What Does Black Lisbon Look Like?
Urban Online Imagery and the Place of Race

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore urban racialization as a process that emerges in specific places of the city. Using the publicly accessible Google Maps and Google Street View imagery of Lisbon Metropolitan Area, I conduct a fine-grained analysis of the urban and architectural forms through which race materialises in a central historical square, in a few peripheral social housing areas and in some informal urban gardens. Inscribed in the wider Black European framework, Black Lisbon is here intended as a provocation more than a label, and the concept of blackness is adopted as a visible tracker of micro-scale mechanisms of racialization as well as resistance to them. Considering the complex spatial dynamic that results and that encompasses different forms of omissions, displacements, replacements and place-makings, I argue that certain buildings, settings, bodies presence, urban spots and gardens arise as critical elements of the (still disregarded) compilation of non-white European architectures.

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Race can be conceived as a process made of material elements.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore complexly layered materiality of race that emerges out of the analysis of specific places of the city through means of digital visualisation. In the last few years, the materiality of social media has been reaffirmed in a range of disciplines such as geography, urban studies, architectural theory, anthropology, history to name but a few. From this perspective, race can be conceived as a process made of material elements – bodies, urban places and architectures, for instance – and as a chain of contingencies in which the connections between its constituent components are not given, but tend to repeat. There is no essence of whiteness any more than of blackness, but there is a relative fixity that inheres in most of the possibilities in which its many elements materialise. Race ruled Apartheid, but usually operates through more subtle means than racial segregation. Yet, race's processes invariably deal with space. This theoretical assumption suggests a practical consequence: in a space-time imagined as dominantly white – such as that of Europe – blackness is not only a political variable but can be considered also a material and visible tracker of race's spatial articulations. So, I choose Black Lisbon as a case study and as a provocation to grasp certain processes of urban racialization. Indeed, specific places of the metropolitan area of Lisbon characterised by the visible presence of black people offer an opportunity to explore the urban dimension of race. The intrinsic link between what is material (or not) and the implicit social meanings is addressed through a relational notion of place. Although it can be challenging particularly with respect to research methodology, it means to consider places as multi-layered, networked and perforated, as results and drivers of social processes. So, I implemented a visual analysis of the online urban images publicly available on Google that has proved to be an extremely effective tool to conduct a detailed urban investigation – without being physically present on the sites of study but combined with previous first-hand experience and documented knowledge – particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown constraints.
The paper is structured as follows. I first present Black Lisbon as part of the wider Black Europe framework.

Then, I propose the innovative analysis implemented through digital visualisation of architectural materials in which the spatial and the visual converge on multiple levels. The attempt is to shed light on the complexity of the relationship between race and place, between blackness and the urban space. The places presented are the ones in which I considered race operates and functions more critically and visibly than in others: a central public square and a set of social housing estates together with the informal urban gardens around them. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to acknowledging how subtle ways of urban racialization emerge when their (visual) materiality is analysed with the support of digital means of visualisation. Another issue raised by the analysis is that of recognising how black spatial practices have a decolonising and transformative effect on attitudes: excavating historical injustices, envisioning and materialising alternative futures for Lisbon architecture and urban development and, by extension, for the European space.

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Race (Visual) Materiality: a Micro-scale Analysis of Urban Places

The insight elaborated within Black Geographies is an effective starting point on which to articulate a spatial framework to answer a sociological question on race. Indeed, this recent branch of study opens up discourses on how an analysis of space, place, and power can be transformed by foregrounding questions of blackness and race (Hawthorne, 2019). In particular, my conceptual framework is articulated in the space-time of Black Europe (Keaton et al., 2009) and focuses on Lisbon as a case study. I propose a virtual method to a critical re-signification of race visual materiality within specific Black Lisbon places. There are a number of contemporary practices and projects that have used digital technologies to render places visible. They show that while there are many advantages to using digital techniques – not least the possibility of a form of engagement with places that are not easily accessible – such techniques come with their own limitations (Awan, 2016). Moreover, possibly more than ever before, the pandemic urged researchers around the world to find alternative ways of investigation, generating a higher level of digitalization and virtualization of empirical analyses. In the case of this study,

the analysis of online urban images publicly available on Google Street Views (GSV) and the satellite Google Maps (GM) shots turned out to be a convincing visual resource combined with the direct observation and the historical documentation of the places considered. The methodological question is, what does (or does not) the visual allow one to understand about race spatial materiality. In other words, the challenge is to attain a deeper comprehension of how the visual can be designed as part of the complex, phenomenological and material forms in which race emerges in the urban (Saldanha, 2004). GM images, updated to 2021, offer the definition of urban localization and morphology, as well as the street layout and the relation with the wider context, and provide photos of urban areas that are hardly understandable only through walking by them. On the other hand, GSV street shoots – taken every five or ten years by Google cameras – provide an opportunity not only to deepen the analysis to include materials, colours, urban typologies and uses, mobile elements, barriers, electric poles, road signs and frequentation by vehicles and people, but also to track change over time. In GSV, indeed, there is a Time Machine option that stocks photos of the same spots taken in different years, making it possible to visualise urban changes over a decade or more. Another important feature of this digital tool is the access to users detailed photos of exteriors as well as interiors. While GM is supported by new technological possibilities, but relies on traditional geographical modes of top views, GSV includes the innovative time variable and stands on the critical assumption that what is visible from a public street is publishable knowledge. Considering that, the tool reinforces – or rather problematizes – a hugely debated notion in architectural and urban theories such as that of the public (for a sharp analysis see Cremaschi, 1994). In addition, as a critical concept, “the street” builds upon an extensive scholarly tradition interested not only in its public nature, but also in concepts such as “the everyday” and “the bottom-up” (see, for instance, Fyfe, 1998). Thus, it forms the privileged space for the theorization of a particularly urban condition for unpredictable and uncontrolled encounters between strangers marked by differences and inequalities (Watson, 2006; Amin, 2012).

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In the experience of the contemporary street, the spatial and the visual converge on multiple levels (Awan,

2016; Dibazar, Naeff, 2018). Google tools, both Maps and Street View, claim to present the world as a fact, mapped, documented, and reconstituted online – an approximation of the real – while actually they are directly implicated in the politics of representations (Power et al., 2013), renewing questions of privacy, power, knowledge, and access (Elwood, 2010). So, both GM and GSV imagery can still provide a very good tool for urban analysis at a fine level and has the potential for grassroots initiatives via democratisation of technology (Elwood, Leszczynski, 2013), but only with a re-signification of their operative images – images that no longer represent objects but are part of an operation (Hoelzl, Rémi, 2014). In other words, one is influenced by what one sees, one can comment on it, but one can hardly notice what is missing without direct experience of the places observed online. The automated capture primes this casual exposure, where the implicit trust placed in the image can influence observations based on a representation (mediated by Google). Admittedly, the experience can be supported by the image but still needs embodied knowledge.

The choice of the places here analysed and the composition of their GM and GSV images is driven by a deep personal knowledge of the city (six years residing both in the peripheries and in the city centre), as well as full bibliographic research, participant observation throughout ten months of intense fieldwork and by the information collected through the interviews (more than 50 of them, spanning from informal conversations to in-depth sessions). The content analysis that I conducted on the images was as simple as a detailed description of the architectural and urban characteristics of the spaces, of all the visible human and non-human elements and articulations. Through this operation, I increased the objectivity of the analysis, limiting myself to an architectonically detailed and historically informed report.

The places that I present are, in my opinion, interesting places where race and blackness are critically at work, but not "black places" of Lisbon. I am not black, I do not know what a black place really is, and I am not even sure if it exists. Rather, I propose a visual exploration of specific places of a city predominantly (thought of as) white, where black presences reveal the complex (visual) materiality of processes of urban

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racialization and resistance to it. Urban racialization emerges from the field study as a multifaceted process of mutual production of race and space that encompasses bodies and urban materials and can develop in different and more or less subtle ways – omission, erasure, displacement, replacement, architectural alienation. At the same time, these processes of urban racialization are interrupted by certain kinds of spatial forms of resistance that disturb and question conventional Lisbon (and, for extension, European) imaginary.

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In the City Centre: Racialization through Omission and Resistance by Presence

Largo de São Domingos is a place that includes a range of different layers of understanding regarding the ways in which race materialises. It is entangled with many past/present connections and, at the same time, embeds a sense of false promise. Figure 1 narrates the square through a composition of GM

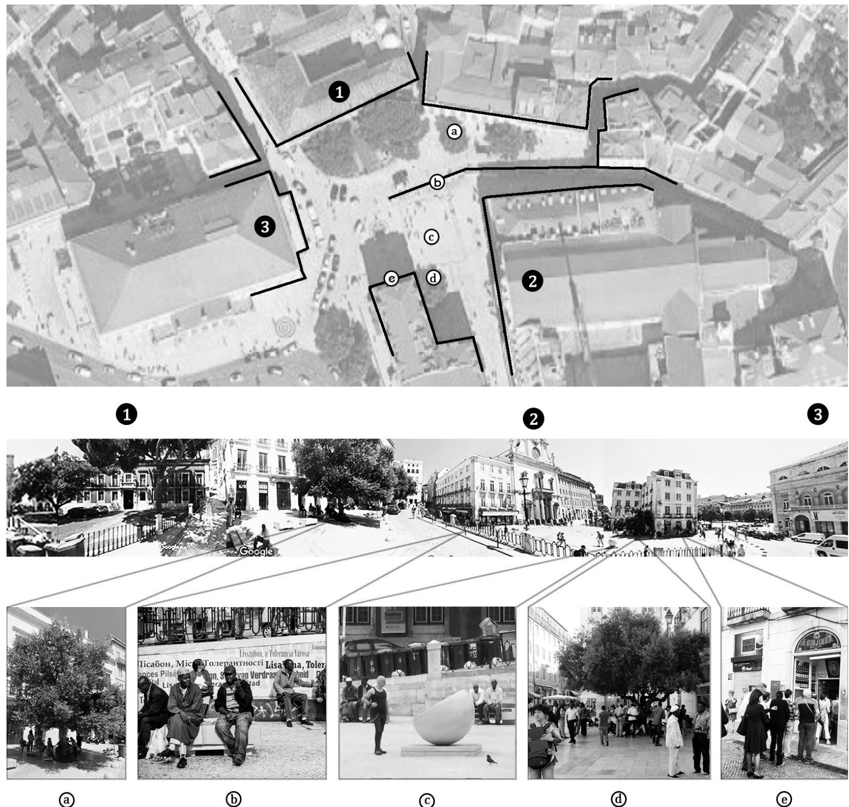

Fig. 1 - The central square of Largo de São Domingos. In the first row, a satellite GM image of the square; in the second row, a composition of GSV street views; in the third row, online publicly accessible photos uploaded by Google users. Source: online GM and GSV images composed by the author.

and GSV online publicly accessible photos. The layout consists of a satellite photo, a set of street-level images arranged in a single panoramic one, and five detailed photos provided by GSV users in order to highlight some critical details of the square.

Actually, Largo de São Domingos is not a proper square, rather a largo which in Portuguese technically means an enlarged space between buildings. It is located in the very centre of the city, on the edge between the rich and noble part and the decaying and multicultural one. It serves as a “funnel”: a place of transit, but somehow intimate. It is a meeting point of black people, it naturally welcomes white inhabitants of the poor neighbourhoods in the passage to the centre as well as tourists from all around the world entering the disordered, narrow and steep part of the city or attracted by the historical Ginjinha bar (“e” in Figure 1) together with the elderly locals.

Its irregular shape evokes the mediaeval urban fabric. It develops on two levels, the northern part lies on a slope edged with an iron railing, at a higher level than the remaining part. On the lower part, the difference in height turns into an inner triangular wall, just next to a seating system created with modular parallelepiped blocks of black and white marble. The flooring is made of white cobblestones with black minimal decorations and simple relief details. The square is mainly bordered by residential buildings and the institutional ones are distinguished by size and architectural style: Palácio da Independência (1), São Domingos church (2) and the right side of the theatre Dona Maria II (3).

The church, which dates back to the thirteenth century, stands out on the east side with its Portuguese baroque religious architecture, completely rebuilt after the 1755 earthquake. During the sixteenth century, the first black fraternity of Lisbon (Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos) established itself in the church. Black catholic brotherhoods, which rapidly expanded throughout the city and the country, played a complex and even subversive role in Portuguese society under slavery. The conversion of Africans to Catholicism was a pillar of slavery, but these brotherhoods also provided social life and support to those ostracised from society in almost every other way. They provided assistance to enslaved Africans and

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economically sustained those who were Latinized, baptized and freed (Fonseca, 2016: 91).

The church of São Domingos is itself evidence of black historical embeddedness in the city; however, nothing material was designed to communicate this circumstance, neither inside nor outside, not even a plaque. So, this part of history is easily and totally ignored by an uninformed visitor. Another historical event that occurred there at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when a mob persecuted and killed around 3000 Jews, is instead materially recalled twice outside the church by a monument and a mural. The Memorial to the Victims of the Jewish Massacre ("c" in Figure 1), inaugurated in 2008, lies at the centre of the square. It is a white spherical marble block with an inscribed metal star of David, in low relief. It is not prominent and may be overlooked by uninformed passers-by, because of its small size, but it is there, holding its position. The memorial also includes a mural with the phrase "Lisbon – City of Tolerance" written in 34 different languages ("b" in Figure 1), affixed on the right side of the slope.

The other institutional building of the square lies almost hidden by two big trees at the beginning of the slope. The exterior of Palácio da Independência (2) responds to a simple bi-chromatic and regular seventeenth-century style. Immediately after the Revolution of 25 Abril, in 1974, the palace was occupied and the "Association for the colonial war-wounded veterans" was established there (Rigal, 2015). The main objective of the association, still existing today, was to unite and assist the soldiers who suffered serious injuries fighting for Portugal in the colonial war, many of whom were (and are) blacks. Soon a social canteen was opened too. For this reason, even if today the canteen has been replaced by a tourist restaurant and the association has changed its venue, the entrance of the building continues to be a meeting point for old retired soldiers, especially blacks from Guinea-Bissau. Again, not a single material sign reveals this part of recent history.

However, the presence of approximately a hundred black bodies stands out in the square. This architecture of bodies made of an old and mostly retired generation of black people whose main activity seems now limited to conversation, indeed, expands in other

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parts of the square. Under the canopy of trees, on the slope ("a" in Figure 1), on the sittings ahead of the tolerance' mural ("b" in Figure 1), under the tree in front of the church ("d" in Figure 1), on the first benches of the nearby Rossio square. A small market of African food products populated by about twenty sellers slightly dynamizes the scene. The firmness of these black bodies mismatches with the flow, movement and passage that characterize other presences. The daily repetition of this black occupation and appropriation of space challenges the flux of visitors and local passers-by with some fixity.
In Largo de São Domingos, indeed, it is possible to see a wide range of different bodies and the peaceful atmosphere could even suggest a certain cosmopolitan/multicultural sense of place. However, the strident mismatch between its materiality and the actual presences that characterise the everyday life of this place contradicts the pretence of an unproblematic and harmonious scene. The square is full of symbols as well as omissions. No material element explains and recognizes the historical roots of black presence and it seems that all the burden of recall is left to the bodies. On the basis of this discussion, I argue that material omissions in urban design emerge as a form of racialization.

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In the Peripheries: Racialization through Erasure, Displacement and Re-placement

The most significant urban manoeuvre that occurred in the urban periphery of Lisbon, changing radically its landscape, was the PER Programme. Enacted in 1993 by the central government and implemented by local municipalities over the following decades the Special Re-housing Programme had two main objectives: the eradication of informal settlements and the replacement of people in new housings (Cachado, 2013). Only a few informal settlements were spared by demolition machines since they occupy low-value lands or because of strong resistance by residents (see, for instance, the case of Cova da Moura). The ones located on lands with a real estate value were instead gradually destroyed. In Figure 2, thanks to the time machine available on GSV, it is possible to reveal the buildings of informal settlements demolished between 2015 and 2017 by the Amadora municipality.

Bairro 6 de Maio

2009

2019

Bairro Estrela D'Africa

2009

2019

Fig.2 - The demolished neighborhoods. A composition of GSV street-views before (2009) and after (2019) the demolitions of black informal neighborhoods of Bairro 6 de Maio and Estrela d'Africa. Source: online GM and GSV images composed by the author.

They were part of two black-majority neighbourhoods: Bairro 6 de Maio and Bairro Estrela D'Africa. The images in the first rows date back to 2009, and those in the second row are from 2019.
The scenery changed to such an extent that only with the help of some urban elements – such as street signs and light poles – are correspondences detectable. These black architectures, material expressions of creativity and place-making, were simply razed to the ground. Admittedly, the settlements' illegal origin and their inhabitants' social vulnerability to some extent paved the way to the implementation of (violent) processes by local authorities, such as house demolition and displacement of former inhabitants. Erasing buildings, and relocating (mainly black) people, emerges as another way in which racialization works out.
Yet, people were relocated to the social housing that today constellate the suburbs. Around 45,000 new dwelling units and 290 social housing neighbourhoods were built (Tulumello et al., 2018). They are certainly not black architectures, but rather architectures where the majority of black people currently reside within the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Considering their isolated locations, the alienating urban forms and the low-quality materials utilised in their construction, I argue that they stand as "danger architectures" embedding an obviously explosive

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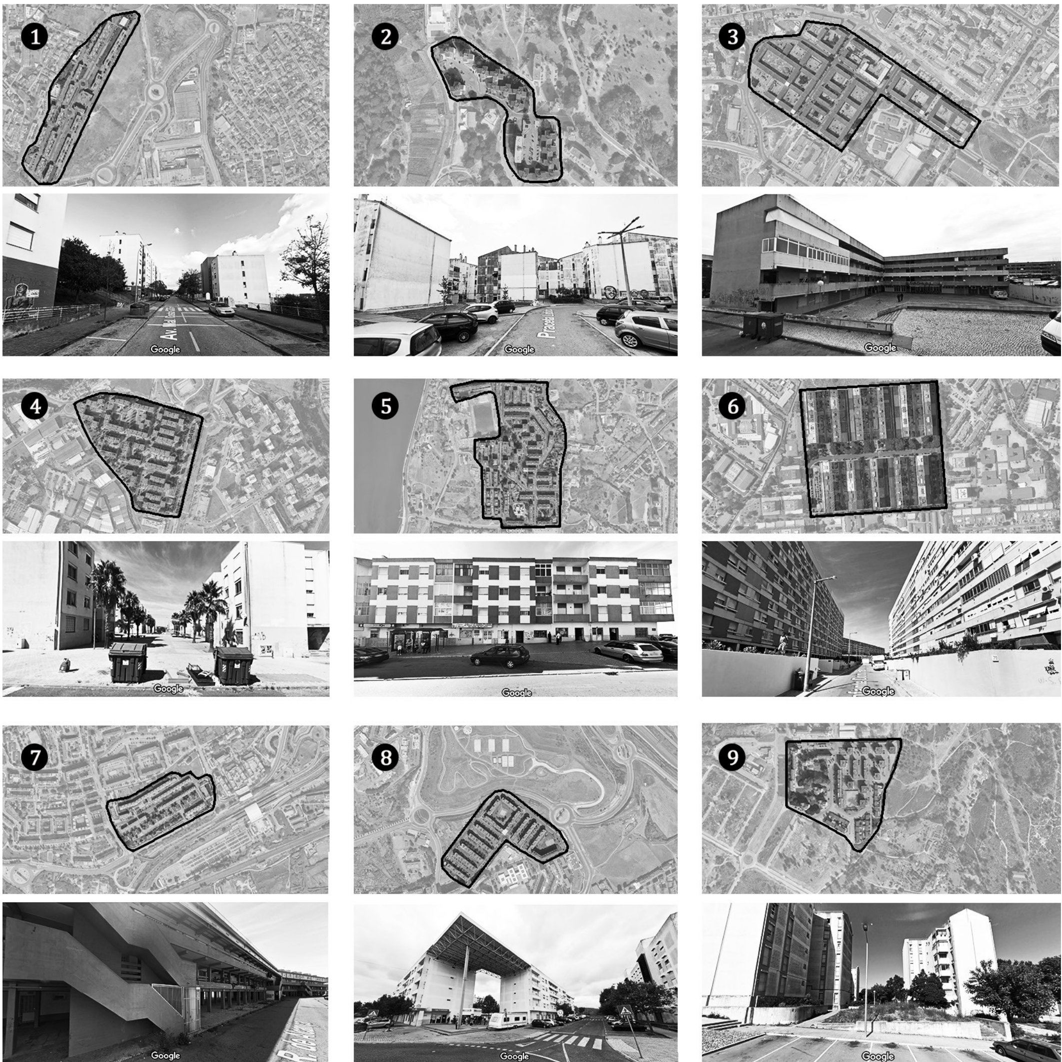

Fig.3 - The social housing areas. Casal da Mira, Amadora (1), Quinta da Princesa, Seixal (2), Bairro da Bela Vista, Setúbal (3), Quinta do Mocho, Loures (4), Arrentela, Seixal (5), Quinta da Vitoria, Loures (6), Monte da Caparica, Almada (7), Casal da Boba, Amadora (8), Vale da Amoreira, Moita (9).
Source: online GM and GSV images composed by the author.

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set of circumstances and implying another specific process of racialization, that of marginalization by re-placement on the metropolitan edges. In Figure 3, nine examples of social housing projects that were constructed by the PER programme are narrated through satellite and street view images.
In the words of the legislation, the stated purpose of the programme was to rehouse people in-situ, close to the place where they lived (article 5, comma c, of Decree-Law 163/93). However, the lack of public land to accommodate the new housing estate near the original settlements and municipal authorities' financial constraints (despite the central government covering 50% of the costs) resulted in the relocation of people to far-away sites, disrupting existing social and labour networks. In general, data points to an increase in the peripheralization of the people involved in the process, and a hidden – yet persistent – trend to relocate black populations into more marginal sites than whites (Ascensão, Leal, 2019). The areas where the housing estates house a great percentage of black inhabitants are, undoubtedly, isolated (2, 8, 9 in Figure 3), devoid of infrastructures (1, 3, 5 in Figure 3), close to industrial centres (4, 6 in Figure 3), or cemeteries (9 in Figure 3). The architectural solutions adopted in these social housings are comparable to the post-WWII social architecture of other European capitals. In other words, they were already dated when built. Their inhospitable urban morphology, as well as the dubious quality of the materials, fused in "an institutional architecture of poverty". No public spaces or commercial activities have been realized, and not even envisioned in the projects. Greenery is minimal. Some trees were planted on the sidewalks, but neither parks nor children's playgrounds were designed. Oftentimes, primary schools have been constructed near the new settlements. However, this conducted a contradictory mechanism of segregation in the educational system. Indeed, the majority of children residing in social housing estates attend the nearby school, while children residing in other areas are unlikely to do so. Consequently, classrooms are homogenous in terms of student social background (mostly black and poor families) and virtuous circles of social mobility are hardly triggered.

The materiality of these architectural solutions is also a latent activator of social exclusion. The low-quality materials used in the constructions deteriorated within a few years. Damage is visible inside and outside the blocks. The plaster is of very low quality and absorbs humidity, window frames are made of aluminium and the single glazing does not provide adequate insulation. The houses are equipped with water and electricity, but do not have heating systems. The common areas – entrances, stairs and landings – evoke those of the worst hospitals or even those of prisons. In short, these new houses had been presented to the inhabitants coming from informal neighbourhoods as an improvement in terms of living conditions, but the results have been nearly the opposite.

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People who lived in self-built houses – with structural constraints balanced by familiarity, freedom, and creative touches on the building itself – were re-placed in apartments that quickly became old and ruined. People who lived in an atmosphere of mutual help and community support were relocated to social housing estates, lacking any social facility with new and unknown neighbours, isolated in the urban fringes. It is not surprising then that many of these new social neighbourhoods built as part of PER have become enclaves of youth crime. Given these premises, what else could they have become? The establishment of a second periphery driven by the implementation of the programme seems to correspond to an urban reterritorialization of colonial relations, which emerges as a process of racialization through marginalization of black people.

Resistance through Suburban Informal Agriculture

The processes of racialization have been counteracted by certain spatial practices, which at least limit effects even if they do not tackle the causes. Informal urban gardens arise as a form of daily, discreet and subtle resistance (Scott, 1985) that interrupt and punctuate Lisbon peripheral landscape. Non-regulated urban gardens, created and operated by an old generation of Cape Verdeans across the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, are an interesting example of resistance through placemaking. In architecture and urban planning, placemaking is the idea that people “transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live” (Schneekloth, Shibley, 1995: 1). It refers to a

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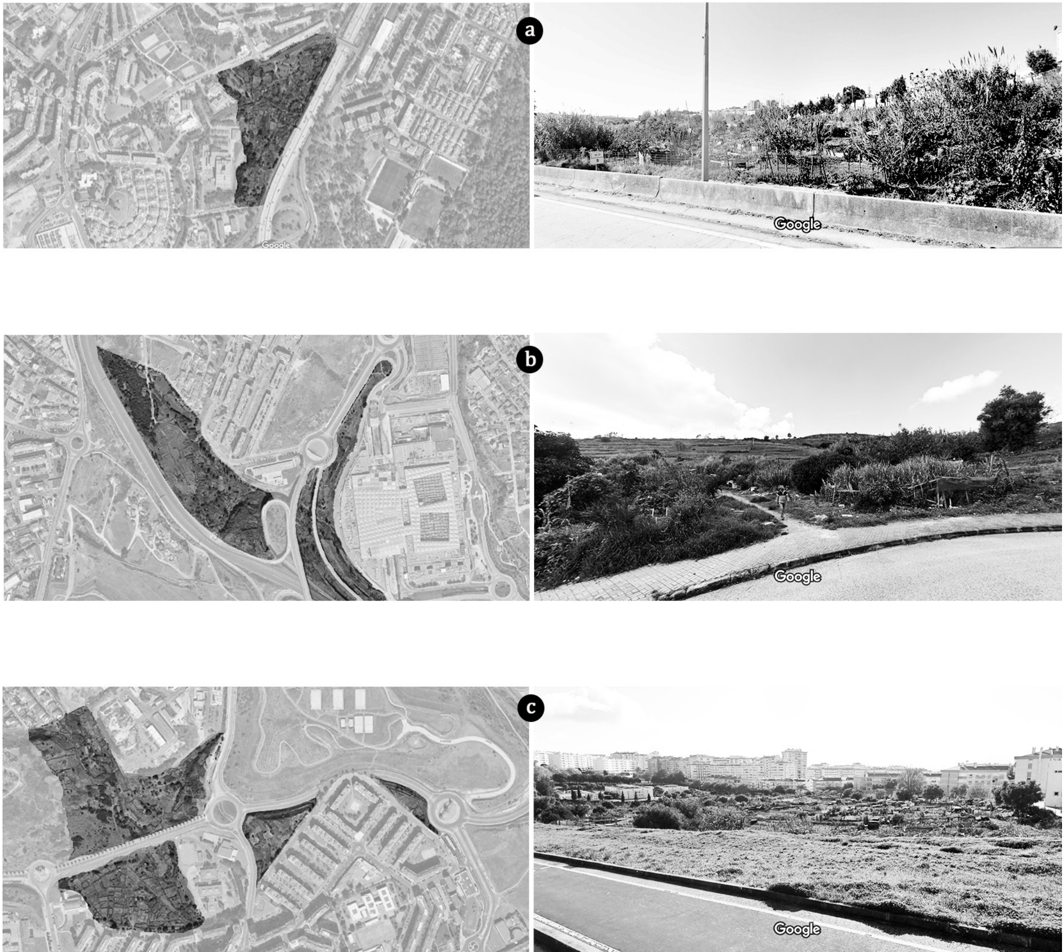

Fig. 4 - The suburban informal gardens. Near the self-built settlements of Cova da Moura and Bairro do Zambujal (a) and near the social projects of Casal da Mira (b) and Casal da Boba (c). Source: online GM and GSV images composed by the author.

collaborative process by which people shape places in order to maximize shared value. But black placemaking carries other intrinsic features: it occurs within a context of segregation, unemployment, bad schools, violence and police brutality and a broad array of subtler racialization processes.

In Figure 4, three informal urban gardens are narrated through a couple of images each, a satellite GM image and a GSV shot of the street. These allotments along the metropolitan road IC17 CRIL ("a" in Figure 4) are worked by the inhabitants of Cova da Moura and Bairro do Zambujal informal neighbourhoods, and the ones near the recent social housing estates of Casal da Mira ("b" in Figure 4) and Casal da Boba ("c" in Figure 4), worked by the relocated residents.

These urban allotments arise on public land, in the

voids between the infrastructures. They are neither legally nor institutionally regulated, and a legal vacuum allows them not to be considered unlawful (Cabannes, Raposo, 2013). They result from gradual occupations, reoccupations, and disguised collective appropriations first by Portuguese rural migrants who moved to the metropolis during the 1950s and then by the migrants from the colonies after the 1960s. Today, these suburban gardens are cultivated mainly by an old generation of Cape Verdeans (Varela, 2020). Their design is ephemeral, delicate and wise. Fences, nets, canalization, divisions, tool sheds are made of simple and usually remedied wooden, metal or plastic materials. Following and interacting with the natural reliefs, an entanglement of almost straight lines creates various rectangles of different sizes. From the street, they appear as a marked and articulated set of green spaces between the concrete of buildings and streets, colouring the otherwise grey landscape.
But they are much more than this. They are the fruit of daily resistances and essential economic support for a number of families. They are also the hub of old friendships: mostly men and women who left Cape Verde more than fifty years ago (very few also from Guinea-Bissau), whose life revolves around the maintenance of such places. Here, vegetables and pulses are cultivated: potatoes, sweet potatoes, broad beans, peas, corn, different varieties of beans, tomatoes, cassava and sugarcane. Here is the place of shared lunches and weekend encounters, the place of chats and work, fights and resistance. The constellation of urban gardens in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area questions and contests urban growth, while intersecting it. It emerges as a form of black place-making that not only productively resists racialization, but also materially develops alternative futures.

Conclusions

The places presented in the article bring one to reflect on how looking at race – and at the processes through which race permeates urban space – is relevant to understanding our city. Urban racialization emerges as a multifaceted process that operates in different ways. In Lisbon city centre, for instance, it works out as material omissions. Obliterated histories are embedded in the material space, while the constant presence of

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black bodies contradicts, and somehow compensates, such neglect. In Largo de São Domingos, indeed, an "architecture of bodies" questions the silence of urban design. The fixity of black bodies in the square appears an answer to the institutional spatial design, unable to reveal and recognize the black urban memory of the place. In the peripheries, racialization emerges as erasure – demolition of black architectures and displacement, re-placement and marginalization of black people. The isolated location, the anonymous and uniform urban morphology and low-quality architectural elements of re-housing projects are other aspects through which racialization materialises.

However, within the voids of infrastructures, the wise and fine architecture of informal urban gardens, realized and operated by black people, counteracts the architectural alienation of concrete blocks. The creativity of horticulture, the green place-making and the assembling of people around the rhythms of agriculture arise as a powerful form of resistance. The informal gardens reveal the inadequacy of institutions' approach to the peripheries and interrupt the conventional Lisbon – and, by extension, European – imaginary of the suburban landscape. They are not adaptive strategies, rather practices of black people insubordination with beneficial effects on places. They can be seen as innovative forms of conceiving urban peripheral architectures in Europe and, if institutionally recognized, they could enrich in multiple ways the urban realm.

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