DOSSIER: REFOUNDING URBAN-REGIONAL LATIN AMERICAN THINKING: NAVIGATING VARIEGATION, NEGATION, AND CONSTITUTION

BETWEEN ORALITY AND WRITING: PERSPECTIVES ON BRAZILIAN REALITY IN THE SUBJECTIVATION OF A BLACK SENSE OF PLACE

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Abstract

The article examines a Black sense of place from a Brazilian perspective, situating it within a colonial, enslaving past that has continued to shape contemporary social and spatial relations. The study argues that this sense of place may be understood through the interplay between the processes of writing and orality. Drawing on the theoretical construction of these two conceptual operators, the text revisits key national legal milestones that have historically sustained the exclusion of the Black population, materialized in what is termed a "Brazilian-style spatial apartheid", manifested in the urban environment. The empirical focus is the city of Belo Horizonte, whose origin was permeated by institutional practices legitimized through legal texts imbued with intrinsic racial logics. These written frameworks are counterposed by orality, especially through the central role of quilombola matriarchs, which have resisted hegemonic processes and constitute forms of re-existence of the Black population.

Keywords

Colonial Question; Raciality; Social and Spatial Segregation; Orality; Urban Space; Urban Theories.

ENTRE A ORALIDADE E A ESCRITA: UMA PERSPECTIVA DA REALIDADE BRASILEIRA NA SUBJETIVAÇÃO DE UM SENTIDO NEGRO DE LUGAR

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Resumo

O artigo discute um sentido negro de lugar a partir de uma perspectiva brasileira, cujo passado colonial e escravocrata pode ser identificado nas relações socioespaciais contemporâneas. Propõe-se que essa identificação seja compreendida por meio de processos de escrita e oralidade. A partir da construção teórica desses dois operadores conceituais, foram retomados alguns marcos legais nacionais que viabilizaram a manutenção da exclusão da população negra, materializada no que chamamos de um "apartheid espacial à brasileira", que se expressa na urbe. O urbano em foco é a cidade de Belo Horizonte, cujo processo de surgimento foi permeado por ações institucionais legitimadas por escritas legais que possuem uma racialidade intrínseca a elas. Essa mesma escrita encontra um contraponto na oralidade, especialmente no protagonismo matriarcal quilombola, que resiste aos processos hegemônicos como uma forma de reexistência da população negra.

Palavras-chave

Questão Colonial; Racialidade; Segregação Socioespacial; Oralidade; Espaço Urbano; Teorias Urbanas.

BETWEEN ORALITY AND WRITING: PERSPECTIVES ON BRAZILIAN REALITY IN THE SUBJECTIVATION OF A BLACK SENSE OF PLACE[1]

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Introduction

This article analyzes the relationship between writing and orality to expand the concept of a "Black sense of place" (McKittrick, 2011) from a Brazilian perspective. In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick (2006) delineated Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean as possible spatial frames by which the Afro-diasporic context can be examined. She argues that Black existence may be understood through the historical processes that have unfolded in these locations, culminating in what she terms "our present geographic organization" (McKittrick, 2006, p. X). Building on her work in Canada, as well as on the contributions of other U.S.-based scholars such as Sylvia Wynter, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Saidiya Hartman, it is possible to identify a discursive engagement with the impacts of racialized relations within the field of human geography. Beyond the contexts of Canada and the United States, this debate has also been advanced by studies conducted in the Caribbean (Ferdinand, 2022; Moulton, 2023), and may be further extended to encompass Hawthorne's (2023) formulation of the Black Mediterranean.

1. I would like to acknowledge the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais – FAPEMIG (Minas Gerais Research Foundation) for its institutional support through the funding of my doctoral scholarship. I also acknowledge the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES – Brazil) and the Graduate Program in Geography at UFMG. I extend my thanks to Professors Heloisa Soares de Moura Costa, Felipe Nunes Coelho Magalhães, and Alex A. Moulton for their support in the development of this work.

Such studies have demonstrated the consolidation of a critical theoretical corpus across territories of the African diaspora, thereby raising the question as to why discussions grounded in a Brazilian perspective have remained largely absent from this body of work. Although this debate has begun to take shape in Brazil (Guimarães, 2020; Santos & Ferreira, 2022; Cirqueira & Santos, 2023), significant theoretical and methodological gaps persist. It is therefore necessary to incorporate Brazilian sociospatial processes into the analytical foundations of the field, in order to articulate a specifically Brazilian "poetics of landscape" (McKittrick, 2006). This need stems from the fact that Afro-diasporic perspectives in Brazil reveal singular dynamics of dispossession, violence and racialized exclusion directed at Black existences, as well as to their forms of confrontation and resistance. Although still emergent, these discussions suggest that an epistemic hegemony may persist even within counter-hegemonic research agendas. This underscores the importance of revisiting geographic studies from Black perspectives and further expand analyses of racialized sociospatial relations, so as to incorporate a pluriversality (Ramose, 2011) of existences that constitute Blackness, avoid reductionisms, and de-enclose the multiple analytical possibilities of a Black sense of place.

Building on this intent, the article engages Brazilian reality in dialogue with theoretical and empirical work that has been produced across the Americas. In parallel with McKittrick's (2013) proposition of a Black Canada, the conceptualization of a Black Brazil brings the failures of the Brazilian State into view, exposing it as the proponent of a project of Black genocide and epistemicide. Therefore, this analysis reveals a Brazilian State for which the denial of Black self-determination has been—and remains—central to its project of power (Silva, D., 2022).

The article begins by discussing the concept of a Black sense of place—which provides the methodological grounding for the study (McKittrick, 2011)—in order to advance the possibility of a Brazilian-oriented analytical framework. From this perspective, the analysis addresses Brazil's colonial condition by relating the legacies of a slaveholding past to contemporary sociospatial relations, understood as multiscalar processes whose dynamics are mediated by writing and orality. In a second stage, the distinction between these two conceptual operators is contextualized, and key national legal frameworks that have sustained the exclusion and social subjugation of the Black population are revisited, materializing what is termed a "Brazilian-style spatial apartheid". To this end, the ideological processes that underpin these sociospatial dynamics are examined, as they are expressed in the urban realm.

The empirical focus is the city of Belo Horizonte, the author's field of study, whose formation—along with institutional actions legitimized through

municipal writings (laws and decrees)—possesses an intrinsic raciality masked by an appearance of neutrality. This same writing is counterposed by orality as a form of Black re-existence. Black women, particularly quilombola matriarchs, assume a dual protagonism—on the one hand, the violence inflicted by hegemonic processes, and on the other, resistance to these same hegemonies—from which it can be concluded that their *escrevivência*[2] articulates a distinctly Brazilian Black sense of place.

1. A Black sense of place

McKittrick (2011) examined the enduring impacts of a colonial past on the present, arguing that a Black sense of place—or its annihilation—can be understood by situating the plantation regime at the center of modernity. She establishes a relationship between Blackness and geography through the forced displacements of enslavement, which instituted relations of subjugation between white populations and Black people of African origin, thereby interconnecting race, place, and violence as interdependent analytical categories.

Understanding this interconnection reveals an elemental condition of Black existence in the Americas, alongside the normalization of relations of subjugation, in which exploitation and dispossession are treated as rights legitimately assigned to a segment of the population—in this case, the white European colonizer. From this naturalization of racialized sociospatial relations, the Black population comes to be composed of those "without"—without territory, without rights, without humanity—leading to the objectification of Black bodies. At the opposite extreme, those who "have," or those who "are," enjoy an ontological condition of freedom (McKittrick, 2011).

Within this framework, McKittrick's (2011) concept of a Black sense of place serves as a point of departure for incorporating, from a Brazilian perspective, racialized sociospatial relations as singular dynamics within a global context. This analytical move also requires the introduction of additional categories that link Blackness and geography in the Brazilian context, namely writing and orality. The proposed framework associates writing with State mechanisms that have been—and remain—deeply implicated in the production and maintenance of segregated spatial containment, operating as a mask (Kilomba, 2019) that has constrained Black agency, confining Black bodies within a subordinate social position. Recognizing the conceptual multiplicity of the term "writing", the analysis focuses specifically

2. *Escrevivência* is a concept coined by Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo to describe a mode of writing grounded in lived Black experience, particularly that of Black women, in which writing and life are inseparable and constitute a political and epistemic practice.

on its archival dimensions (Taylor, 2013) understood as a colonial mechanism for the homogenization of knowledge and, consequently, its deployment in efforts to erase other forms of knowledge derived—in the Brazilian case—from Indigenous traditional peoples and African populations. Although the counter-hegemonic potential of writing is also acknowledged, the analysis foregrounds its historical and contemporary deployment as an instrument of Black subjugation.

In parallel, orality is constituted as a mode of knowledge transmission by means of corporeality, operating as a form of resistance to processes of erasure and violation of Afro-diasporic heritages. From this perspective, orality can be understood as a multiplicity of embodied manifestations "that imbricate history and memory, postfacing Brazilian cultural discourse with African prefaces"[3] (Martins, 2021a, p. 43).

Building on McKittrick's (2011) articulation of orality and writing, it becomes possible to envisage the formation of a Black sense of place specific to Brazil. While the dichotomy between writing and orality may appear essentialized, it provides a productive theoretical lens for rethinking Brazilian sociospatial processes, opening the way for further conceptual development.

Another key aspect in applying the concept of a Black sense of place to this analysis is the question of gender, highlighting the central role of Black women in the sociospatial configuration of Brazil. Positioned at an extreme opposite of white men in terms of access to rights, Black women nonetheless exert decisive influence within the social "machinery". They are thus understood as "outsiders within" (Collins, 2016), or *forasteiras no interior*, a concept that captures the dichotomy of their position: while they do not directly participate in power dynamics, their existence is embedded within power structures, insofar as they are implicated in maintaining hegemonies. Beyond this social positioning, these women also embody resistance through the transmission of knowledge historically protagonized by matriarchs. Their cosmoperception activates the transformative potential of matriarchy—or *matripotentializes*— the sociospatial dynamics, and, as Portilho (2021, p. 107) notes, the power of these women lies in "matriarchy as a phenomenon of the social order, preserved and recreated in the experiences of Indigenous, African, and Afro-diasporic peoples", underscoring the centrality of quilombola matriarchal protagonism.

Incorporating the role of women—particularly Black women—into the discussion of a Black sense of place entails questioning patriarchy as a structuring mechanism of the sociospatial dynamics that position Black women as occupying

3. This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the author.

a space of difference (McKittrick, 2006). As McKittrick observes, “she is seemingly in place by being out of place” (2006, p. XV), a condition that fixes these bodies in a position of subalternity. Examining *matripotence* reveals, in Brazil, how Black women inhabit “the crevices of power” (Sharpe apud McKittrick, 2006, p. XVII).

Subsequently, enslavement will be revisited in order to analyze Brazilian Black geographies, in a movement analogous to that of Katherine McKittrick.

Building on this perspective, the analysis then revisits enslavement in order to analyze Brazilian Black geographies, following an approach analogous to that of Katherine McKittrick.

2. A colonial question

Official data indicate a substantial presence of Black people in the formation of Brazilian territory, both during the colonial period and in contemporary times. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), approximately 4 million men, women, and children of African origin were forcibly trafficked to Brazil during the colonial period, representing more than one-third of the entire global slave trade (IBGE, 2007). It is estimated that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, over 12 million people of African origin were violently transported across the Atlantic, 2 million of whom are believed to have perished during the journey.

The impact of colonialism is also reflected in the 2022 Census (IBGE, 2023), which indicates that 55.4% of the Brazilian population identifies as Black, totaling over 110 million people and thus constituting a majority. Given that the same census indicated that over 87% of the Brazilian population resides in urban areas, it can be inferred that cities have long been sites of racialized sociospatial relations and may therefore materialize a Black sense of place. These data provide an initial indication of the singularity of the Brazilian context, in which the parallel between the colonial past and the present reveals an intrinsic relationship between sociospatial construction and Black existence

The materialization of a Black sense of place can be approached from a multiscalar perspective (Ratts, 2010). At a global level, colonial dynamics established supranational relations that persisted in Brazil for over three centuries, structuring expropriative relations between European white colonizers and enslaved peoples. These dynamics were reinforced at a national level by State mechanisms throughout history that legalized the systemic violation and subjugation of the Black population. Consequently, the urban scale becomes particularly revealing (Santos, R., 2012), where racialized sociospatial segregation materializes as a site of power struggles mediated by raciality.

At the same time, it is at the scale of the body that the impacts of these multiscalar processes of racial violence are most acutely experienced, insofar as Black bodies are segregated and subjected to violations structured at other scales of power. Yet it is at this same individual scale that resistance to subjugation emerges, since for centuries Black bodies have resisted this interconnected system of domination (hooks, 2022). Thus, this analysis highlights how colonial relations continue to influence contemporary Brazilian sociospatial dynamics, with the expropriation of Black lives operating through a "political economy of bodies"[4] (Mbembe, 2021, p. 16). Although no longer legitimized by the apparatus of enslavement, this system of subjugation and qualification persists, reinforcing the inferiorization of Black people relative to white populations, as well as establishing racially demarcated spatial allocations.

This analysis is supported by Ferdinand (2022), who, from a Caribbean perspective, conceptualizes the invasion of the Americas as a first "colonial fracture," which initiated widespread violations against Black lives and Indigenous peoples, disrupting an existential pluriversality (Ramose, 2011) and legitimizing the expropriation of human bodies, objectified to serve the demands of European colonizers. He identifies a second "colonial fracture" with the advent of modernity and its exploitative principles, a perspective that resonates with the studies of McKittrick (2011). Ferdinand (2022) further explores how these dynamics of expropriation intersect in contemporary times with issues such as climate change and biome alterations. Although this work does not directly address environmental perspectives, it underscores the theoretical and methodological potential of incorporating Black perspectives into contemporary debates, positioning the colonial question as central to global power relations, in accordance with the analyses presented in this essay. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022, p. 335) reinforces the necessity of this theoretical exercise as "a strategy of historical analysis capable of 'destabilizing this abstract figure of the universal human' that historicist ideology inherited from the scientific construction of time".

Accordingly, the colonial question may be understood as a political, economic, and social process, whose legitimation has been sustained through writing. Thus, raciality operates as a device activated by hegemonic processes, simultaneously maintaining privilege and enforcing subjugation. As Carneiro observes, these are "discourses and practices produced in Brazil around raciality, which configure it as a device of power" (Carneiro, 2005, p. 34). From a Foucauldian perspective,

4. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of MBEMBE A. *Brutalism.* Durham and London. Duke University Press. (2024, p. 38). Translated by Steven Corcoran.

Carneiro further argues that "in constituting itself, a device remains available to be operationalized in different circumstances and moments, self-reproducing by way of its strategic deployment" (Carneiro, 2005, p. 38). In sum, the device of raciality continues to shape social spatialities. Resisting these dynamics, orality functions alongside hegemonies, sustaining the pluriversal existence of Black people from an Afro-diasporic perspective.

3. Between writing and orality

Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2018) examined the distinction between two modes of knowledge transmission—orality and writing—associating the former with Black corporealities that embody traditional teachings derived from peoples of African origin and traditional Indigenous communities, and the latter with a colonization of thought, insofar as writing presupposes mastery of a specific technique and therefore restricts who may transmit this type of knowledge. Taylor (2013) similarly understands writing as a selective mechanism for archiving knowledge. When approached from a racial perspective, writing may be understood as part of a "scientific fabrication" (Silva, D., 2022) that enables only a portion of a society's historiography to be recorded, thus functioning as an instrument for maintaining and perpetuating a "colonial anxiety" (Silva, D., 2022) linked to economic, political, and social power. Orality, by contrast, is conceptualized as a repertoire (Taylor, 2013) that, precisely because it cannot be archived, depends on continuous transmission. Resistance to hegemonic processes can thus be understood with this mode of knowledge transmission, which has operated from the period of enslavement through to the present day, expressed in oral practices and the management of territories—ancestral technologies of land care—passed down across generations. It is therefore possible to identify the protagonism of subjects who sustain counter-hegemonic modes of existence grounded in orality. This perspective resonates with the concept of African ancestry as a guiding principle in individual and collective decision-making among Black populations (Portilho, 2021) in the face of a violating and objectifying hegemony. It should be emphasized that the persistence of these social processes does not negate the existence of other counter-hegemonic practices, but rather underscores the importance of orality as a foundational Afro-diasporic social repertoire.

Writing, in turn, records a society's historical processes through archiving and, from the perspective adopted herein, since the arrival of the first colonial ships in the Americas, has been imposed as a mechanism for legitimizing hegemonic dynamics. This imposition operates via the construction of knowledge grounded in a colonizing European Westernity, oriented toward "naturalizing racial subjugation" (Silva, D., 2022). The erasure of Indigenous and African heritage produced by the

enforced adoption of Eurocentric language and customs has been continuously rearticulated throughout history, spanning the legal codification of enslavement during the colonial period, the abolition of enslaved labor, the production of urban vulnerabilities under segregationist legislation, and a contemporaneity that continues to sustain an interconnected system of domination (hooks, 2022) in operation.

The imbrication of historical processes reveals the agency of power relations that continually establish new dynamics of expropriation as socio-spatial demands emerge. In this sense, a parallel can be drawn between colonial processes and contemporary social relations as fundamental elements of a Black sense of place, in which race, place, and violence are persistently intertwined. Within this framework, colonial fractures operate as renewed cycles of Black subjugation. Denise Ferreira da Silva's reflections corroborate this understanding, whereby

> strategies of signification are fabricated—"civilization", "modernization", and "globalization"—that engulf the globe and preserve the text of the science of Man, in which Africa, Asia, and Latin America are presumed *(sic)* to be subaltern global regions (Silva, D., 2022, p. 333)

Writing thus operates as a device that has historically underpinned hegemonic processes, legitimizing the fracturing of society—from the conquest of the Americas to the consolidation of the capitalist system. As its point of departure, this article takes the transition from colonial processes to the country's modernization, which unfolded between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than seeking to exhaustively account for the constitution of a Brazilian Black sense of place, the analysis aims to identify the establishment of violence and resistance that emerge within these fractures. In the Brazilian context, writing may be understood as one of the mechanisms through which decision-making processes that shape Black existence are legitimized, ranging from the validation of territorial appropriation by colonizers to institutional decisions that have sustained the subjugation of the Black population.

4. A national mode of writing

With the aim of examining how the perspective on writing adopted herein has shaped racialized socio-spatial relations within the Brazilian context, this article revisits key legal milestones that offer insights into the foundations of these relations. One possible starting point is May 13, 1888, which marks the formal abolition of enslavement in Brazil, with an attempt to analyze the dynamics that

emerged after more than three centuries of the legalized objectification of Black bodies within the national territory. However, the complexity of these relations demands an examination of legal device that have sustained post-abolition subjugation.

In the decades preceding the enactment of the Lei Áurea (Brazil, 1889)[5], several laws were sanctioned that reveal the racialization of institutional decision-making within the historical process in which they were embedded. One such example is Law No. 1 (Brazil, 1837), the first education law of Imperial Brazil, which, in its Article 1, barred enslaved persons and freed Africans from having access to educational institutions. This provision effectively determined for whom educational spaces in the country were intended and who would be systematically excluded from them, thereby exposing the explicitly racial character of this legal mechanism. Educational processes therefore inflicted a dual form of racial violence: first, by being organized around written practices, and second, by being governed by laws—i.e., written archival tools.

In 1850, Law No. 581—also known as the Eusébio de Queirós Law[6]—was enacted, thereby bringing the transatlantic slave trade to an end and criminalizing its practice (Brazil, 1851a). This legislation anticipated the political reconfiguration that would later culminate in the establishment of the Republic. Merely two weeks after its enactment, Law No. 601—known as the Land Law—was promulgated (Brazil, 1851b), laying the foundations of private property in what would become the future Republic by restricting access to public lands exclusively through purchase. Beyond instituting the buying and selling of land, this legal device effectively restricted land ownership for large segments of the Black population, who at that time remained enslaved or bore the material consequences of enslavement even when formally freed. Within the broader struggle for Black emancipation within a pre-republican society, the conditions imposed by this law ensured the reservation of land ownership for white individuals, thereby operationalizing the devaluation of nonwhite people (Pulido, 2017).

Even prior to abolition, the Free Womb Law (Brazil, 1871) and the Sexagenarian Law (Brazil, 1885) were enacted, both of which maintained the

5. The law that formally abolished slavery.

6. It should be noted that the aforementioned law was not the first attempt to extinguish the transatlantic slave trade. Under pressure from economic agreements with the UK, imperial Brazil had already enacted earlier measures—such as the so-called Feijó Law of November 7, 1831—aimed at ending the trade; however, it was only with the Eusébio de Queirós Law that prohibition was effectively established by means of a legal instrument. This discussion is related to the impasses inherent in a Brazilian slaveholding society that hesitated to bring the transatlantic trade to an end.

objectification of Black bodies by assigning monetary value to compensations paid by the State to slaveholders purportedly "harmed" by these measures. The former established that children born to enslaved women after its enactment would be legally free; however, should the slaveholder refuse the compensation, the child could remain under their tutelage until the age of twenty-one. The latter regulated the gradual extinction of enslaved labor through compensation, while excluding individuals over sixty years of age from its scope; no compensation was provided for this group, who therefore remained under the tutelage of slaveholders.

These national writings make evident the extent to which Black bodies were objectified and treated as commodities from birth, with no recognition of their humanity, and the Brazilian State acting as the agent that legitimized racial objectification. In light of this discussion, the impact of the enactment of legal device—as State-instituted mechanisms that sustained the submission and subjugation of Black people—becomes particularly clear. The Lei Áurea [Golden Law] (Brazil, 1889) might have fulfilled its transformative potential had the abolition of enslavement been accompanied by a genuine social reconfiguration. In practice, however, its potential was circumscribed to what Ferdinand (2022) terms a second colonial fracture, marking the decline of classical colonialism and the transition to a renewed form of spatial colonization grounded in republican ideals. Within this framework, a modernist vanguard—rooted in earlier European historical processes stemming from the Industrial Revolution—came to define the orientation of socio-spatial relations.[7]

The final decade of the nineteenth century began with the enactment of the Brazilian Penal Code through Decree No. 847 (Brazil, 1890), sanctioned as a republican—rather than imperial—measure. This legal instrument is directly connected to the preceding legislative framework and established the social positioning of Black populations. Whereas the Land Law restricted access to property, the new decree effectively criminalized Blackness itself by targeting associated practices such as capoeira and manifestations that could be linked to magic or healing. In doing so, it established a juridical precedent for the criminalization of Afro-descendant cultural practices. The raciality embedded in these state devices is evident, insofar as they enabled judgment and punishment of individuals whose

7. The influence of European Enlightenment ideals and of the abolition of the enslavement of Black and Indigenous peoples in Brazil is addressed in Kury's (2007) analysis. The author examines the publication of the newspaper O Patriota between 1813 and 1814 and argues that "[...] the articles in O Patriota criticize the influence of slavery on the lack of technical progress in Brazil. Tasks that could have been performed by simple machines were instead carried out by enslaved people, as attested by many artists of the period" (Kury, L., Iluminismo e império no Brasil: O Patriota [Enlightenment and Empire in Brazil: the Patriot] (1813–1814). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz, 2007, p. 190).

ways of life diverged from the norms of Brazilian social order. In other words, the Penal Code of 1890 consolidated the State's role in controlling Black bodies and their spaces of socialization, through legally sanctioned mechanisms of control.

The beginning of the twentieth century in Brazil was forged upon what Bento (2022) describes as an agreement that perpetuates white privilege. From this perspective, writing may be understood as a technique that enables the formulation of such agreements, structuring a pact that ultimately materializes in space. Denise Ferreira da Silva's (2022) analysis of historical materialism within the Marxist legacy engages with McKittrick's (2011) reflections insofar as it locates colonial dynamics at the very core of modernity. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022) identifies hegemonic strategies, or devices, that are mobilized to maintain social hierarchies:

> In order to map social configuration, historical materialism follows a logic of discovery that describes the instruments and relations connecting (economic) material production and the (State) juridical sphere, as well as cultural forms. Within this framework, the "current" and "real" human being "makes history" with the aim of mobilizing strategies that produce social phenomena as effects of external determinants whose operations may become accessible and, to some extent, controllable by human beings, even although they are not created by them. (Silva, D., 2022, p. 341-342)

The legal instruments discussed thus far functioned as racial devices (Carneiro, 2005). These agreements, however, are continually renegotiated whenever hegemonic arrangements are threatened or when their underlying demands need to be met. Accordingly, although the laws examined herein were implemented more than a century ago, the cumulative effects of these written instruments may be identified in the present and continue to underpin other hegemonic decision-making processes. To advance this argument, the analysis turns to the spatial materialization of raciality, apprehended through patterns of racialized socio-spatial segregation that have shaped a form of spatial apartheid characteristic of Brazil. The absence of formal segregationist legislation, such as that implemented in the United States and South Africa did not preclude the persistent disadvantage of the Black population, descendants of enslaved people, nor did it prevent the formation, across the national territory, of spaces effectively designated for white people and spaces relegated to Black people.

5. Brazilian-style spatial apartheid

The first question that emerges when asserting the existence of a spatial apartheid in Brazil is how such an institutionalization of racial segregation can

be identified in the absence of historical developments comparable to those that occurred in the United States and South Africa. In the North American case, segregationist legislation was enforced between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, explicitly delimiting spaces for white people and spaces for Black people.[8] In the African nation, between 1948 and 1994, racist policies were enforced, with violent repercussions for the Black population.

In the Brazilian case, no laws were sanctioned that explicitly instituted racial segregation. Nevertheless, the entire legal framework established throughout the nineteenth century systematically constrained the participation of the Black population in society. Brazil's status as the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, combined with the scale of the transatlantic slave trade it received, underscores the singularity of racialized socio-spatial relations in the country. Gonzalez (2020) argues that in societies where segregationist legislation was formally implemented, racial consciousness was more readily converted into sociopolitical activism—a position also advanced by Rodriguez (2016). By contrast, in societies such as Brazil, the absence of overt racial austerity fostered an acceptance of diversity that, in turn, diluted racial consciousness among significant segments of the population.[9] This in turn, enabled institutional actions that disadvantaged Black populations to persist largely unchallenged, in the absence of organized forms of resistance capable of interrupting their reproduction. Evidently, it is not possible to equate the forms of violence perpetrated by the State in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States, a comparative approach nevertheless allows for the identification of the specific vulnerabilities and modalities that characterize each context.

In the Brazilian context, the myth of racial democracy and the theory of *mestiçagem* [10] (Nascimento, A., 2019) may be understood as two ideological

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8. The Jim Crow laws were enforced in the United States between 1876 and 1965 and established racial segregation in public spaces, as well as economic disadvantages for the Black population, among other sanctions. These laws sustained beliefs in white supremacy and treated interracial relations as socially illicit, thereby discouraging racial mixing.

9. As documented by Beatriz Nascimento (2021), Black emancipation movements have been present throughout Brazilian history since the first recorded existence of the Quilombo of Palmares in 1597, spanning numerous Black insurrections and underpinning the emergence of the Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado—MNU), which played a significant role in consolidating the gains established in the 1988 Federal Constitution. Nevertheless, these social movements were unable to prevent the ideological establishment of a nation-building project devoid of racial consciousness (Bustamante, 2025).

10. Beatriz Nascimento (2021, pp. 64-65) summarizes the two concepts. Critiquing Gilberto Freyre's work, the author defines the myth of racial democracy as "the crucial point of a national ideology responsible for the degrading social space in which the mass of Black people in Brazil finds itself." With regard to the theory of mestiçagem, she argues that "after the abolition of slavery, we were integrated into

mechanisms that corroborate the argument outlined above.[11] Abdias do Nascimento (2019) contended that the absence of an articulated racial consciousness produced a sense of racial equality that is not borne out in practice in Brazil, thereby preventing the Black population from recognizing the violations that were—and continue to be— systematically enacted. The myth of racial democracy is grounded in narratives of racial mixing between white and nonwhite populations, which has historically fostered interracial ties, while simultaneously obscuring the structural subjugation embedded in racialized social relations.

However, certain data reveal that the social position of Black people is not equivalent to that of the white population. Indicators related to violence, for example, are sufficient to dismantle the notion of a racial democracy. According to the 18th Brazilian Public Security Yearbook (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2024), 78% of the homicides recorded in Brazil involved Black victims. The same publication highlighted that approximately 70% of the incarcerated population is Black. Likewise, data from the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship (Brasil, 2023) reveal that nearly 70% of the homeless population is Black. Taken together, these figures indicate the existence of a structural articulation between being Black and spatialization, insofar as they expose a socio-spatial fragility inherent to this existence.

A parallel may be drawn between past and present. By relating the freedom granted through manumission letters to contemporary documents of Brazilian identity recognition, it becomes evident that, from the issuance of such letters in the nineteenth century to the violent police stops in today's major cities, the Black population has been compelled to demonstrate that no crime has been committed, since their mere existence is already regarded as inherently suspect. Violence against Black people and their incarceration reveal the vulnerability to which they are subjected; yet, these phenomena represent only one dimension of the broader materialization of socio-spatial segregation.

Thus, it is within urban space that the enduring impacts of colonial relations in Brazil become visible; consequently, Brazilian-style spatial apartheid can be said to find its materialization in the urban (Santos, R., 2012). To examine this scenario,

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the national whole, but undoubtedly with the simplistic hope that, through the filter of marriage or concubinage, we would 'improve the race' to the point that the nation would become increasingly brownish and, with the aid of European immigration, increasingly white".

11. These ideological mechanisms are related to Chauí's (2008) analysis, according to which "ideas or representations [...] tend to conceal from human beings the real manner in which their social relations were produced and the origin of the social forms of economic exploitation and political domination. This concealment of social reality is called ideology" (Chauí, 2008, p. 24).

the emergence of the city of Belo Horizonte will be discussed, with particular attention to the role of writing from the moment the charter of the new capital of Minas Gerais was promulgated. The discussion revisits institutional acts that facilitated the deterritorialization of Black populations and considers how raciality may be understood in the contemporary context as a framework supporting the existence of spatial apartheid.

6. The materialization of writing and orality in space: the urban in Belo Horizonte

Belo Horizonte was inaugurated in 1897 as the new state capital of Minas Gerais, thereby replacing Mariana and Ouro Preto. The transformation of the former Arraial do Curral del Rey aligns with what Ferdinand (2022) identifies as the second colonial fracture. Grounded in republican ideals, there arose a push to abandon Ouro Preto, the state capital at the time, whose colonial legacy—marked by slavery—is still evident in its colonial houses and cobblestone streets. The inauguration of the new capital less than a decade after the abolition of slavery indicates a correlation between the production of a new urban space and the racialized socio-spatial dynamics that would unfold there.

Pereira (2019) notes that approximately 70% of the population inhabiting the territory designated for the new city was Black. Hence, the remodeling of the preexisting landscape entailed the erasure of a Black presence, an argument advanced by Lisandra Mara Silva (2020). A notable example of this process was the demolition of the Capela do Rosário dos Homens Pretos de Nossa Senhora da Boa Viagem [the Chapel of the Rosary of Black Men of Our Lady of Boa Viagem] in Curral del Rey,[12] together with its cemetery, built by the Brotherhood of Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos, to make way for the urban layout of the new capital. It should be noted that the remains interred there were likely neither exhumed nor relocated to another cemetery, meaning that these Black bodies may still lie buried beneath layers of asphalt and urban development. This dynamic demonstrates how this modernizing project systematically sought to erase traces of Black cultural heritage, enacted by the institutions responsible for constructing the city. In response, forms of resistance emerged to confront this modus operandi. The figure of Maria do Arraial epitomizes Black resistance to such erasure. Pejoratively nicknamed Maria Papuda (literally “swollen neck”), due to her suffering from

12. The site where the cemetery and chapel were located was named Largo do Rosário and has been recognized as a Cultural Heritage site of Belo Horizonte (BELO HORIZONTE. Municipal Foundation of Culture. Directorate of Cultural Heritage and Public Archives. Registration dossier of the Largo do Rosário territory – intangible cultural heritage. Belo Horizonte: Municipal Foundation of Culture, 2022).

goiter, her struggle to prevent the removal of her small farmstead is preserved in museums and forms part of the social imagination.[13]

Bustamante (2023) examined processes of governance directed toward the Black population in the early twentieth century, analyzing how the devices of raciality (Carneiro, 2005) were activated through urban institutional frameworks to serve the interests of an emerging elite. In dialogue with studies by Lima (2009), the author explored processes of territorialization and deterritorialization enacted in favor of these elites, within the context of a recently emancipated yet persistently marginalized Black population. Shortly after the inauguration of the new capital, the growing demand for labor in a still-incomplete city prompted the occupation of central areas—an outcome unforeseen in the original urban plan—leading municipal authorities to issue decrees authorizing such settlement. However, approximately two decades later, new municipal decrees were issued that, this time, legalized the removal of these same populations from the city center, in response to the increasing demand for land in the area resulting from population growth and real estate speculation. These forms of population management, legitimized through legal writing, produced reterritorializations in other areas of the city. The Concórdia neighborhood, for example, emerged from these urban dynamics of extractive and subtractive biopolitical processes (Aradau; Tazzioli, 2019). The Black population that had occupied the city's central areas was redirected into workers' villages, reflecting a management of bodies that echoes colonial logics of trafficking and control. Nevertheless, beyond the violations imposed upon Black existence, Bustamante (2023) identifies a significant concentration of spaces dedicated to practices of African origin within the Concórdia neighborhood, which received populations displaced from the central areas of the city. As a result, the area is currently regarded as a *Quilombaço* or the *Little Africa* of Belo Horizonte. The term *Little Africa*, originally coined by Heitor dos Prazeres to designate Black territories in the port zone of Rio de Janeiro, has been appropriated by Black personalities in the capital of Minas Gerais to signify the Afro-diasporic potency that has resisted the processes of apartheid[14] materialized there. This Black re-existence underscores the

13. For further information regarding Maria do Arraial, see Dias (2023). She is the namesake of an occupation of an abandoned building in downtown Belo Horizonte, which began in 2023 and continues to the present. Comprising approximately 200 families and supported by the Movement for Struggle in Neighborhoods, Villages, and Favelas (MLB), the occupation, which advocates for housing, echoes the resistance exemplified by Maria do Arraial (DIAS, D. H. M. Do Curral Del Rey à Belo Horizonte: resgate imagético da experiência negra na cidade [From Curral del Rey to Belo Horizonte: an imagistic retrieval of the Black experience in the city]. *Revista Ñanduty*, v. 11, n. 18, p. 179–203, 2023).

14. The appropriation of this term is related to the attempt to name racialized sociospatial segregation as it materializes in the city, while acknowledging the relevant spatiotemporal differences.

strength of orality as a mechanism for the transmission of knowledge, operating in parallel to the processes of legal writing that nonetheless enable the perpetuation of other forms of existence rooted in African ancestry.

Bustamante (2023) has also examined quilombola matriarchal protagonism in Belo Horizonte. From an intersectional perspective, she presented processes of resistance to violations perpetrated by the State against Black communities, highlighting how matripotent leaderships are able to institutionalize themselves as remnant quilombo communities in order to access institutional mechanisms for safeguarding threatened territories. This form of protagonism, operating in the contemporary context, points to the continuity of African-heritage modes of creating, doing, and living (Brazil, 1988). At present, the city has six certified quilombola communities that have experienced similar processes of territorial violation, with resistance and confrontation led by matriarchal leaderships.[15]

The ambivalence between writing and orality reveals forms of Black existence permeated simultaneously by violence and resistance to hegemonic processes. This discussion resonates with McKittrick's (2022) analyses, which indicate how Black lived experiences unfold between processes of clarity (that which is socially visible and associated with writing) and opacity (which coexists with clarity and must be unveiled in order to be understood). Orality operates as an opaque modality of re-existence; nevertheless, it is present and demands recognition as a constitutive social dynamic. From a Brazilian perspective, a Black sense of place may inhabit this ambivalent condition, giving rise to another form of writing lived experiences—or writ(liv)ing experiences (*escre(vivências)*) (Evaristo, 2005).

7. Escrevivências[16]

From the colonial processes that culminated in the forced transatlantic crossing of millions of enslaved Africans to Brazil, it is possible to observe that not only bodies were trafficked, but also a worldview was brought from Africa by our ancestors (Gilroy, 2001). Gonzalez (2020), Beatriz Nascimento (2021), and Martins (2021b) have examined the profound African influence in the formation of Brazilian society. Martins, in particular, argues that "[...] through its multiple, rhizomatic palimpsests, Africa impregnates the Americas" (Martins, 2021b, p. 45). This Afro-diasporic palimpsest finds in orality a mode of permanence for African

15. It is important to acknowledge the leadership currently exercised by Ione Oliveira (Quilombo Mangueiras), Makota Cassia Kidoialê (Kilombu Manzo Ngunzo Kaiango), Gláucia Cristine Martins de Araújo Vieira (Kilombo Família Souza), and Luciana de Souza Matias (Quilombo Família Mattias).

16. See note 2.

heritage, influencing ways of being in and inhabiting society. As Martins further observes (2021b, p. 32),

> African philosophy recognizes the full spectrum of knowledge embedded in oral performance as central to the inscription of experiences of temporality and for their epistemic elaboration. The term *oralitura* is inscribed in the body and in its scansion, and it produces knowledge.

Conceição Evaristo (2005) foregrounds the role of Black women in the transmission of knowledge. For her, the *"escre(vivência* [*writ(liv)ing*] of Black women renders explicit the adventures and misadventures of those who know a double condition that society persistently seeks to inferiorize: being both woman and Black" (Evaristo, 2005, p. 223). Understanding this form of protagonism that exists outside dominant power dynamics, yet is simultaneously capable of challenging them (Collins, 2016), may offer a path toward envisioning fissures within long-standing hegemonic processes.

Quilombola orality offers a critical counterpoint in this regard. According to Beatriz Nascimento (2021, p. 101), the quilombo may be understood as an "[...] incessant effort, throughout the history of Brazil, to maintain the tradition of Palmares: to create and organize societies". For Nascimento, flight toward another form of social organization exceeds an attempt to prevent the perpetuation of violence; instead it signals the pursuit of other possibilities of collective existence. The dialectic between orality and writing (Martins, 2021a) is foundational to this endeavor. Quilombola flight fosters a rupture with hegemonic processes that inhibit a pluriversal existence (Ramose, 2011) and finds in matriarchy its fundamental expression—matripotency. Quilombola matriarchs implement strategies of resistance enacted through orality, whether in the pursuit of food security and ethnobotanical knowledge or in the safeguarding of practices rooted in African matrices. These epistemologies illuminate other forms of socio-spatial relations, and suggest alternative paths for humanity. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2019) blackens the reflection through the proposal of a Black light that, anchored in orality, strengthens the tensioning of ambivalences established through writing. Therefore, quilombola matriarchal *escrevivência* resists hegemonic writing, pointing toward a Black sense of place that is characteristic of Brazil.

Final remarks

In order to discuss a Brazilian perspective on a Black sense of place, this study has proposed to revisit the colonial question as a foundational dimension of

contemporary socio-spatial relations. To this end, it has mobilized two conceptual operators that deepen the interconnection between race, violence, and place, as proposed by Katherine McKittrick, namely: writing, as an archival possibility that ensures the maintenance of hegemonic processes; and orality, conceived as a repertoire that transmits knowledge through corporealities and which may operate as a mode of resistance to the violations and subjugations imposed upon Black populations. In the Brazilian case, such violence is sustained by legal writing and activated by state institutions in order to uphold economic, political, and social hegemony.

By revisiting nineteenth-century legislation—both from the period preceding and that following the abolition of the enslavement of Black people in Brazil—this study has identified forms of writing that have sustained the continued objectification of formerly enslaved bodies. The effects of these processes may be observed in the configuration of a Brazilian-style spatial apartheid, produced through ideological mechanisms that perpetuate racial violence into the present and whose most salient materialization occurs in urban space.

In the city of Belo Horizonte—conceived under republican ideals—municipal writing functioned as a central instrument to erase Black heritage from urban space and to perpetuate processes of objectification of these bodies, which were governed in accordance with the interests of the elites of the time. However, alongside the violence perpetrated by the State through writing, processes of resistance rooted in African ancestry can be identified. These include, among others, practices found in the present-day neighborhood of Concórdia or in the central role of quilombola matriarchs across the city, both of which have sought to ensure the continuity of African-derived ways of creating, doing, and living. Such evidence underscores the potency of re-existence among these populations, who, in orality, find a means of transmitting knowledge that has been erased or rendered invisible. A Black sense of place, therefore, may be understood as an ambivalent form of existence—one that operates through the fissures opened by *escrevivência*, illuminating counter-hegemonic forms of existence.

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Information on the use of Artificial Intelligence

a) Search, systematization, and final organization of references: No.
b) Organization of databases and the respective preparation of charts, tables, and graphs: No.
c) Final text review for grammar and spelling improvement, in order to comply with formal language standards: No.

Open Data

All datasets supporting the results of this study are published within the article itself.

Submitted: March 10, 2025.

Approved: November 15, 2025.

Editors: Maria do Livramento Miranda Clementino, Rodrigo José Firmino and Sara Raquel Fernandes Queiroz de Medeiros.

Dossier Editors: Jeroen Johannes Klink, Victor Ramiro and Guillermo Jajamovich.

How to cite: BUSTAMANTE, C. B. A. Between Orality and Writing: Perspectives on Brazilian Reality in the Subjectivation of a Black Sense of Place. *Revista brasileira de estudos urbanos e regionais*. V. 28, E202610en, 2026. https://doi.org/10.22296/2317-1529.rbeur.202610en.