	
Dance/Music parties	37,4%
Street rap battle	10,1%
Jazz/Rock concerts	7,7%
Samba round	4,1%
Film screenings	4,5%
Photo sessions	2,1%
Graffiti practice	6,5%
Barber school	1,5%
Open-Air library	3,2%
Public school activities	0,6%
Skate boarding	6%
Basketball	3,2%
Gastronomy	1,3%
Flea Market/Thrift/Fair	1,3%
Neighborhood meetings and others	3,7%

Source: Authors

The collected data shows us that most attendees were residents of three bordering neighborhoods: Realengo, Bangu and Padre Miguel, proving this cultural territory's role as a reference point for the West Zone and

helping us grasp how the site articulates culturally with the city as a whole. It also shed light on broader issues, such as the gender of the attendees. While the survey shows a more balanced gender distribu-

tion when it comes to the 15-plusevents, it proved our initial observation regarding male dominance at their flagship activities centered on hip-hop. In fact, only one female artist was seen actively taking part in the rap battles during the whole of our field research (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Flow chart of a rap battle. Source: Authors
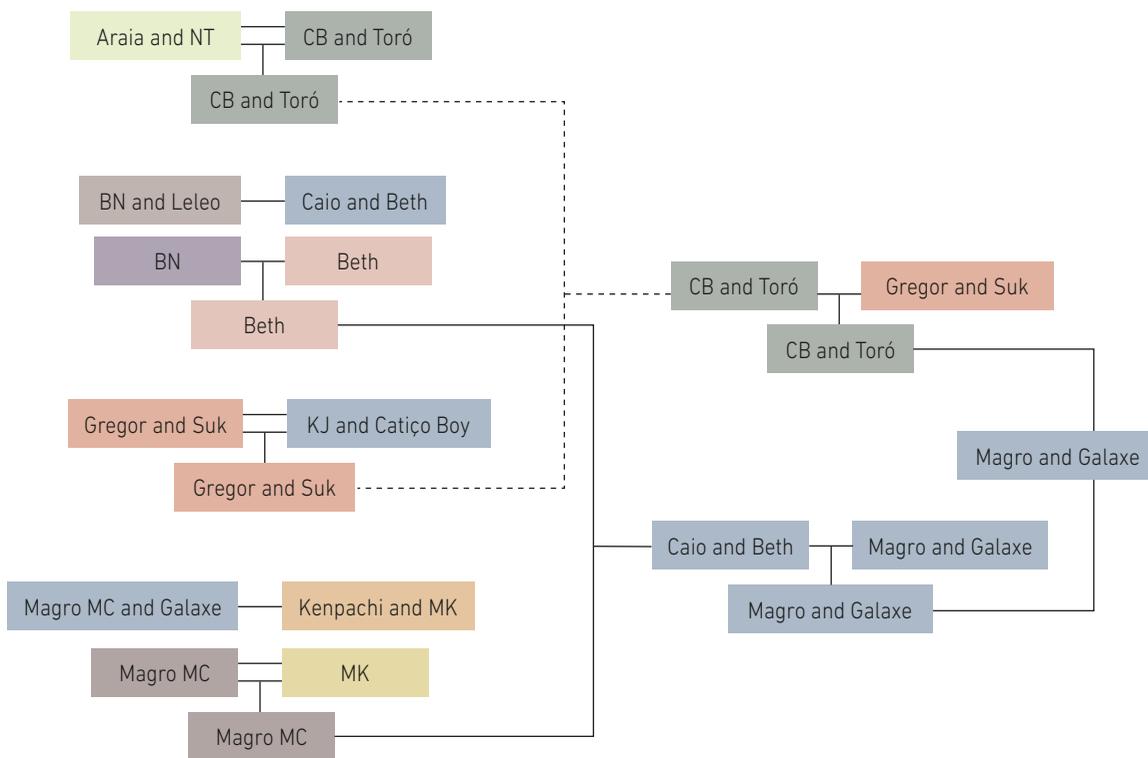
Source: Authors

Additionally, rhymes sung by the subjects at the Flyover were also analyzed to distil their opinions and experiences. We saw how the rappers' lyrics were activated to promote their authors and/or defame their opponents, reflecting individual perspectives. They helped to shed light on broader social and economic problems in Rio de Janeiro and Brazil. For instance, the sexist remarks or denouncements of racism present during the rap battles reflect a broader (historical) cultural/societal problem present in Latin American societies. We replicate certain controversial citations here as part of our standpoint methodology (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser, 2004) to assert how the rapper has a singular trajectory that locates him: a male resident of the global periphery, poor, Black, and often-denied access to basic education, and information, leading to the reproduction of common prejudices (i.e. homophobia, sexism).

This means that the body that produces rap is not just any body or an object. It has a specific trajectory, translated into rap performances, reflecting personal experiences/opinions that legitimize the lyrics, regardless of our judgement.

The case study

The Western neighborhood of Realengo lies 25.5 km away from Rio's center. It has a population of under 180,000 with an average monthly income of around U$120 (IPP, 2018). Official records show only two State-funded cultural facilities: the Gilberto Gil Cultural Arena and the Arlindo Cruz Cultural Space. The Flyover covers roughly 200 square meters and is bounded by two walls. The site resembles an alley (Figure 4), linked to the local train station by one of the neighborhood's main streets. Walking under the Flyover is the only option for many workers returning home on the trains from the city center. The empty, dark area often poses risks, with several interviewers mentioning the crimes committed there.

Figure 4 The passageway created by the flyover structure (2018)

Source: Authors.

Given its strategic location in relation to the transport infrastructure and the high flow of people, the site caught the attention of the OBSS, which occupied it intermittently by holding various activities over time. Led by musician Oberdan Mendonça and with other young graffiti artists, DJ's and MC's, the OBSS sought to beef up the local cultural scene, producing events and renting out technical equipment. In 2013, the Realengo Flyover Cultural Space became a reality, later gaining some support from the Municipal Secretary of Culture's 'Local Actions' public call and the place the status of a cultural facility. This however only reinforces the contested character of the territory, since such support is practically symbolic

given the area's persistent infrastructural problems and the conflicts with municipal bodies (including the local military police). This seemingly official recognition is common for several cultural actions in the global peripheries of Capitalism, mirroring the very specific urban and political dichotomies between formality and informality when it comes to territorial configuration (Roy, 2004).

The OBSS took it upon themselves to alter the aesthetics of the site through graffiti art, also building their own urban furniture. That included a bookstand, which works as a communal library, and a container, which holds musical equipment, folding chairs, and a retractable awning. By 2018, the cultural space functioned as a successful self-organized, improvised and temporary open-air venue. Its program featured over 15 events of various kinds, including rap battles, dance parties, musical concerts, film screenings, photo shoots, graffiti practice, a barber school, a pop-up library, street markets, skate board-ing, and even neighborhood association meetings. Its large number of activities reflects Haesbaert's (2004) view on the contemporary phenomenon of multiterritorialization and contemporary territories as being fluid and multiple.

Their most renowned activity, the rap battle, is a weekly gathering of mostly young local Black men. Their main goal is to ridicule and demoralize the opponent through rhymes. The audience decides who the winners and losers are by clapping and shouting. The rapper who gets the loudest public acclaim moves to the next round, until reaching the 'final stage.' Unlike other slam battles, there are no prizes. Those competing do so for fun, for practice, and maybe for the chances of social encounter with other hip-hop enthusiasts. Still, the occupation under the flyover is patchy and not unanimously accepted, leading to underlying disputes and conflicts that, together, help build a complex contested territory of culture.

Figure 5 The 'Holy Tuesday Rap' battle in 2018.

Source: Authors.

Contestations in the Inner Group

As mentioned earlier, our field research and survey showed a huge gender imbalance in the rap battles. The percentage of female attendees was under 10%, with an even smaller percentage of active battlers. Most of the women present were accompanying their boyfriends, and were mere spectators. After witnessing a record high of nine female spectators in October of 2019, we tried to uncover the reasons for this.

OBSS leader Oberdan Mendonça told us during interviews that "the hip-hop universe is more male" (Mendonça, January 2019). He compared the rap battles to their other events, claiming that the female presence is more evident at some of the dance parties. His own notions about the space and its appropriation reflect a gender bias, mirroring Brazilian society. He even refers to their initial occupation through graffiti on the walls as a process of "men conquering a cave" (Mendonça, May 2018). That association, he explains, is linked to the poorly lit, hidden nature of the site. This feature poses a threat to the local women, who feel unsafe there. Aware of the gender discrepancy, he somewhat naively mentioned the need to build a restroom to make the female audience feel more at ease.

The production of masculinity at the site goes beyond its physical aspects. The content of the battles themselves reflect an outdated, sexist dispute of male honor among the participants. Although there are no official rules, it is understood that a male rapper cannot insult another rapper's female family members or partners, nor are they allowed to insult their opponent by implying any kind of homosexual behavior. That, we learned, is perceived in a derogative manner, again reflecting a broader societal prejudice. In other words, the male rapper's honor is connected to his masculinity through an unspoken consensus. The notions of masculinity and femininity at the site are their own. Male weakness, in this specific context, is a product of infidelity. A woman is worryingly seen as

a possession, someone to be controlled. Ironically, other events not centered on hip-hop, have led to opposite feelings by some attendees. When asked what made the Flyover special, Interviewee A[1] told us: "Respect. I did not feel excluded for being gay" (May, 2018). Respect and "cultural union" were also mentioned in the answer of Interviewee B, one of the local MCs (May, 2018).

Another source of inner tension during the battles are racial issues. Most of the attendees are young, Black and Brown people, who perceive themselves in opposition to the White and richer inhabitants of Rio's affluent South zone. They denounce the inequalities that West zone dwellers endure daily, knowing that the region (along with the North zone) encompasses the city's greatest poverty and of Afrodescendants (Clarke,2015). The issue of racism in Brazilian cultural territories has long been debated (Silva, 2014; Alves, 2020), revealing its existing systemic racism and link to a broader picture of urban inequality.

At one point, Mendonça referred to the neighborhood of "Realengo as an extermination zone" (April, 2018), where the rights of poorer non-White people are disrespected. This affirmation reinforces Zibechi's claims about Brazilian "territories of genocide and resistances," inhabited by Blacks and Browns, who suffer constant oppression. He stresses that the many problems faced by this country's Afrodescendants are a direct reflection of our colonial heritage, so different from the rest of Latin America because the "experience of slavery is intransferable" (Zibechi, 2015: 08). This colonial heritage leads to everyday humiliation and the rejection of Black people's humanity.

The notion of territories of genocide versus territories of prosperity in an unequal city also leads us to draw on Mbembe's (2003) notion of a "necropolitics," which, in Rio's case, is often perpetuated by

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1   Taken from in situ interviews. We have opted to refer to the interviewees by letters to protect their privacy.

the military police and their disrespect for human rights through the use of force against the poor and Black (Ahnen, 2008). Our interviews in Realengo have uncovered episodes of direct confrontations between the users of the site under the Flyover and the local military police, although these comments were always made anonymously, carefully and superficially for fear of retribution.

The deactivation of certain city regions and the implementation of necropolitics can also be perceived through the purposeful lack of infrastructure and urban services and the inequality and inefficacy of public policies in a movement similar to Foucault's (2008) "let die" notion. In Realengo, it is impossible to disregard the relationship between the bodies actively occupying and creating the contested cultural territory and State neglect. These bodies are mostly Black, and their existence (and their death) is largely defined by public policies.

Still, race is not the only point of dispute that arises within the group. Although the area under the flyover is considered to be a collective space, cultural producer Oberdan Mendonça functions as an all-dominant figure in our research, strengthening our argument that conflicting leaderships and clashing inner relationships are inherent in this territory and its power geometries. He organizes most of the events and articulates various activities. His personal network reaches beyond the Realengo borders and even the West zone, as he is able to connect with independent artists in other marginalized communities and even with the Central and South zones of Rio de Janeiro, bringing them together as the kind of mediator proposed by Velho (2001).

Mendonca's presence is dominating, fostering a vertical dynamic. The Flyover is not only extremely masculine but also hierarchical. For instance, the rap battles only begin once he arrives at the site. Even though he humbly denies the position of leader, describing himself as an articulator and an "ant among many in the group" (Mendonça, February 2019), we could never identify among the other MCs anyone with equal power in terms of organizing duties.

Mendonça decides who occupies the area and what kind of activities can take place. He mentioned how certain people have asked permission to sell their products during events, wishing to put up stands and even to create an open-air market in a manner similar to another famous flyover in the North zone of Rio (Seldin, 2018). He always turns such requests down because he sees them as "trying to take advantage of the cultural activities' success for their own benefit" (July 2019). This narrative reflects another type of conflict: while trying to keep it as a 'pure' cultural space, the artists deny the occupation of those who do not fit their pre-established categories.

It is worth noting that members of the OBSS themselves carry out commercial activities at the site. They sell beverages and alcoholic drinks from the group's container, and tokens to be used at an arcade machine. They have also turned the Flyover into a brand, selling kits with T-shirts, keychains and stickers bearing their logo. This reflects a controversial point of view when it comes to the 'commercialization' of the space and its true collective intent, since some are allowed to use the site for financial gain and others are not.

When speaking of leadership in the formation of cultural territories, Bonnemaison (1981: 284-285) highlights implicit and explicit social codes, common and divergent points of interest and of a collective conscience that rises up against those seen as 'outsiders.' He argues that, within the collective, there is the "development of an inner competition for a certain type of power that leads to the emergence of gurus or masters, who found and renew their cultural vision." Mendonça certainly fits this profile, leading us to question whether the Realengo Flyover Cultural Space would be able to survive without him.

Contestations with the Outer City
One of Mendonça's ways of justifying the appropriation of the Flyover's underpass is the scope for giving new meaning to the area, overcoming the

notions of 'danger' and 'violence' connected to it. In many interviews, he rejected complaints about site safety, claiming that the cultural occupation improved the space. We also noted how other artists see themselves as "fillers of an empty space, a leftover area" previously taken over by "violence, darkness and danger" (Interviewee C, May 2018).

Mendonça illustrates his romanticized view of their role with the tale of two young men, who turned up bent on robbing people but ended up changing their minds and joining the rap battle. He defines this as a "gratifying, legendary moment" and as example of "how culture changes lives" (May 2018). He also mentions his role in building bridges with the local municipality for the construction of infrastructure, often citing the new public lighting project for the dark area as a factor in cutting crime.

However, despite the OBSS's claims that the cultural space improved Realengo, not everyone shares this view. We saw Mendonça asking participants not to smoke marijuana on the site because it affects its already tainted image. Part of the local community still links the cultural space to negative connotations of illegal drug use, vagrancy, loitering and danger. In addition, during our visits, passers-by warned members of our groups to watch out for muggings, advising them to keep an eye on their belongings. This leads us to conclude that the perception of danger or safety is relative, varying according to the time of day, presence of people, familiarity with the area, among other factors.

Perceptions about the intended level of attention raised by the OBSS's activities also varied depending on the interviewee. This brings us to consider another conflict when it comes to occupying the site, namely that between wishing to gain visibility and the need to operate discretely, without drawing too much attention that might make people feel unsafe. Zibechi (2015) claims that visibility also means vulnerability, a lack of autonomy and a dependence on the system. A similar approach is proposed by Bey (2018) when speaking of the

need to create "temporary autonomous zones." In a movement similar to that observed in Rio, Bey (2018) suggests the occupation of invisible zones, arguing that they should remain unnoticed in the gaps and cracks of society in an attempt to maintain their independence. It is clear, however, that 'invisibility' has its drawbacks especially when it comes to attracting funding to keep the activities going.

Still speaking of visibility, some lyrics heard during the battles indicate that the rappers feel that inhabiting the West zone is the reason why they are not famous, often denouncing the invisibility of this region within the city. Local rappers seem to constantly compare themselves to those living in the South zone, claiming that they are not given the same opportunities.

This leads us to ponder the circulation of rappers within Rio de Janeiro as a whole. Our interviews showed that they do not restrict themselves to just one place, and that they often move throughout the city, following their preferred cultural events. This movement lets them show off their work to different audiences and peers. They believe that the South zone battles have a more 'viral' aspect, especially when it comes to social media exposure, with YouTube playing a major role in an artist's' fame nowadays.

Still, the prejudice linked to the West zone is palpable in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. During our field research, Uber drivers often questioned our destination and dismissed the idea of us conducting social research there. This kind of thinking not only shows a historic prejudice towards the West zone, but also rising intolerance, which follows the post-2013 conservative wave in Brazil (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020). This intolerance culminated in the election of a far right-wing President — Jair Bolsonaro — and is marked by the weakening of social public policies (Garcia, 2019) and the scrapping of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture. This political trend opposes the cultural policies implemented by the previous leftist mandates of Luís Inácio Lula da

Silva and Dilma Rousseff, whose program 'Living Culture' (Cultura Viva) sought to fund the development of marginalized cultural collectives (Seldin et al., 2020). The act of producing culture itself has become contested in contemporary Brazil.

In recent years, Bolsonaro's supporters have seen progressive cultural producers, feminists, LGBTQ+ spokespeople and activists as vagrants or "enemies" of the nation (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020). Our interviews revealed that this growing prejudice against artists clearly worsens perceptions of the Flyover by some Realengo dwellers. Such mistrust, observed through political far-right narratives, is causing structural changes in Brazilian society, and a "descent into the ordinary" (Das, 2007). In other words, the ordinary - everyday life - is permeated by reproductions of hate speeches in tune with the rejection of broader agendas towards social impact and change.

In the Flyover's case, hate speech and violence took another turn in 2019. Even though the real estate market is not especially strong in this run-down neighborhood, the presence of the artists at the site eventually lessened the interest of developers considering 'urban renewal' schemes.

The area under the Flyover is a public space, and despite the OBSS's turning it into an improvised urban square, there are no legal documents establishing them as its official owners. That means that other groups or individuals can also intervene on the site, since The State does not care to regulate it.

This became clear in October of 2019, when one of the walls bounding the site was knocked down, destroying much of the graffiti art in the process. The OBSS told us that a new popular supermarket named "Atacadão" was going to be built on the bordering land. The artists replaced the wall with a protective metal grid, which partially blocked attendees' access to the container but made it easier to hold the rap battles. They also moved the bookstand to a nearby street, closer to the train station.

In an interesting twist, the cultural site's organizers, who were previously against its 'commercialization' by other actors, initially approved the new supermarket. Many told us that they saw it as an opportunity for future employment but this picture quickly changed.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, members of the newly inaugurated Atacadão security staff expelled the group announcing that the flyover site "now belonged to them" (Mendonça, September 2020). This is a good example of fragile notions of agency in informal contexts. This did not reflect an official change in the property status but rather of a symbolic act of 'taking over.' These individuals' action resembles that of local militia groups, when a parallel power often takes control of urban space through violent threats, substituting The State's role in regulating land use (see Cano, 2013). This fact also illustrates Rio's urban violence, where the chances of negotiations are well-nigh zero given the threat to life and limb.

This turn of events left the OBSS disheartened. Mendonça claimed that "he could not go against this (parallel) system" (idem), and that this "system had finally reached them due to the municipality's negligence, leaving them unsafe" (idem). As the group's leader, he fearfully had to move away from Realengo in late 2020. Having left the Flyover in the hands of his friends, he now plans to start an online shop for their branded products and to begin a similar project in his new neighborhood of Jaconé.

At the time of writing, the future of the Realengo Flyover Cultural Space is uncertain, revealing the ever-changing nature of this territory. Still, regardless of what happens to the site, the cultural producers involved in its construction (and demise) highlight the need to learn from these tense spaces, marked by both *resistance* and *persistence*. In Realengo, the moment of *resistance* was characterized by the act of occupation itself and by the occupiers' fight for legitimacy, which for them, came with the 'Local Actions' public call and winning

the city's Municipal Order of Merit. This period was also marked by crucial achievements, such as better public lighting, and the forging of dialogue with both public and private actors in power (i.e. the garbage collection company, the supermarket, and so on). Resistance is what kept the occupation going and stopped The State from stigmatizing or repressing the experiment.

The second moment, of persistence, was, and still is, more challenging. It happens as an everyday experience through the bodies and activities physically appropriating the site regardless of the emerging obstacles. One of these obstacles is guaranteeing the right to the land and some action by the State. *Resistance* and persistence for the creation of cultural territories are not exclusionary but complementary.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS
Throughout this paper, we have sought to build a concept of *contested territories of culture*. We argued that these territories resemble tensed spaces, where conflict and dispute are often present, especially in Latin American's unequal cities.

We began by analyzing the notion of territory *per se*, while highlighting its cultural character. We explained that territories are subjective by nature, built upon the meanings, experiences, itineraries and expectations of its users. We also stressed how they contain power games, involving diverse actors with conflicting interests regarding space. We then analyzed how Latin-American cultural territories are often built in a bottom-up manner, exhibiting significant resistance to the established order. This resistance translates through a wish to operate outside the system in an attempt to gain more access to culture. In this sense,

contested territories of culture can be seen as a key tool for drawing up future policies, in the hope of achieving greater reality.

To illustrate our argument, we presented the case study of the Realengo Flyover, a cultural appropriation of a leftover space on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The presence of artists helped to resignify this site, empowering a run-down public space, and turning an empty area into a point of cultural reference. Their action spurred the creation of a territory for sociability and exchanges in place of a mere alleyway or crime hot spot. This example let us observe contestations in different categories within the group and with the outside city. Analyzing them revealed the importance of its complexity. On the one hand, the site lets some of the local inhabitants gain greater access to culture in a neighborhood where traditional facilities are scarce. On the other, it has a limited reach due to the nature of its activities. Not all of Realengo's dwellers can take part in the events. They also have diverging opinions regarding its value for the region but that is not necessarily a bad thing.

The current dispute surrounding the appropriation of the site itself proves that acknowledging contestation is needed for a fairer planning scheme. While the cultural use is of great importance to some, commercial use could be more beneficial to others. If the State acted as a mediator, perhaps both uses could coexist. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' on this score but the perception is that that Rio's outskirts are neglected and driven by clandestine activities. These are needed because the government is failing to provide the city as a whole with equal planning and fair policies. Until we can no longer say the city outskirts are marginalized, they will remain culturally rich but socially vulnerable.

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