

Refuge in Brazil: An Ethnographic Approach*

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed an exponential growth in the number of refugees received in Brazil, most of whom have settled in São Paulo, one of its major cities. The data presented here were collected as part of a broader ethnographic research on mental health services for immigrants and refugees conducted between 2017 and 2019 in the city of São Paulo. This study is intended to describe refugees' experiences in the city, presenting two major conclusions: the first advocates that to better understand the context of *refuge*, we need to promote fractures in the category's monolithic block; we need to abandon the rigidity prescribed by its legal definition, and instead consider it a dynamic and constantly moving structure. The second argument postulates that we should also abandon the idea of a remissive configuration of the category of refuge, paying special attention to the fact that the confinement of refugees to a temporality in the past can obfuscate our understanding of what they are attempting to communicate. Herein lies the originality of what is presented: the results of the research reveal that a refuge is a relational category, produced not only by State bureaucracies and international organizations, but also by its own subjects. Refugees in Brazil refuse to be limited

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by the bureaucratic categories, and they reformulate its boundaries so new internal and external divisions can be made. These include *refúgio branco* and *refúgio negro*. They also encompass other members otherwise excluded by the bureaucratic category of refuge.

Keywords: Brazil, racism, refugees, São Paulo, temporality.

Refugio en Brasil: un enfoque etnográfico

Resumen: en los últimos años ha habido un crecimiento exponencial de la cantidad de refugiados que recibe Brasil, quienes en su mayoría se han establecido en São Paulo, una de las principales ciudades del país. Los datos aquí presentados fueron recopilados en una investigación etnográfica más amplia sobre servicios de salud mental para inmigrantes y refugiados, realizada entre 2017 y 2019 en dicha ciudad. El estudio, cuyo objetivo fue describir sus experiencias, presenta dos conclusiones principales. La primera plantea que, para entender mejor el contexto del *refugio*, necesitamos promover fracturas en el sentido monolítico de la categoría, abandonar la rigidez que prescribe su definición legal y, en su lugar, considerarla como una estructura dinámica y en constante movimiento. La segunda postula que debemos renunciar también a la idea de una configuración remisiva de la categoría de refugio y prestar especial atención al hecho de que el confinamiento de los refugiados en el pasado puede ofuscar una mejor comprensión de lo que tratan de comunicar. Aquí es donde radica la originalidad de lo que se presenta: los resultados de la investigación revelan que el refugio es una categoría relacional, producida no solo por las burocracias del Estado y de los organismos internacionales, sino también por sus propios sujetos. Los refugiados en Brasil se niegan a ser limitados por las categorías burocráticas y reformulan sus límites para que poder establecer nuevas divisiones internas y externas. Estas incluyen *refúgio branco* y *refúgio negro*, que también abarcan a los demás miembros excluidos de un modo u otro por la categoría burocrática de refugio.

Palabras clave: Brasil, racismo, refugiados, São Paulo, temporalidad.

Refúgio no Brasil: abordagem etnográfica

Resumo: nos últimos anos, tem ocorrido um crescimento exponencial da quantidade de refugiados que o Brasil recebe, os quais, em sua maioria, têm se estabelecido em São Paulo, uma das principais cidades do país. Os dados apresentados aqui foram coletados em uma pesquisa etnográfica mais ampla sobre serviços de saúde mental para imigrantes e refugiados, realizada entre 2017 e 2019 nessa cidade. No estudo, cujo objetivo foi descrever suas experiências, são apresentadas duas conclusões principais. A primeira propõe que, para entender melhor o contexto do *refúgio*, precisamos promover fraturas no

sentido monolítico da categoria, abandonar a rigidez que sua definição legal prescreve e, em seu lugar, considerá-la como uma estrutura dinâmica e em constante movimento. A segunda postula que devemos renunciar também a ideia de uma configuração remissiva da categoria de refúgio e prestar especial atenção ao fato de que o confinamento dos refugiados no passado pode ofuscar uma melhor compreensão do que pretendem comunicar. Aqui é onde se encontra a originalidade do que é apresentado: os resultados da pesquisa revelam que o refúgio é uma categoria relacional, produzida não somente pelas burocracias do Estado e das organizações internacionais, mas também por seus sujeitos. Os refugiados no Brasil se negam a ser limitados pelas categorias burocráticas e reformulam seus limites para poder estabelecer novas divisões internas e externas. Estas incluem *refúgio branco* e *refúgio negro*, que também abrangem os demais membros excluídos de um modo ou de outro pela categoria burocrática de refúgio.

Palavras-chave: Brasil, racismo, refugiados, São Paulo, temporalidade.

“**P**ara brasileiro também é assim” (“It’s the same for Brazilians”). This was the response given by migration assistance workers and volunteers, whether from public entities or private, to many of the complaints I heard from immigrants and refugees (see also Almeida 2020). However, their intention was not to in any way equal those who were complaining and Brazilians in general, but to emphasize the exact opposite: workers and volunteers intended to expose the expedients of the country’s inequality to the newcomers little versed in local contexts. Indeed, it is the same for Brazilians, but definitely not for all of them. The endless waiting for medical appointments or medicines from the public healthcare service, the lack of jobs opportunities or abusive work relations, being subject to racism and racialization (Fanon 2008, 1968; Hochman 2018; Mitchell 2017; Omi and Winnant 2015). None of these difficulties are exclusive to immigrants and refugees and the same inequalities are also part of everyday life for millions of Brazilians. What to do? How are they to access rights in Brazil? Individual rights are at hand but they cannot be accessed by everyone.

The fact that this conventional wisdom was on the tip of many migration service workers’ and volunteers’ tongues says a lot about how refugees are received in Brazil. This paper is intended to describe these conditions pointing out two major arguments in particular: the first advocates that to better understand the context of refuge in Brazil, we need to promote fractures in the category’s monolithic block and abandon the rigidity prescribed by its legal definition, and instead consider it a dynamic and constantly moving structure, like a kinetic sculpture (Branco 2020c, 2020b). I agree

with Machado who describes refuge as a “tense field of definitions that will impact the delimitation of other differences” (2020, 1). The second argument postulates that we should also abandon the idea of a remissive configuration of the refuge category. In this respect, we need to pay special attention to the fact that the theoretical and methodological approach confines refugees to a past temporality – whether in a psychological circumscription such as the category of trauma, or when it considers that the present temporality does not have any agency in producing the experience of refuge – that can obfuscate our better understanding of what refugees are communicating and of what a refugee is.

The data presented here were collected in an ethnographic research on mental health services for immigrants and refugees conducted between 2017 and 2019 in the city of São Paulo, the most populous in Brazil and South America. While undertaking my research, I was able to accompany immigrants and refugees from the poor suburbs to the richest parts of the city, circulating with them in their Portuguese courses; NGOs; hospitals; celebrations; and, of course, their homes. I also served as a volunteer for some migration assistance services, and voluntary work was a key methodological instrument for me to access these contexts, as it was for Cabot (2013). In the same way as for her, this allowed me to approach the workers of those services “from a ground of common rapport that recognized the uncertainties, anxieties, and other challenges that characterize their work” (2013, 455).

200 ■ I accessed those services in 2017 and 2018, when I started to contact a number of psychologists and psychiatrists that worked with this population in São Paulo explaining my interest to conduct research about mental health services for immigrants and refugees. I sent them my research project, and asked for preliminary interviews. It is important to highlight that I had, by then, already conducted research on a psychiatric facility in Brasília, capital of Brazil, which led to one of the psychologists that I was interviewing invite me to help her as a volunteer while I proceeded with my investigation on the NGO she worked for. I received several such invitations and in relation to a number of the services on which I requested permission to conduct research. I reflect on this in other published works (Branco 2020d, 2020c, 2020b, 2018).

In this paper, I chose not to specify the services where I conducted my research for two main reasons. First, my participation in those services was not endorsed by research ethics committees, which is not mandatory in Brazil for investigations whose results are not expected to be published in health journals. All the interviews made were informed and consented, and everyone involved knew that I was an anthropologist researching the matter. I also insisted on sending my research project to the coordinators of all the services precisely because I wanted them to understand my approach to the topic. Yet, this put me in a delicate situation given that anonymity was a condition for me to be allowed to talk to the subjects involved, including the psychologists and psychiatrists. The second reason is that although I was not officially authorized by research ethics committees to conduct my investigation, I believe that

it is an ethical position not to be explicit about the services so that subjects in therapeutic groups and those sharing delicate issues with mental health professionals cannot be easily identified. This applies especially to asylum seekers or refugees, in which case being identified can constitute a threat to their lives.

The majority of this research was conducted with black immigrants and black refugees, such as Haitians, Congolese, Nigerians, Angolans, Togolese, Cameroonians, Guineans, Senegalese and other African immigrants, who lived in poorer neighborhoods of São Paulo, such as Guaianases and Itaquera, on the east side of the city, or even in the tenements or on the streets downtown. These groups obviously have internal differentiations which they insisted on highlighting. However, the findings of my research pointed out that what approximated these groups spoke louder than the things that distanced them as it turned out to be a way to demand attention from the Brazilian state and migrant assistance services for the specific problems, which were, as they often stressed, permeated by the fact that they were not *brancos* (white), or that they were *pretos* (black).

This was their attempt at a creative reformulation of the refuge category: many of the refugees, as I will argue throughout this paper, were not eligible for refugee status according to the official criteria, but they demanded to be considered as such in order to receive access to the same protection and welfare system designed for refugees, such as faster regularization processes and financial aid among other things. Their demands were based on the fact that, as they found out as soon as they got to Brazil, black and brown populations were more prone to be excluded and made vulnerable due to Brazil's racist structure. Thus, the vulnerability they were subject to for not being white in a profoundly racist country would be enough to justify their inclusion in this category and able to enjoy its benefits.

It is important to stress that the racial categories presented in this paper are completely contextual and situated, and they are used here as they were articulated by my interlocutors. Brazil has a complex racial category system based on racial self-declaration. I declare myself as *pardo*, which is frequently translated as "brown," and is a category included in Brazil's non-white classification.¹ However, my racial categorization was never mentioned as a relevant matter by any of my interlocutors. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to reify or crystalize these categories as if they were some sort of universal and univocal reality, easily transposable to any other context. This is explicit in how refugees and migration services workers emphasize that some immigrants and refugees "discover that they are black when they arrive in Brazil," while others, like Syrians, discover that they are white when they arrive in Brazil. This happens because these racial categories start to be articulated when these people are faced with the way in which the concept of race and racism is defined

1 Brazil's racial classification is based on self-declaration, which means that the country's racial composition is based on how people perceive themselves racially. There are officially five racial categories: *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *preto* (black), *amarelo* (yellow), and *indígena* (indigenous). These are disputed categories, which have often been problematized, but they are the state's way to racially classify people.

in the arrival context, which, in this case, is the Brazilian context. This is another finding of this ethnographic research, as it describes processes of discovering oneself as a racialized being in Brazil's migratory context.

Fluidity of Refugeness in Brazil

São Paulo is the most populous city in South America, with a population of approximately 22 million in its metropolitan region, which encompasses 39 municipalities. Located in southeastern Brazil, it has the most poignant economy in the country and it is where immigrants and refugees that come to Brazil tend to live. Officially, the city houses an overall population of 361 201 immigrants (IOM 2019), and concentrated 8.5 % of the refugee claims in Brazil in 2019 (Silva *et al.* 2020) even though it is located 1,064 km from the closest international border. Up until 2015, the city of São Paulo was home to 47 % of all refugees living in Brazil (Cavalcanti *et al.* 2015). Most of these refugees found places to live downtown, where the majority of the migration assistance services are located. However, they frequently end up moving to other parts of the city, the east zone, in particular. Neighborhoods such as Itaquera, Guaianases, Cidade Ademar and Lajeado, in the far eastern region of São Paulo, are neighborhoods that attract large numbers of immigrants and refugees, especially those from Haiti and African countries.

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■ On one of the many cold São Paulo July mornings, I had just arrived at the NGO, in the center of the city, for another *grupo de troca* (exchange group, a name given to the sessions by one of the NGO volunteers) day. These therapeutic groups were attended by immigrants and refugees who were supposedly interested in having group psychological support – and I say “supposedly interested” because since my first visit to the NGO, their lack of interest spoke louder than their presence. Right after me came Beatrice,² a psychologist who studied trauma and was in charge of conducting the group. Her face was a little flushed, which gave away her rush in getting to work. As she prepared coffee, she explained that it was an important day: Cristina, a United Nations High-Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative, would visit the NGO to observe the *grupo de troca*, and since UNHCR sponsored the whole enterprise, nothing could go wrong. What was at stake here was whether the mental health program would continue receiving its financial support or not (and that would also guarantee Beatrice's job).

So far, many *grupo de troca* meetings had been canceled due to the absence of refugees or because there was no coordinator available. One of the strategies adopted to make sure there would be people attending was to schedule it right after the Portuguese classes that were much more assiduously frequented. Yet, that strategy wasn't as effective as the NGO workers imagined, and the *grupo* remained mostly empty, something that Beatrice herself told me when I first met her: the encounters were

2 All names used in this paper were changed in order to preserve identities from people whose histories are presented here.

expected to occur weekly for about two months, which would total eight meetings but this was but the second time that the *grupo* was going to meet. Indeed, in another meeting, attended by a single Syrian refugee, the latter suggested giving us an Arabic class to replace the group's activities. In the six other opportunities, the group had no activities due to the lack of interested refugees or to Beatrice's unavailability.

However, this would not be the case on that day. The *grupo* could not be cancelled, as it was imperative for Beatrice (and all the volunteers available) to ensure that there were participants who met the requirements that the mental health program financier stipulated; that is, people who were refugees or eligible asylum seekers. This was already a problem because although many of them were immigrants, they were not officially refugees nor did they meet the eligibility criteria to be entitled to refugee status. In addition to ensuring that the *grupo* had a large audience, which would attest to the success of the endeavor, there was a need for a great number of refugees or people eligible for the refugee status. However, on the list of interested people for that day's *grupo*, there was a great number of Haitians, and that would cause problems: "UNHCR's money is not to be used with Haitians, they're not official refugees," she told me as she head towards her office to leave her belongings.

That concern permeated the whole day, and Beatrice drafted several volunteers to help her recruit "non-Haitians" for the *grupo de troca*. As the scheduled time approached, Elena, a volunteer at the NGO, told me, almost cheering: "I got a Togolese, a Syrian, a Congolese and a Nigerian!" Yet, out of the six men and three women at the activity, five were Haitians. Three participants were late, all of them Haitians. The questions Beatrice asked were initially in French, which some of the Haitians women did not understand because they only spoke Haitian *Krèyol* and a Haitian man had to translate for them. The UNHCR representative sat across from Beatrice, behind the Nigerian refugee, and translated what was being said for him also. Beatrice's face turned more intensely red, and her voice oscillated and was being easily surmounted by parallel conversations.

The passage above describes a session which took place a few months before Beatrice was replaced by another psychologist at the NGO and the subsequent end of the mental health program weeks later. This episode demonstrates how the categories of refuge and immigration, plagued by manipulation in terms of their semantic itinerary, are not a univocal monolithic block. Beatrice did not think it was necessary, during her daily activities, to consider the category of refugee in all its legal technicalities. Haitian immigrants frequented the NGO and benefited widely from its services, including those from the mental health program – even though, despite being one of the groups with the greatest number of refugee claims in Brazil (a strategy for fast regularization in the country) only two Haitian nationals have been granted the refugee status since 1951 (Brazil's Justice Ministry 2018).

Nevertheless, for UNHCR, responsible for selecting services interested to receive its funding and for the definition of which subjects these services should assist, the refugee category did not include Haitians. According to the criteria

provided by the High Commissioner, which Brazil ratifies, any person who has not been forced into displacement due to armed conflicts or to well-funded fear of persecution by motive of race, religion, nationality, political activity or participation in social groups could not be assured the right to international protection from a nation-state different from the one where he or she was born, or the right to be assisted with resources from UNHCR. Brazilian law implements a broad interpretation of eligibility criteria, granting refugee status to those who were victims of systematic and widespread human rights violation. However, Haitians, in general, did not fit in because the poverty and bad living conditions experienced in Haiti are allegedly not considered systematic and widespread human rights violation. There are deep political implications here, when one compares this to the country's recent change of orientation towards the Venezuelan immigrants (Branco 2020a).

When UNHCR was not present, Haitians were refugees, which highlights the category's semantic and practical flexibility. What made Haitians refugees in some contexts were not the legal details involved in defining the eligibility criteria – or in other words, the configurations of their migration experiences confined to the past – but the fact that they presently needed to access humanitarian aid, and this was defined by the structures of their contexts of arrival.

204 ■ Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the creative co-production of the refugee category by Haitians. If UNHCR, the Brazilian government and the organizations assigned by them to execute migration assistance services, such as the NGO in which those events took place, have a fix understanding on the criteria to define what is and what is not (or what can be and what cannot be) a refugee, the subjects of the refuge could not disagree more. Hence, Haitians forced their presence among the population designed to receive assistance which was supposed to be exclusively for refugees. Even if they were not refugees to the eyes of the bureaucracy responsible for defining refugees, they demanded to be considered as such in order to receive access to the same assistance and political attention that official refugees were granted. This was due to the fact that, as they found out as soon as they got to Brazil, black and brown populations were more prone to be excluded and made vulnerable by Brazil's racist structure. Thus, their vulnerability caused by the fact they were not white in a profoundly racist country would be enough to justify their inclusion in this category, along with access to its benefits. The mobilization of different temporalities of suffering was used as an important tool to do this, as is described in the following section.

Temporalities of Suffering: Prospecting Trauma, Finding Racism

The *grupos de troca* were verbalization groups inserted in a context of multiplication of “new approaches that could glimpse at the psychosocial dimension of suffering and could take into account the human subjectivity and social inclusion through citizenship and autonomy” (Benevides *et al.* 2010, 128, original in Portuguese) brought

to light by Brazil's 2001 psychiatric reform. Those groups are intended to potentiate "the dialogical exchanges, the sharing of experiences and the improvement of adaptation to the individual and collective way of life" (2010, 128). In our first encounter, Beatrice said that her *a priori* universal hypothesis for why refugees came to her for help was that they were suffering from some level of trauma associated to their displacement or their migration conditions.³ The NGO website, for example, described the goal of the mental health program as "to contribute to refugees' and asylum seekers' social integration by means of reducing psychological traumas and emotional disorders, taking into account their migration and cultural contexts."

However, during the *grupo de troca*, one could not directly ask the participants about these traumas: if such subjects were to be broached, it should be by the refugees' initiative. This was an emphatic recommendation Beatrice made to her volunteers: they were forbidden to ask refugees "how they ended up in Brazil" in a direct equivalence between their migration processes and traumatic experiences. Thus, the questions asked at the *grupo* sessions were about their difficulties in general. The answers orbited three major issues: their difficulties in learning Portuguese, their experiences of racism, and their difficulties in finding employment (most of time these matters were interconnected). They did not bring up their personal histories, nor their past sufferings or traumas: they would rather talk about their tribulations in the present tense.

During the *grupo de trocas* session I described earlier, for example, Beatrice asked questions about the participants' lives. Although the expectation was to find out about traumatic experiences of displacement, the questions were mainly about misfortunes and sufferings that they had been through and were asked via a general approach, as explained above. The answers focused on three major issues: their difficulties in learning Portuguese and accessing free Portuguese courses, the complications of finding employment – especially when competing with Brazilians –, and their experience of racism. When asked if they had been subject to any form of discrimination, a Haitian man answered:

I have. Once, I went to a job interview in a restaurant at Praça da Luz. I arrived and said, "I came for the interview, to be a waiter." The woman looked at me from head to toe, and told me to go away because there was no vacancy for me, that I should leave. I know it wasn't because I'm a foreigner, I know it was because I'm black. There are these two types of discrimination, right? Racism and racial slur. I've suffered racial slur. (Pierre, Haitian man, *Grupo de Troca*, July 2017, original in Portuguese)

There is a differentiation between the temporalities mobilized by refugees – especially those who were inhabitants of the macro continent of the black refuge – and by Brazilian nationals – especially those involved in any kind of

3 For a more detailed and nuanced approach on the matter, see also Haydu *et al.* 2020; Galina *et al.* 2017; Martin Goldberg, and Silveira 2018.

migration assistance work: instead of exchanging past traumas, refugees brought their present sufferings for the *troca*. The definition itself of what a refugee is and of the eligibility criteria for refugee status, for example, allude to people who were forced into migration by a disrupting event in the past, and only if escaping from armed conflicts and persecutions of any sort. That turns the constitution of what I call refugeness – the very symbolic substance of what a refugee is made of – into something allocated primarily as remitting to past events and contexts, enclosing these people in a perspective that privileges past temporalities to refer to their experiences. Under this perspective, the displacement itself would be permeated and motivated by experiences of suffering that would belong to a past temporal dimension: humanitarian aid and refugee status would be conditioned to experiencing suffering at their departure contexts in a “conceptualization of the past event as a painful scar” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 22).

Liisa Malkki makes a brief reflection on the matter arguing that in her research with Hutu refugees in Tanzania, their stories were often disregarded; they were frequently treated as being prone to exaggerations, dishonest and unworthy of trust.⁴ Thus, camp administrators considered that to get to the “pure facts” that constituted those people – as a medical history of lesions and diseases, or a political history of persecution that referred to their displacement from Burundi to Tanzania – it was necessary to discard their history of past suffering in an “active process of dehistoricization” that was simultaneously a process of depoliticization.

For to speak about the past, about the historical trajectory that had led the Hutu as refugees into the western Tanzanian countryside, was to speak about politics. This could not be encouraged by the camp administrators (whether the Ministry of Home Affairs, TCRS, or UNHCR); political activism and refugee status were mutually exclusive here, as in international refugee law more generally. (Malkki 1996, 385)

Unlike Malkki’s argument here about the Tanzanian context, the experience of *refúgio negro* demonstrates that it is the reference to the past temporality that, in fact, vouches the refugeness (the eligibility not only for the legal status of the refugee condition, but also for humanitarian aid) in the Brazilian context. The suffering located in the past is what is expected as a political capital that justifies humanitarian intervention, because this past suffering can be neutral to the present political context, which deeply involves workers faced with these complaints on a daily basis. The depoliticization of the requests made by black refugees occurs in an attempt to neutralize aspects of present temporality that profoundly implicate the offer of aid and the workers involved in offering it, for the political aspects of the conformation

4 This is analogous to the Brazilian context: attesting their stories as true was a crucial part not only of eligibility interviews, but of social assistance interviews for humanitarian aid as well. Knowing if a refugee or asylum seeker was lying or not about their economic condition defined whether he or she received food items or financial aid, for example. Mistrust is a cornerstone of the relationship between humanitarian aid workers and refugees.

of refugees' experiences lie in the present. If the services expect to find a hyper-historical subject, one whose suffering only exists in the past – a political temporality that can be neutral to them –, immigrants and refugees, especially those from the *refúgio negro*, bring their present-continuous hardships, pulling the services out from their self-granted place of political neutrality and demand the recognition of adversities that implicate them in the experience of the *refúgio negro* as a present tense suffering.

Refúgio branco and refúgio negro

It was nearing the end of September of 2017, and Jean was at Al-Janiah, a famous Palestinian restaurant located in central São Paulo. The restaurant, an important space of political activism and resistance – especially among those involved with the migration theme in São Paulo – would that night host a debate about access to housing by immigrants and refugees, an important matter for a group that frequently ends up living in the *favelas* (shanty towns), clandestine occupations in abandoned buildings, or even on the streets.

Jean, a Congolese refugee that had already lived for a few months in one of these occupations in central São Paulo, was asked to present his considerations on his own experience about housing conditions for refugees to dozens of migrants' rights political activists and migration assistance services workers. However, he started his speech by asking whether he could project a movie about the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As the projection failed, he began to say in a frustrated voice:

I wish I could start by showing you a little bit of what is happening back in my country because nobody shows anything about it here in Brazil. Congo has been at war for twenty years now. We have handicapped children working in mines, raped women... when the Syrian boy died, the one from the picture on the beach, it appeared in every newspaper in Brazil. Every single one. But nobody knows what is happening in Congo, that's why I'd like to show you this video. But it doesn't matter, I'll just tell you about it. (Jean, Congolese refugee in Brazil since 2015, lecture in a public event, September 2017, original in Portuguese)

His speech, which was supposed to address the difficulties faced by immigrants and refugees in accessing decent housing conditions, started by referring to a past temporality. His intention was to highlight how much the political situation in his country was largely ignored, even though there was no reason for this. If wars are wars, the dead are dead, and suffering is suffering – and all these categories have monosemantic and univocal characteristics, supposedly with regular topographic incidence on all immigrants and refugees in Brazil –, there were no reasons for us to know so little about the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Beginning his speech in this way also underlined that, in Jean's perspective, there was no way to approach the housing conditions of refugees in Brazil without comprehending

the conflict in his country, or the reason we knew so little about it. If we used a past temporality to determine eligibility or lack thereof to a certain humanitarian aid and, ultimately, to determine what Jean was (a refugee in Brazil), why did this past temporality acquire an unequal topographic importance between Syrians and Congolese refugees? Why did we know about the suffering experienced in Syria and by Syrians, and not that relating to Congo and the Congolese? Why did Syrian refugees end up in regularly rented houses, while Congolese refugees ended up living in *favelas*, clandestine occupations or on the streets?

Jean, who has been in the country for about four years, told us that he has “found out about racism in Brazil.” His speech, then, started to move towards the present temporality, as he told the audience that people here stood up from their bus seats when he got on, crossed the streets upon seeing him, and looked at his suspiciously. He highlighted that the experience of racism was profoundly connected to accessing decent housing conditions:

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To me, refugee is an UN category, and it is incomplete... Here in Brazil, we have *refúgio branco* (white refuge) and *refúgio negro* (black refuge). Everybody prefers Syrian refugees. Syria has been at war for six years; Congo has been at war for twenty! Days ago, I heard of a mother who was raped after her son was burned in front of her. You don't have that in Syria! Syrians, they become merchants, restaurant owners... Africans and Haitians become waiters, construction workers... these things, and that's if we can get a job at all. There are no Syrians at the occupation, only Haitians, Congolese, and Nigerians. Africans and Haitians are the ones that end up on the streets... so, we have *refúgio branco* and *refúgio negro* in Brazil. Things are different for blacks. That's why no one knows anything about what's happening in Congo.” (Jean, Congolese refugee in Brazil since 2015, lecture in a public event, September 2017, original in Portuguese)

Therefore, the experience of being categorized as black determines a particular refuge experience in Brazil. The Congolese refuge, who is black, is qualitatively different from the Syrian refuge, who is white, which brings the former closer to groups and individuals not eligible for refugee status, such as Haitians and African immigrants.

Other examples can be drafted to illustrate this division. During a Portuguese class at Guaianases, a poor suburb of São Paulo, a Haitian student was presenting a seminar on “human relations,” a theme that he had voluntarily chosen. Stressing that he had started to perceive racism in his work relations, in a conversation with a classmate, he wondered about the reason for the constant demands for him to learn Portuguese faster:

Ricardo: I don't know why they ask us to learn Portuguese. Brazilians want us to speak Portuguese because they think we are speaking ill of them, but I don't see them asking the Japanese to do the same.

Perkly: Oh, but I know the reason...

Ricardo: What is it?

Perkly: It's because I'm black, you're black...

Ricardo: Yes. That's why I have no Brazilian friends. That's why I don't have any white friends. (Conversation between Ricardo and Perkly, two Haitians in a Portuguese class in which I was participating, November 2018, original in Portuguese)

It is also possible to draw approximations between the experiences of being black and being a refugee in Brazil, superimposing or juxtaposing such categories as unassimilable from an assimilationist perspective. Beatrice, for example, told me that they always conducted a racism awareness activity addressing their volunteer workers given that “all volunteers were white” (and that was not accurate, as the NGO had both black volunteers and black refugees working as such). This presupposed a cleavage in relation to the public served: the activity was necessary to avoid potentially racist attitudes from volunteers, mostly white, which is only plausible if there is a majority of black refugees assisting. Even if there were black volunteers, the division was clear: white people help, black people are helped. This is the exact particular experience of the black refuge shared by subjects at the margins of the refuge category: the racialization, the racial prejudice and the possible mobilizations of the race and racism categories.

Zelaya points out how the elaboration of the idea of race is operated in relation to these racial categories articulated in Brazil, arguing that “many black immigrants and refugees affirm they had not thought about the racial matter before arriving in Brazil” (Zelaya 2016, 424, original in Portuguese). Discovering oneself as a black person – or being invented and invent oneself as a black person – is a construction of which the basis is not so closely related to the univocal character of being black (or white), as it is to experiencing racialized relations and processes. Racism presents itself to these immigrants and refugees in several different ways: by the assumption of vulnerabilities and a pre-modern mind and culture; by the construction of an extensive victimhood that encompasses the identities of these people; by the peripheralization and the bad housing and living conditions of those considered unassimilable; by the low quality job vacancies available to these people, and the inference that there are groups that are more suitable for certain types of work, such as Haitians and Africans who are often identified as more apt for manual labor; by the contact with anti-racist political discourses formulated by Brazilian black activists, which also provides them with instruments to qualify their experience as racial prejudice and react to that, among many other things. And all these life conditions are also shared with local excluded communities, such as black Brazilians, indigenous people and lower class workers: all of them unassimilable under this excluding perspective.

Having different subjective experiences, the subjects from the *refúgio negro* – which includes not only those eligible for refugee status, but also Haitians and others from various African countries – therefore demand qualitatively different answers in order to address the specificity of their experiences. Through the complaints about the racism suffered, refugees highlight the fact that they notice the internal fractures

in the monolithic block of the refugee category, and the *refúgio negro* denies its political neutrality and the expectation of speechlessness directed towards it through the non-recognition of its imprisonment in a past temporality. This setting happens under different temporalities of suffering: if refugeness in Brazil is supposed to be defined by means of past suffering – traumas (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) and the well-founded fear of persecution for various reasons –, the allocation of racism and racialization among the hardships that define those who will have a better consecution of their lives in Brazil demonstrates that the present sufferings pointed out by the subjects of the black refugee is also crucial to the understanding of this scenario and to comprehend what a refugee is or will be when in Brazil.

Seyferth argues that “those who are distinguished through national or ethnic identities based on cultural differences, or those that form minority groups, are disturbing elements in a national society that wants to be univocal” (2008, 3, original in Portuguese). In an univocal conception of what Brazilian national society would be, minority groups – or those distinguished through national or ethnic identities based on cultural differences – are a disturbance. However, not all these groups can be considered as such, nor can they be considered as such on an equitable basis. Some immigrants and refugees will never be eligible to a certain idea of citizenship, even though they speak Portuguese, are employed or professionally qualified (a commonplace reproduced to exhaustion to justify the economic failure of certain immigrants and refugees groups) not only because they will never achieve equality in comparison to the legal status of a Brazilian national, but also because there are certain logics engineered in Brazilian contexts that produce Others – and otherness – among Brazilians themselves, like black Brazilians, indigenous people, lower class workers, women, LGBTQI+ and many more. In other words, legal statuses become a detail because the mobilization of equality does not encompass these groups even if they have the right to be encompassed, and that structures an exclusionary inclusion: they are included in an exclusionary and segregating society.

Zelaya, reflecting on the intersections between rights assurance and humanitarianism, tells us about the centrality of the category of victim for refugees, especially as a strategy to demand rights. She argues that “the victim status bestows recognition and suits to move away from invisibility” (2018, 98, original in Portuguese) which would make the connection between the notions of victim and of citizen patent. The author reports that, in her research itinerary, she was surprised by the fact that it was the demonstration of some sort of suffering which granted immigrants recognition, rather than the contribution they could make to the country (100, original in Portuguese). Political significance was reached through the demanding of rights based on the expression of suffering, which would mobilize support networks and provoke governments to adopt urgent measures.

Hence, this means that when a refugee evokes a story of suffering story, even though it is a story from the past, he or she is also saying something about the present and is trying to trigger present tense answers to present political demands. In other

words, it is definitely necessary to know about the war in Congo just as much as we know about the war in Syria or any other configuration that forces people into displacement. But if one points out that the years of war in Syria are worth more than the years of war in Congo when it comes to granting political recognition and relevance, and accessing better life conditions, it is because this difference forms itself in the context of arrival, and it is permeated with what is perceived by refugees as racism. In this light, several issues faced in Brazil by those encompassed by the category of *refúgio negro* are made invisible as well.

Conclusions

Every time refugees speak about the past, they are also speaking about the present. The attempts of Brazilian nationals and supranational agencies imbued in establishing parameters of eligibility for refugee status and specific humanitarian aid to confine the experience of refugeeness to the past can also be seen as attempts to neutralize political and structural aspects of what constitutes the experience of immigrants and refugees in Brazil, subsequently neutralizing the implications for UN agencies, migration assistance services and their workers. When a choice to privilege a certain temporality is made, it ignores and makes certain aspects of what constitutes refugees in Brazil invisible: if we take past temporalities as the substance of what it means to be a refugee, considering it the only temporality which has agency in delimiting the refugee category, we lose sight of crucially important factors.

One of these aspects of the present temporality observed in the Brazilian context is racism and racialization: refugees and black immigrants, the inhabitants of *refúgio negro*, discover that they are black in Brazil – and that does not mean that they were not aware of phenotypic characteristics before the migration process, but that these characteristics become racialized and start to determine their lives in a practical way once they arrive in the country. This machinery also operates for what is considered *refúgio branco*. Japanese immigrants and Syrian refugees are brought as examples of this, and, we may say, discover themselves categorized as white for their more successful consecution of migration experiences in Brazil in comparison to Africans and Haitians. The monolithic block of the legal category of refugee, then, fractures into two major blocks: a black refugeeness, which encompasses not only those eligible for the legal status, but also Haitians and Africans from different countries and Brazilian nationals categorized as unassimilable according to a Brazilian national identity desired as univocal, permeated with and defined by racism. It also encompasses a white refugeeness, which includes immigrants not eligible for the legal status of refugees but prone to succeed when in Brazil due to the country's racist machineries and structures.

This demonstrates an assimilationist framework of migration in Brazil, and highlights that some individuals are considered ineligible not only for refugee status, but for the full fruition of citizenship. Thus, it turns out to be an exclusionary

inclusion, or an assimilation of subjects as unassimilable. Assimilation, as many authors have pointed out, is frequently synonymous to extermination (Fanon 2008, 1968; Nascimento 1978), but that does not mean that black immigrants and refugees are speechless and have no agency at all in this choreography. By denouncing how the conditions of their present temporality have a huge relevance in their lives, they simultaneously deny the political neutrality expected from them and their voicelessness and lack of agency in defining how refugeeness is also determined by structures involved in the context of arrival. This pulls UN agencies and civil society services out of their self-granted place of political neutrality in which only past sufferings and conditions would be the definers of the hardships faced by refugees in their lives. It demands recognition of the adversities that implicate these very services in their present time sufferings. Thus, refugees and immigrants from *refúgio negro* reinvent the category of refugee and tension their relationship with these assistance services and supranational agencies in order to claim political relevance for their present demands. Finally, this demonstrates the creative facet of the appropriation of the refuge category by black immigrants and black refugees. Not only do they impose internal distinctions to the alleged monolithic block of refuge, if we are to consider the perspective of international organizations such as UNHCR or of the Brazilian state, but they force the category's boundaries in order to make it accommodate more people than it was originally designed to.

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