

Research Article



The not-so-empty lot – Ethnographic experience and reflections visiting Cariri’s former concentration camp area

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While housing more than 70.000 drought refugees in 1932 in the Cariri Region, in Ceará State (Northeast Brazil), Buriti concentration camp's history is mostly unknown both locally and nationally. At the turn of the twentieth century, Northeast Brazil suffered some of the most severe drought periods ever registered, commonly known as the Terrible Years. Groups of migrant families from the inlands were forced to seek refuge relocating towards the coastal and capital cities of the region. As a response to this state of emergency, local and national governments dealt with the migrant crisis, culminating in the construction of temporary concentration camps in 1915 and again in 1932 serving both as an aid resource and a mechanism of control of the population by the state. While officially called "concentration camps," it is important to notice how these facilities were built and conceptualized before the Second World War. Despite the strong connotation of the wording that was later connected to Nazi Germany, Ceará's camps were not extermination facilities. This "coincidence" should be a reminder of the more complex and nuanced understanding of "camps" and the different iterations of these kinds of facilities through the course of history. Ceará's camps mobilized and sheltered more than one hundred and fifty thousand people. Buriti camp was the largest of all facilities precisely because it was located in Cariri, a more fertile area in the region that was also already known as a pilgrimage site. Once the droughts were over, camps' ephemeral facilities were dismantled, but the long-lasting effects of these physical and social structures are still present in the lives of populations from Northeastern Brazil—known as *Nordestinos*—today. This, despite attempts by many to forget them, as camps are both not yet properly memorialized and legitimized by the state, nor do they get broadly unveiled or disclosed in Brazilian historical documents and literature.

In this short essay, I will share my ethnographic experience and reflections after visiting Buriti camp's space with a local guide, James Brito, while also contextualizing the Ceará concentration camp's history from 1932, and raising questions about memory and memorialization, power and place. In doing so, I engage in discussions related to a broader view of the 'geographies of the camp' (Minca, 2015), where camps' facilities are not solely considered as spaces of exception and bare life (Agamben, 1998). This essay confronts how this designation [concentration camps] is regularly and solely associated to the idea of killing centers after the Second World War, despite previous homonymous spatial configurations that served different purposes. I engage with a more extensive understanding of the camp as a biopolitical instrument that also "evolves according to changing territorial and political needs" (Katz, 2016). Beyond being used and understood only during a state of emergency, the consequences and long-lasting effects of the camps in national and local scales can also establish and shift certain geopolitical orders. Ceará's camps were used as early instruments of modern urbanization being a mechanism to isolate and control unwanted groups of migrants while creating landmarks of expanded territorial control of the Brazilian inlands by certain social and political groups. While Ceará's camps' histories are in an explicit dialogue with modern practices of urbanization in the early 1900s, the erasure of these structures' physical traces and lack of official governmental acknowledgement or memorialization of these places today can be considered as a current (and continuing) top-down urbanization method.

Buriti in Muriti

After taking the overnight bus from the capital city Fortaleza to innerstate Crato, in Ceará's Cariri region, northeast Brazil, I was introduced to James Brito, a psychopedagogue and advisor to the city's Councilor, who was designated by Crato's secretariat of culture as my local guide. James Brito was born and raised in Crato and held the city's history close to his heart. He told me that the house he grew up in was really close to where Buriti concentration camp was once located and offered me a car ride to the area. Today, the neighborhood is called Muriti. James explained that originally the area was called Buriti, like the concentration camp, because of the abundance of Buriti Palm trees in the region. But precisely because of the former camp and the "need" for the neighborhood to untangle itself from its complicated past, Buriti became "Muriti", generally there is no memory left of what was once a 70.000 people drought refugee center between the years of 1932 and 1933 (*Relatório da Comissão Médica*, 1933, p.136).



Figure 1: Nossa Senhora de Fátima statue, in Crato, CE. Source: Author, July 2019.



Figure 2: Padre Cícero statue, in Juazeiro do Norte, CE. Souce: Author, July 2019.

James drove to the top of the hill, and we stopped at an enormous parking lot right by a 38-meter-high *Nossa Senhora de Fátima* (Our Lady of Fatima) statue (**figure 1**). “This is the city’s newest acquisition. It was recently inaugurated in 2018”, he said. The area became very popular because of the deeds of a Priest (known in that region as a saint) called Padre Cicero (1844-1934), who lived in what is the largest city of Cariri Region today, called Juazeiro do Norte. Over 2.5 million people travel annually to Juazeiro to visit Padre Cicero’s former church, his grave, and his 27-meter statue (**figure 2**) (Vasconcelos, 2011). The Cariri region is also well known as an “oasis” in the middle of a very dry and hot region of the country with bustling commercial activities, significant agricultural production, and cultural life (Ab’Saber, 1999, p.30). While Juazeiro represents the largest and most known city in the Cariri Region today, it started as a former neighborhood of

Crato. The rapid growth and popularity of Juazeiro, especially due to religious pilgrimage, continues to represent a threat for Crato today—and Our Lady of Fatima’s statue symbolizes this dispute. “People come to Muriti Neighborhood today because of Our Lady Fatima’s statue, but no one knows about the concentration camp that was once placed just a few meters away from this new pilgrimage site.” James questioned the city’s investment in the statue, and raised queries not only related to the lack of visibility to the Camp’s history but also its erasure. The performance of building Crato’s image on this new pilgrimage site of Our Lady Fatima’s statue is also a quest for creating a certain identity of a city and its community that is detached from—and in this case, built over—its past stories. Despite the lack of official acknowledgement or proper memorialization of Buriti camp by the government and local citizenry, this space continues to hold a special significance until today: while temporary, a camp facility always leaves a mark on the territory and its population as a permanent space of exception (Agamben, 1998). The concept of exception, however, as Katz explains, is continuously changing, as it is aligned and progressing with new political and geographical demands (Katz, 2016). Building concentration camps in Ceará state was the dominant strategy for territorial occupation and urbanization in the early twentieth century. Today, the state no longer builds nor uses concentration camps, but precisely by officially ignoring or erasing former camps’ spaces, they once again become a symbol and example of top-down political power in force. If the camp was once a tool for exclusion and control of certain groups of the population in the early twentieth century, today’s territorial and political needs are different and so are the uses and expectations for the former camps’ area. The erasure of these camp sites’ physical traces and their lack of memorialization is as much of an urbanization process and strategy as building these facilities once were.



Figures 3 and 4: Photos of Buriti Concentration Camp, 1933. Source: Relatório da Comissão Médica, 1933, no page.

When the Buriti concentration camp was established by the government in 1932, the chosen location of the camp reflected an already-known influx of people. Drought migrants were attracted to the facility in hopes of gaining access to governmental aid and support. Buriti camp was one of the seven camp facilities spread across Ceará’s territory in 1932 built for the internally displaced refugees from the droughts (popularly known as

flagelados). Camps were justified through humanitarian rhetoric and highly influenced by the local elites. These wealthy groups were afraid of the masses of ragged and undisciplined migrants “spreading their bodies contaminated with diseases of various kinds, [...] this poor population that blended with citizens from Fortaleza, invading their homes with their pleas, exposing everyone to their illnesses” (Neves, 1995, p. 96), the concentration camps in Northeast Brazil worked as barriers to the city. Camps were placed on the outskirts of the capital city Fortaleza, or strategically situated in close proximity to existing railroad stations in the inlands of the state. Camps were both a local and national effort. While advertised to the population as a space for aid, two of the main goals of the 1932 camps were to isolate and control drought migrants, but also to mobilize cheap labor force for public works in the North and Northeastern regions of the country (Morales, 2002, p. 139). Camps needed to be connected to a source of public works, especially large infrastructure-building projects (Neves, 1995, p. 108). This strategy of gathering manpower through the concentration camps defines how building infrastructure in Northeast Brazil was (and continues to be) as much a social as a physical construction, as much a project of nation-building as an effort to discipline and control parts of the population. While camp facilities no longer exist, it is possible to see the legacy of the *flagelados*’ works in roads, dams and other infrastructure projects across the state.

Over the course of one year (1932–33) Ceará’s concentration camps sheltered over 150,000 people. Buriti was the largest of them all, hosting a little less than half of these *flagelados*¹. Out of the seven facilities from 1932, only one, the Campo do Patú, in the city of Senador Pompeu, remain partially standing, being currently considered for state-level landmarking. In 2019, the municipality of Senador Pompeu publicly declared the camp as a municipal heritage site. The memory of Ceará’s concentration camps today, being these spaces with little to no physical traces left, are quickly disappearing, but the consequences of these ephemeral spatial constructions and urban policies are still very present in Nordestinos’ lives: from social class discrepancies to racial prejudices connected to living and work opportunities of former *flagelados*, and so forth.

Each one of the seven facilities had different sizes, rules, and characteristics. In **figures 3 and 4**, it is possible to recognize Buriti camp’s organization, also described in the report from the *Commission of Medical Assistance and Prophylaxis to the Northeastern Flagelados* from 1933: “[Buriti camp was] constituted of a considerable number of palhoças [stick shacks] organized in continuous rows, defining large and uniform streets” (*Relatório da Comissão Médica*, 1933, p.136). There were three doctors and four guards hired to assist refugees at Buriti Camp, and one rudimentary hospital facility with more or less one hundred beds available (*Relatório da Comissão Médica*, 1933, p. 136). Medical reports from the Camp registered more than five hundred deaths per month:

“There was an emergency hospital, the most rudimentary possible, and that facility could shelter about one hundred people. In order to judge how deficient the hospital was, it is sufficient to say that at the camp’s mortuary there were a few dozen corpses daily. The obituary had a monthly average of 500 cases.”

(*Relatório da Comissão Médica*, 1933, p.136)

While predicted to be hosting large groups of people, the numbers at Buriti Camp were unprecedented, resulting in the lack of basic conditions to support these groups in need. There were, however, less expressive but alternative refuge spaces for newcomers who knew about them, such as the self-governed socio-political-religious community of *Caldeirão de Santa Cruz do Deserto*. “Most people would come to Buriti because they had heard about the camp and thought of it as a source of official governmental support. Nevertheless, in their long journey, some—very few—of them learned about other opportunities...” explained James. While places such as Caldeirão might have some local recognition and visibility today, the vast majority of people would be sent directly to the concentration camps. Buriti Camp, however, is still hardly known, let alone recognized. In 1932, it was part of the government’s plan and local elites to attract people to the camp’s facility in order to control them, both through isolation and specific labor assignments in public works. Secluding *flagelados* was a particularly important tool in making these large groups of people invisible to society. This reaffirmed that *flagelados* were not only unimportant to social and political circles, but more importantly, out of sight. In 2022 it seems like the government’s plan is to continue to ignore this part of history as well: A “Multidão de Ninguéns” (a crowd of no-ones), as James calls attention to local researcher’s Ronald de Figueiredo e Albuquerque Filho expression designating the *flagelados*’ situation (Albuquerque Filho, 2015)².

James drove further down the hill and stopped at a soccer field (**figure 5**) right by a large avenue, called Padre Cícero’s Avenue. He pointed at the field and the empty lot on the other side of the road (**figure 6**) and said: “This is it.”



Figure 5: Soccer field in Muriti neighborhood, Crato, CE. Source: Author, June 2019.



Figure 6: Empty lot in Muriti neighborhood, Crato, CE. Source: Author, June 2019.

We stopped by the soccer field and James looked for where crosses used to be placed near the road. Nothing. “This area here [between the road and the field] was the cemetery where they would bury the dead. They were buried in common trenches, as numbers were so high. There used to be some crosses here by the road but when the road was officially built, they were taken down...” The road that passes between the soccer field and the empty lot James pointed out is the main highway connecting Crato to Juazeiro do Norte—two of the most important cities in the region.

There is an old sugar factory in the background, which today is a paper factory. James explained how these lands at Muriti neighborhood used to belong to just a few wealthy families, and how he even suspected and speculated that the choice of placement of Buriti Camp in that location was an arranged deal between the owners renting their lots to the government at that time. James pointed out to the chimney of the factory, asked for me to take a photo of him (**figure 7**), and said “this is how you recognize the precise location of the camp. The factory has always been here, and the camp was located exactly in the lots in front of it. You can even recognize this chimney in photographs from the 1930s!” A few days later, I found the photo James was referring to in the archives from IFOCS/DNOCS (Federal Superintendence of Drought Works), in Fortaleza (**figure 8**). The photo was taken during an official medical expedition to Buriti in 1933. In the photo, the medical team is posing in the front row, wearing white coats or suits. Some residents are standing near them, right in front of the shacks where they take shelter. In a building in the back and to the left of this construction there is a white mark on the paper. It is hard to say if this is a scratch on the old and worn-down report’s page, or if this blurry form is part of the picture. There are no other copies of the report available. I decided to stick with James’ story.

The difficulties of researching and unveiling the concentration camp's histories are many. How to deal with memory in the built environment when there are no physical constructions anymore? How to research a place that is no longer on the map? Camps are ephemeral in nature, thus, built to be forgotten. Camps are part of the path, but not its destiny. "History" often overrules the multiple stories behind it. Ceará's concentration camps were for some, temporary structures of hope. For others, camps were and continue to be permanent spaces of power. The memory of camps' spaces lies in the stories that are passed on through different generations: the few documents that survive, the little traces one can track. The memories of the camps are also subject to who and how they are told or enacted.



Visit to the former Campo do Buriti in July 2019. In the photo James pointing at the factory's chimney. Source: Author, July 2019.



Figure 8: Campo do Buriti, 1932. Source: Relatório da Comissão Médica, 1933, no page.

We stayed for some time looking at the empty lot. Besides the picture with the chimney in the background and James pointing at it proudly, I also took a few more shots. I told him I felt silly by taking photos of what supposedly is “nothing”, and James reacted ironically: “You are taking photos of nothing where it used to gather a *crowd of no-ones*”. It seemed hard to conceive how that land, which used to house so many people, today sits empty. I thought about the dead bodies and remains mixed with asphalt and all the layers that exist under that road.

Today, both the Our Lady Fatima’s statue and the “not-so-empty” lot attempts to manufacture a certain identitary role and purpose to Muriti’s neighborhood purposely ignoring the area’s former use as a camp. The statue tries building a new sense of place, but as Dolores Hayden explains, this cannot be done overnight. At the same time, the not-so-empty lot while holding specific memories and history, is also no longer physically there. The “power of place” for Hayden, is precisely its complex and multiple processes; the intricate relationships among history, place-specific memory, and the preservation of the urban landscape (Hayden, 1995, p. 227). Building a sense of place is both a biological response to the surrounding physical environment and a cultural creation” (Hayden, 1995, p. 16). Building a sense of “place”, therefore, is constructing a certain identity. The concept of place and identity when bound to locality can be both used as a tool for power and also for empowerment (Hall, 1990). At the same time, identity is also an ever-changing construction that depends on context and relies precisely on these discussions of power (Said, 1979). Today’s Lady of Fatima Statue is as much of a tool for building a certain sense of place and identity in Muriti’s neighborhood, as the implementation of the concentration camp facility once was in that same area almost one hundred years ago. Furthermore, the not-so-empty lot of the former concentration camp builds a similarly powerful message regarding the identity of that place that persists. Understanding these spaces as places with their own identities, one is also helping to empower that site’s

history. My photo of “*nothing* where it used to gather a *crowd of no-ones*” is an attempt to register a facet of a place, as well as its identity.

On our way back, James told me a few of the stories he heard from people that actually lived in the camps, which helped me build, in my imagination, some of the spaces that are no longer there through the memory of their uses. First James presented Wilton’s heroic deeds:

“You see that house over there, that’s Wilton’s home. His father would always tell me a story of when he was living in the Concentration Camp back in 1932. He told me that one day he was walking by the trenches where the dead bodies would be thrown, and he heard something. There was a very weak man that was mistakenly placed thereafter passing out, but he was still alive. So, Wilton’s father decided to crawl into the trench and save the poor man. He carried the man back to the main area of the camp. By nighttime that man was dead. He was just too weak, you see?” As we drove further, James pointed at a smaller house covered with plants: “You see that other house on top of that hill? That’s the house of an older lady who is the daughter of a woman from Barbalha [a neighboring city]. By 1932 this woman used to walk to Buriti Camp at night to hang out with folks. The camp was not just a sad place, there was life too. At night people would play music together, talk, mingle... Some people were not allowed to leave, but some outsiders could stop by for a visit, and that was what that lady’s mother did. She fell in love with one of the camp’s guards and ended up marrying him, and that’s that lady’s family story.”

James’ stories and convictions help build a little-known memory of a place that is no longer there: The not-so-empty lot. These are also his version of this story. Was the chimney really there? Can one confirm this information based on the only blurry historical image of that space? Would that lot really fit 70,000 people? The truth of history is precisely the multiple perspectives it has. The memory and memorialization of a space is also subject to these discrepancies. As Dolores Hayden said, urban landscapes are storehouses for social memories: “Even totally bulldozed places can be marked to restore some shared public meaning, a recognition of the experience of spatial conflict, or bitterness, or despair” (Hayden, 1995, p. 9). Looking at Muriti today is an exercise in recognition and reconstruction: to bring forward the histories of permanency of the impermanent. The not-so-empty-lot might seem “off-the-map” at first, but it is truly a result of a specific planning method from the 1900s, isolating unwanted groups of the population while also expanding the elite’s geographical and political territorial control. At the same time, the not-so-empty-lot also speaks to current planning practices today, continuously trying to control certain communities by establishing imposed growth vectors and segregation through covert redlining and other zoning practices. Buriti camp’s stories help illustrate some of the stories of temporary (or ever-changing) spaces, and what is left of them, considering that most of the time, the remains of these constructions are not physical anymore. The permanence of these ephemeral spaces consists of people’s paths creating and recreating the multiple layers of place, identity, and the built environment.

¹ This is an estimated number. While medical reports from DNOCS from 1933 would estimate lower numbers, they were also not considering all seven facilities from 1932. Historians from Federal University of Ceará (UFC) Kenia Rios and Frederico Neves question the official data, estimating the real number of residents of the 1932 concentration camps is at least two times what reports would announce, totalling something near 150.000 people.

² This is a reference researcher Ronald de Figueiredo e Albuquerque Filho uses, citing the uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano's essay "Os ninguéns" (Galeano, 2002)

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