

Urbanization, Inequality, and Race: Socio-spatial Segregation and Territories of Exclusion

Sandra Medina Benini

Professor at the Centro Universitário de Várzea Grande (UNIVAG).
PhD in Geography from FCT/UNESP and PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from UPM.
E-mail: sandra.benini@univag.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7109-8717>

Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy

Professor at the Centro Universitário de Várzea Grande (UNIVAG).
PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from UPM.
jeane.godoy@univag.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4577-4651>

Allan Leon Casemiro da Silva

PhD in Agribusiness and Development from UNESP.
allan.leon@unesp.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2397-3492>

Angelo Palmisano

Professor at the Centro Universitário de Várzea Grande (UNIVAG).
PhD in Social Sciences from PUC-SP.
angelo.palmisano@univag.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4139-6366>

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Urbanização, desigualdade e raça: segregação socioespacial e territórios da exclusão

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar a segregação socioespacial nas cidades brasileiras a partir da compreensão do racismo estrutural como elemento constitutivo da produção do espaço urbano, demonstrando como a urbanização se organizou historicamente de forma racializada, especialmente no período pós-abolição, e como essa lógica persiste na contemporaneidade.

Metodologia: O estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa de caráter dedutivo, fundamentada em um ensaio teórico-crítico. A análise articula referenciais da teoria do racismo estrutural, da colonialidade do poder e dos estudos urbanos críticos, em diálogo com análise documental de políticas públicas e com dados secundários de fontes oficiais, como o IBGE, utilizados de forma interpretativa para demonstrar padrões de desigualdade racial no espaço urbano.

Originalidade/Relevância: O artigo contribui para o debate urbano ao reposicionar a raça como categoria analítica central na interpretação da segregação socioespacial, enfrentando o apagamento promovido pela ideologia da mestiçagem e pelas abordagens urbanísticas desracializadas. O estudo avança ao evidenciar a cidade não apenas como reflexo, mas como instrumento ativo de reprodução das desigualdades raciais, preenchendo um gap teórico ainda presente na literatura urbana brasileira.

Resultados: A análise demonstra que a segregação socioespacial no Brasil constitui uma expressão histórica e institucionalizada do racismo estrutural, manifestando-se na distribuição desigual de infraestrutura, serviços urbanos, mobilidade e proteção ambiental. Evidencia-se que práticas de planejamento urbano, políticas públicas e dinâmicas de valorização imobiliária operam de forma racializada, reforçando a marginalização territorial da população negra e periférica.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas: O estudo fortalece a articulação entre teoria urbana crítica, racismo estrutural e colonialidade, contribuindo para a compreensão da segregação como fenômeno sistêmico e adaptativo. Metodologicamente, reafirma a potência do ensaio teórico como instrumento analítico para desvelar mecanismos estruturais de exclusão frequentemente invisibilizados por abordagens tecnocráticas.

Contribuições sociais e ambientais: Ao explicitar as conexões entre racismo estrutural, segregação urbana e vulnerabilidade ambiental, o artigo subsidia o debate sobre justiça territorial e políticas urbanas antirracistas. Os achados reforçam a necessidade de políticas públicas orientadas pela reparação histórica, pela redistribuição territorial e pela redução das desigualdades socioambientais que afetam desproporcionalmente populações negras nas cidades brasileiras.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Racismo estrutural. Segregação socioespacial. Urbanização brasileira.

Urbanization, Inequality, and Race: Socio-spatial Segregation and Territories of Exclusion

ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze socio-spatial segregation in Brazilian cities based on the understanding of structural racism as a constitutive element of the production of urban space, demonstrating how urbanization has historically been organized in a racialized manner—particularly in the post-abolition period—and how this logic persists in contemporary contexts.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative, deductive approach grounded in a critical theoretical essay. The analysis articulates frameworks from structural racism theory, the coloniality of power, and critical urban studies, in dialogue with documentary analysis of public policies and secondary data from official sources, such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), used interpretively to demonstrate patterns of racial inequality in urban space.

Originality/Relevance: The article contributes to urban studies by repositioning race as a central analytical category in the interpretation of socio-spatial segregation, confronting the erasure promoted by the ideology of racial mixing (*mestiçagem*) and by deracialized urban planning approaches. The study advances by demonstrating that the city is not merely a reflection, but an active instrument in the reproduction of racial inequalities, addressing a persistent theoretical gap in Brazilian urban literature.

Results: The analysis shows that socio-spatial segregation in Brazil constitutes a historical and institutionalized expression of structural racism, manifested in the unequal distribution of infrastructure, urban services, mobility, and environmental protection. It reveals that urban planning practices, public policies, and real estate valorization dynamics operate in racialized ways, reinforcing the territorial marginalization of Black and peripheral populations.

Theoretical/Methodological Contributions: The study strengthens the articulation between critical urban theory, structural racism, and coloniality, contributing to the understanding of segregation as a systemic and adaptive phenomenon. Methodologically, it reaffirms the relevance of the theoretical essay as an analytical tool for unveiling structural mechanisms of exclusion often obscured by technocratic approaches.

Social and Environmental Contributions: By making explicit the connections between structural racism, urban segregation, and environmental vulnerability, the article supports debates on territorial justice and anti-racist urban policies. The findings reinforce the need for public policies oriented toward historical reparation, territorial redistribution, and the reduction of socio-environmental inequalities that disproportionately affect Black populations in Brazilian cities.

KEYWORDS: Structural racism. Socio-spatial segregation. Brazilian urbanization.

Urbanización, desigualdad y raza: segregación socioespacial y territorios de la exclusión

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar la segregación socioespacial en las ciudades brasileñas a partir de la comprensión del racismo estructural como un elemento constitutivo de la producción del espacio urbano, demostrando cómo la urbanización se organizó históricamente de forma racializada—especialmente en el período posterior a la abolición—y cómo esta lógica persiste en la contemporaneidad.

Metodología: El estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo de carácter deductivo, basado en un ensayo teórico-crítico. El análisis articula referentes de la teoría del racismo estructural, de la colonialidad del poder y de los estudios urbanos críticos, en diálogo con el análisis documental de políticas públicas y con datos secundarios de fuentes oficiales, como el Instituto Brasileño de Geografía y Estadística (IBGE), utilizados de manera interpretativa para demostrar patrones de desigualdad racial en el espacio urbano.

Originalidad/Relevancia: El artículo contribuye al debate urbano al reposicionar la raza como categoría analítica central en la interpretación de la segregación socioespacial, confrontando el ocultamiento promovido por la ideología del mestizaje y por enfoques urbanísticos desracializados. El estudio avanza al evidenciar que la ciudad no es solo un reflejo, sino un instrumento activo de reproducción de las desigualdades raciales, cubriendo un vacío teórico aún presente en la literatura urbana brasileña.

Resultados: El análisis demuestra que la segregación socioespacial en Brasil constituye una expresión histórica e institucionalizada del racismo estructural, manifestándose en la distribución desigual de infraestructura, servicios urbanos, movilidad y protección ambiental. Se evidencia que las prácticas de planificación urbana, las políticas públicas y las dinámicas de valorización inmobiliaria operan de forma racializada, reforzando la marginación territorial de la población negra y periférica.

Contribuciones teóricas/metodológicas: El estudio fortalece la articulación entre teoría urbana crítica, racismo estructural y colonialidad, contribuyendo a la comprensión de la segregación como un fenómeno sistémico y adaptativo. Metodológicamente, reafirma la potencia del ensayo teórico como instrumento analítico para desvelar mecanismos estructurales de exclusión frecuentemente invisibilizados por enfoques tecnocráticos.

Contribuciones sociales y ambientales: Al explicitar las conexiones entre racismo estructural, segregación urbana y vulnerabilidad ambiental, el artículo aporta al debate sobre justicia territorial y políticas urbanas antirracistas. Los hallazgos refuerzan la necesidad de políticas públicas orientadas a la reparación histórica, la redistribución territorial y la reducción de las desigualdades socioambientales que afectan de manera desproporcionada a las poblaciones negras en las ciudades brasileñas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Racismo estructural. Segregación socioespacial. Urbanización brasileña.

1 INTRODUCTION

The inequalities that permeate Brazilian cities are not expressed solely through social indicators; they are materially inscribed in the territory, determining who occupies areas endowed with infrastructure, services, and opportunities and who is pushed into precarious, distant, and environmentally vulnerable spaces. This unequal distribution of urban space cannot be interpreted as a casual effect of city expansion or as the exclusive result of contemporary economic dynamics. Rather, it is a historically produced process in which race and class operate in an intertwined manner, organizing urban life and establishing persistent patterns of selective access to housing, sanitation, mobility, and citizenship.

From this perspective, socio-spatial segregation constitutes a structural dimension of Brazilian urbanization, forged over the *longue durée* of colonialism and slavery and reconfigured during the republican period, particularly after formal abolition. The post-abolition era did not result in the substantive incorporation of the Black population into the city and urban rights; on the contrary, it consolidated a scenario in which the absence of reparative policies and social integration maintained racial hierarchies and instituted new forms of exclusion, now mediated by urban and institutional mechanisms. The city thus comes to function as an active device in the production of inequality: through norms, administrative routines, and ostensibly neutral public policies, urban space is continuously reorganized in ways that reproduce racialized asymmetries.

It is within this framework that the present article investigates how structural racism operates as a matrix of urban space production in Brazil. The analysis is grounded in the understanding that racism is not limited to individual practices of discrimination but constitutes a broad and adaptive system capable of permeating institutions, regulatory frameworks, and forms of governance while preserving its exclusionary effectiveness over time. Accordingly, segregation is not treated as a “collateral effect” of urbanization, but rather as a concrete expression of power relations that define valued centralities and vulnerable peripheries, producing an everyday geography of territorial inequality.

By problematizing these dynamics, the article also interrogates the ideology of *mestiçagem* and the notion of racial harmony as part of a political-symbolic repertoire that has historically contributed to the depoliticization of racial inequality and the obscuring of its structural dimension. By promoting the idea of natural integration and pacified racial coexistence, this discourse has operated as an obstacle to the formulation of reparative policies and to the explicit recognition of racism as an organizing principle of urban space, reinforcing the naturalization of the marginalization of Black and Brown populations in areas with lower levels of state protection and reduced access to collective goods. In this sense, race is assumed as a central analytical category for understanding Brazilian urbanization, engaging with debates on urban justice and the right to the city while exposing the limitations of approaches that address inequality solely from economic, functional, or technocratic perspectives.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, deductive approach, articulating critical theoretical frameworks with documentary analysis of public policies and urban regulatory instruments, in dialogue with census data and social indicators that reveal racialized disparities

in access to housing, sanitation, and essential urban services. The investigation is thus oriented toward understanding the mechanisms through which socio-spatial segregation is produced and reproduced, examining how historical processes, institutional arrangements, and contemporary dynamics of territorial valorization intersect to sustain persistent racial inequalities in urban life.

The article is organized into four sections, in addition to this introduction. Section 2 presents the theoretical and conceptual foundations of structural racism, emphasizing its historicity, institutional plasticity, and modes of operation in the production of urban inequalities. Section 3 examines the post-abolition period as a decisive moment in the racialization of Brazilian urban space, articulating the coloniality of power, the ideology of whitening, and the political role of *mestiçagem* in the consolidation of an exclusionary urban model. Section 4 analyzes the contemporary persistence of socio-spatial segregation in Brazil, exploring how the racialization of territory is expressed in dimensions such as urban infrastructure, mobility, and environmental vulnerability. Finally, the concluding remarks synthesize the main arguments of the article and indicate implications for debates on territorial justice and urban policies committed to racial equity.

2 STRUCTURAL RACISM AS A MATRIX OF URBAN INEQUALITIES

Structural racism stands among the central elements that organize and perpetuate urban inequalities in contemporary societies. In Brazil, its continuity cannot be dissociated from the *longue durée* of colonialism, slavery, and the post-abolition period, whose legacies remain inscribed in institutional routines and in the concrete forms of spatial production. Within this framework, Krieger (2021) conceptualizes structural racism as a “system of systems,” that is, a mechanism that simultaneously permeates institutions, public policies, and social arrangements, operating as a decisive determinant of territorial segregation, collective patterns of illness, and interlocking inequalities.

Recent studies emphasize that structural racism does not operate as a static mechanism; rather, it reconfigures itself in response to social change, adjusting its modes of operation in order to preserve its exclusionary capacity. Bonilla-Silva (2021) argues that its effectiveness derives largely from the naturalization of practices and norms that present themselves under the guise of technical neutrality, thereby concealing the racial dimension that underpins them.

Graves Jr. and Goodman (2023), in turn, challenge biological explanations for racial asymmetries, demonstrating that such inequalities result from historically produced social processes capable of rearticulating exclusion in multiple forms, even amid scientific and institutional advances. From this perspective, the persistence of racialized hierarchies is associated with the plasticity of racism as both ideology and institutional practice, which shifts away from biology and becomes anchored in socio-spatial, economic, and cultural dispositifs (Benini et al., 2025).

Targeted inclusion measures—such as specific housing programs or selective investments in urban mobility—reveal clear limitations when confronted with the persistence of institutions and regulatory frameworks historically structured by racial hierarchies. Benini et al.

(2025) explain that exclusion is not eliminated but displaced to other domains, manifesting, for example, in the intensification of armed territorial control, the deepening of labor precarization, or the systematic restriction of access to culture, leisure, and spaces of urban sociability.

Graves Jr. and Goodman (2023) further argue that as long as the ideological and material foundations sustaining racial hierarchization are not confronted structurally, equity-oriented initiatives will remain circumscribed to limited effects. This occurs because racism, far from disappearing, continuously reconfigures itself, preserving its capacity to produce and organize segregation.

This understanding is further developed by Lee (2024), who characterizes structural racism as a persistent and adaptive system whose reproduction relies on a set of interdependent features, including diffuse adaptability, networked organization, the appearance of neutrality, historical erasure, and the systematic devaluation of Black life. These attributes enable racism to remain operative even in the face of apparent institutional reforms, rendering fragmented state responses and public policies insufficient to disrupt the centrality of racial inequality in the organization of cities and society (Benini et al., 2025).

It is essential to emphasize that structural racism cannot be reduced to isolated discriminatory practices or explicit episodes of prejudice. Rather, it consists of a complex arrangement of norms, procedures, and institutional routines that, under the mantle of neutrality, systematically produce and reproduce racialized hierarchies (Gee & Hicken, 2021). A recurring example of this process is the repeated allocation of Black and peripheral populations to environmentally vulnerable areas, resulting from their historical exclusion from the formal housing market and the subordination of these territories to the speculative logic of urban capital.

In this sense, the asymmetric distribution of infrastructure, public facilities, and essential urban services cannot be understood as a matter of chance or technical failure. As Patel (2024) argues, such inequalities stem directly from racialized public policies that, whether through deliberate action or omission, reinforce historical patterns of exclusion. The siting of polluting facilities in predominantly Black neighborhoods, the persistent precariousness of basic sanitation, and the militarization of favelas illustrate how urban planning has operated as an instrument for maintaining privilege and denying the right to the city (Torino, 2024).

Along these lines, Benini, Santos, and Souza (2025) advocate for the adoption of analytical instruments capable of capturing the complexity of structural racism through intersectional and composite metrics that move beyond reductionist approaches. This multidimensional perspective is essential to avoid simplified readings that often fail to apprehend the systemic nature of racial inequalities.

Smith and Mayo (2024) underscore the importance of rigorous conceptual work in defining structural racism as a prerequisite for formulating interventions consistent with its historical, relational, and dynamic character. By proposing an operational definition grounded in attributes such as oppressive ideologies and the production of a false sense of equity, the authors contribute to distinguishing structural racism from more superficial and episodic forms of discrimination.

Given the persistence of racialized inequalities in cities, it becomes imperative to reposition urban planning as an explicitly political field committed to confronting structural racism. As Walker and Derickson (2022) argue, such a shift requires overcoming the notion of technical neutrality that has historically guided urban planning practices, recognizing that urban space is produced through social relations traversed by race. From this perspective, Patel (2024) contends that urban public policies must assume a genuine commitment to historical reparation and territorial justice, prioritizing investments in infrastructure, housing, mobility, and health in racialized territories.

Such a transformation extends beyond the operational sphere of policy, demanding a profound epistemological shift. This entails breaking with technocratic and universalist frameworks that have long marginalized the racial dimension in interpretations of social inequality. Scholars such as Geronimus (2023) and Crear-Perry et al. (2021) demonstrate how, both in public health and urban planning, social determinants are frequently treated in depoliticized ways, contributing to the invisibilization of racial relations that structure unequal access to the city.

Within this debate, particular attention is given to the concept of *weathering*, formulated by Geronimus (2023), which describes the cumulative impacts of chronic stress experienced by Black individuals over the life course. Resulting from continuous exposure to structural racism—ranging from institutional abandonment to subtle and explicit forms of symbolic violence—this process produces premature biological deterioration, significantly affecting physical and mental health. Importantly, such wear is not confined to the individual level; it becomes territorialized in urban spaces marked by systematic vulnerability and the deliberate absence of public policies, demonstrating that urban and environmental racism not only regulates access to the city but also shapes differentiated patterns of illness and mortality (Benini et al., 2025).

Contemporary scholarship on structural racism in urbanism converges in advocating for substantive transformations in planning, governance, and the production of urban space. These transformations include, among other aspects, the incorporation of intersectional indicators, the recognition of knowledge produced within popular territories, and the centrality of Black participation in decision-making processes.

As Black (2023) emphasizes, the construction of racial justice presupposes attentive listening to experiences of suffering, resistance, and creativity that emerge from historically marginalized territories. It is within everyday life that alternative forms of belonging, solidarity, and care are forged—forms capable of inspiring new urban ethics. Consequently, confronting structural racism cannot be limited to technical or normative adjustments; it requires an ethical, epistemological, and political reconfiguration of the contemporary urban project, grounded in the recognition of Black resilience as a constitutive element of the struggle for spatial justice.

Understanding structural racism in its historical and territorial density, however, demands an analytical movement that articulates theory and space. Beyond conceptual elaborations, it is necessary to examine how these dynamics materialize concretely in the formation of Brazilian cities, particularly from the post-abolition period onward—a decisive moment in the configuration of racial inequalities that persist in the present. It is within this

context that the foundations of an exclusionary urban model were established, sustained by the systematic denial of rights, the absence of reparative policies, and the consolidation of a racialized logic of spatial appropriation. The following section therefore undertakes a critical analysis of this period and its ramifications for urban organization, demonstrating how the myth of *mestiçagem* and the project of whitening contributed to the structural marginalization of the Black population (Salmon, 2023).

3 POST-ABOLITION, COLONIALITY, AND THE RACIALIZATION OF BRAZILIAN URBAN SPACE

The legal abolition of slavery, enacted in 1888, represented an undeniable normative milestone; however, it did not bring about a substantive transformation of the racial and spatial foundations that structured Brazilian cities. Rather than inaugurating an effective process of social integration, the post-abolition period was marked by the reorganization of hierarchies inherited from the slave regime, now cloaked in discourses of modernization, civilization, and progress. In this context, the systematic exclusion of the Black population from the formal labor market, public housing policies, and full access to urban rights reveals the continuity of an urban model deeply anchored in the logic of coloniality, as formulated by Quijano (2005).

This persistence should not be interpreted as a residue of a superseded past, but rather as the expression of a system of domination that historically reconfigures itself. For Quijano (2005; 2024), the coloniality of power does not disappear with the formal end of colonialism, as it continues to operate through economic, political, and symbolic structures that produce and legitimize the subalternization of racialized peoples. In Brazil, these dynamics find one of their primary vectors of materialization in urban space, insofar as the city constitutes a privileged locus for the reproduction of racial and social hierarchies.

From this perspective, urban space cannot be understood as a neutral setting or a mere reflection of social inequalities, but rather as an active device in the production and maintenance of power relations. Authors such as Quijano (2005), Mignolo, Segato, and Walsh (2024), and Quintero (2024) converge in emphasizing that coloniality manifests concretely in territorial organization, in the unequal distribution of infrastructure, and in the definition of which bodies and social groups are entitled to urban centrality. The city thus operates as a contested territory in which historical mechanisms of exclusion and control are continually reactivated.

Brazilian urban modernization, often presented as synonymous with development and rationality, was historically guided by an exclusionary project that reserved central and valued areas for white populations, while relegating Black and mixed-race populations to the physical and symbolic margins of the city. This pattern of territorial ordering consolidated a regime of racial segregation that, although not legally formalized, constituted what Rotondano (2019) terms a form of veiled urban apartheid. Far from resulting from spontaneous or inevitable processes, this unequal spatial distribution stemmed from political and economic decisions that systematically privileged elite interests at the expense of the needs of the Black population and other socially vulnerable groups.

In this way, the post-abolition period can be understood as a key moment in the consolidation of a racialized urban model, in which the absence of reparative policies and the

naturalization of racial hierarchies contributed to the perpetuation of socio-spatial inequalities. Brazilian cities thus emerge as concrete expressions of the colonality of power, demonstrating that the racial integration proclaimed at the discursive level was never translated into effective territorial inclusion.

3.1 Whitening, Urban Modernization, and the Racialization of Exclusion in Brazil

In the period following the abolition of slavery, Brazilian elites faced the need to reorganize the country's social and economic structure without, however, dismantling the racial hierarchies inherited from the colonial regime. Within this context, a national project guided by the ideology of whitening was consolidated, grounded in the belief that proximity to European standards constituted an indispensable condition for progress and civilization. As analyzed by Schwarcz (1993), policies promoting European immigration and the selective valorization of *mestiçagem* operated as central strategies of this project, while simultaneously relegating the Black population to subordinated positions within the social and urban structure.

Mestiçagem, although celebrated in official discourse as a symbol of national integration, was mobilized hierarchically, functioning as a mechanism for the dilution of Blackness and the reinforcement of white supremacy. Within this arrangement, mixed-race individuals were tolerated in an intermediate position, while the Black population remained systematically excluded from spaces of social, political, and territorial prestige (Benini et al., 2025).

This logic became particularly evident in the urban labor market, where, in the post-abolition period, formal employment opportunities were directed predominantly toward European immigrants. Activities previously performed by enslaved Black workers—in agriculture, commerce, and the emerging industrial sector—came to be occupied by these groups, while the Black population was pushed into informal labor, precarious occupations, and domestic service, perpetuating a deeply entrenched structure of racial inequality (Telles, 2004).

This economic marginalization produced direct effects on the spatial configuration of cities. Deprived of stable income and access to the formal housing market, the Black population was unable to occupy central areas or neighborhoods endowed with adequate infrastructure, being progressively displaced to precarious collective housing, such as tenements (*cortiços*), and later to informal settlements on the urban fringes. As Nascimento (2003) observes, this process consolidated a pattern of socio-spatial segregation that has been reproduced over time and remains a structural feature of contemporary Brazilian urbanization.

Urban reforms carried out at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century further deepened this exclusionary framework. Under the discourse of modernization and adaptation of cities to European models, urban interventions promoted large-scale removals of poor and predominantly Black populations from urban centers. This hygienist and racialized form of urbanism justified the expulsion of bodies deemed undesirable in the name of order, public health, and urban beautification. The reform led by Pereira Passos in Rio de Janeiro between 1902 and 1906 stands as an emblematic example of this process. Inspired by Haussmannian transformations in Paris, the city's remodeling entailed the demolition

of tenements and popular housing, making way for wide avenues and monumental buildings at the cost of the compulsory displacement of thousands of Black families (Abreu, 2022; Benchimol, 1992).

The destruction of the so-called *Little Africa*, a central territory of Black cultural, economic, and religious life in Rio de Janeiro, forcefully symbolizes this policy of erasing Black presence from the formal city. The emergence of the Providência favela—considered the first in the country—is directly associated with this process of expulsion, becoming a landmark of the exclusionary configuration that would come to characterize Brazilian urbanization (Benini et al., 2025). This model, based on segregation and territorial precarization, was replicated in numerous cities throughout the twentieth century, consolidating favelization as the material expression of the socio-spatial exclusion of the Black population (Valente & Berry, 2020).

The logic of urban hygienization also extended to the symbolic and cultural spheres through the systematic criminalization of Black cultural expressions. Afro-Brazilian religious practices, such as Candomblé and Umbanda, were persecuted under the claim that they represented backwardness and posed threats to public order. Cultural expressions such as capoeira and samba were likewise subjected to repression, and their practitioners were frequently labeled as vagrants or criminals. As demonstrated by Gonzalez and Hasenbalg (1982) and Silva (2020), these practices reveal the articulation between racism, urbanism, and social control, showing how urban norms were instrumentalized to discipline Black bodies and ensure the maintenance of the prevailing racial order.

Santos (2007) contributes to the understanding of this process by arguing that Western modernity is structured through a logic that produces absences, denying certain groups recognition as full subjects of rights. The so-called “sociology of absences” describes how racialized populations are kept within a zone of social, political, and economic invisibility, deprived of effective participation in the decisions that shape their living conditions.

In Brazil, the discourse of *mestiçagem* operated as part of this apparatus, presenting itself as a narrative of inclusion while, in practice, masking racial hierarchization and justifying the absence of reparative policies. Celikates (2025) identifies this mechanism as a central epistemological obstacle of structural racism: the production of narratives that depoliticize racial inequality and conceal its systemic nature under the appearance of cultural harmony.

The exclusion of the Black population from central urban spaces was thus naturalized and interpreted as a consequence of supposed individual economic or social limitations, rather than as the result of a structurally exclusionary system. This inversion of causality contributed to the consolidation of a racialized urban geography, in which white populations concentrate in areas endowed with infrastructure and high-quality services, while Black populations are pushed into territories marked by precariousness and the absence of urban rights (Ribeiro, 2023; Benini et al., 2025).

Despite the growing critique of the myth of racial democracy, the effects of the post-abolition period remain deeply inscribed in the organization of Brazilian cities. The Black population continues to be disproportionately affected by housing precarity, lack of basic sanitation, and insufficient urban infrastructure (Telles, 2004). Although the 1988 Federal Constitution formally guarantees the right to adequate housing and sanitation (Brazil, 1988),

these rights have not been equitably materialized in peripheral and informal territories, where Black populations predominantly reside.

Recent data from the 2022 Demographic Census indicate that 12.8% of Black (*preta*) individuals and 10.1% of Brown (*parda*) individuals live in favelas and urban communities—percentages significantly higher than those observed among white (4.9%), Indigenous (4.4%), and Asian (1.9%) populations (IBGE, 2023). This situation is further aggravated by persistent exclusion from access to basic sanitation: it is estimated that more than 49 million Brazilians still lack adequate connection to sewage systems, with millions relying on rudimentary septic tanks, direct discharge into water bodies, or lacking a toilet in their homes altogether—a condition that disproportionately affects peripheral and racialized populations (Estadão, 2024).

Contemporary urban policies, such as the militarization of favelas under the discourse of crime control and forced removals justified by revitalization projects or mega-events, update this historical pattern of exclusion. Far from promoting social inclusion, such actions intensify institutional violence and reinforce territorial control over Black and peripheral populations. As observed by Bearfield et al. (2023), the mere formulation of public policies is insufficient to address structural racial inequalities when not accompanied by effective implementation and rigorous evaluation mechanisms, resulting in the reproduction of a cycle of institutional inaction disguised as symbolic equity.

This pattern of state action underscores the structural nature of institutional racism, which operates through practices that appear neutral but are historically racialized. As argued by Wien, Miller, and Kramer (2023), it is precisely in the naturalization of these norms, procedures, and administrative devices that structural racism manifests itself, sustaining and reproducing racial exclusion even in the absence of explicit discriminatory intent.

4 RACIALIZATION OF URBAN SPACE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF SOCIO-SPATIAL SEGREGATION IN BRAZIL

The socio-spatial segregation that characterizes contemporary Brazilian cities constitutes one of the most evident expressions of how the ideology of *mestiçagem* has historically been mobilized to sustain racial hierarchies and legitimize structural inequalities. Far from representing an effective project of social integration, *mestiçagem* operated as a political and symbolic device that contributed to obscuring the centrality of race in the organization of urban space, while simultaneously naturalizing the exclusion of the Black population from territories endowed with infrastructure, services, and opportunities (Salmon, 2023). In this sense, the city is configured not as a neutral or universal space, but as a strategic field for the materialization of the coloniality of power, in which racial exclusion is reproduced through institutional, normative, and territorial arrangements (Quijano, 2005; Quintero, 2024).

The persistence of this pattern does not stem from occasional failures or isolated distortions in institutional functioning, but rather from the very way in which social, political, and economic relations have been historically structured. As Almeida (2019, p. 50) notes, this process is inscribed in the normality of societal organization, within which racism operates as a constitutive principle of legal, economic, political, and even familial dynamics. From this

perspective, socio-spatial segregation should not be understood as a deviation or anomaly, but as the concrete expression of an urban system that has historically privileged white elites while marginalizing Black and peripheral populations.

Analyzing urban segregation in Brazil therefore requires moving beyond strictly economic interpretations and incorporating race as a structuring element of spatial production. As Harvey (2014) argues, capital appropriates urban space as a means of expanding and reproducing social inequalities; in the Brazilian context, this dynamic is inseparably articulated with the racialization of territory. Private land ownership, real estate speculation, and mechanisms of urban valorization function as central devices of exclusion, restricting access by Black and low-income populations to well-located areas endowed with infrastructure. The ideology of *mestiçagem*, by promoting the narrative of a racially integrated society, operated as a legitimizing element of this process, masking the persistence of racial privilege within land tenure and urban structures.

Within this context, *mestiçagem* was instrumentalized to justify the absence of racial reparations policies and territorial redistribution. Gonzalez (2020) analyzes this phenomenon as an ideological mechanism aimed at diluting Black identity and weakening struggles for racial equality, while simultaneously reaffirming whiteness as the normative horizon of civilization. In the materiality of urban space, this logic translated into a city model that naturalized the presence of racialized bodies in precarious territories, transforming spatial exclusion into a structural element of the Brazilian urban landscape.

The concept of the “abyssal line,” proposed by Santos (2007), provides a fundamental analytical key for understanding this configuration. This symbolic line establishes a profound separation between those recognized as full subjects of rights and those relegated to a zone of social invisibility. In Brazilian cities, this division is concretely expressed in territorial organization: while central areas and planned neighborhoods concentrate high-quality infrastructure, universalized sanitation, and efficient public services, peripheral areas and favelas—predominantly inhabited by Black and Brown populations (IBGE, 2023)—remain marked by housing precarity, the absence of essential services, and the systematic denial of basic rights such as health, education, and security.

Socio-spatial segregation also manifests sharply in urban mobility, revealing how the racialization of space directly shapes everyday urban experience. As demonstrated by Maricato (2014) and Rolnik (2019), the Brazilian model of urban development imposes long and exhausting commutes on low-income populations—predominantly Black—between peripheral areas and employment centers. This pattern deepens temporal, economic, and symbolic inequalities by subjecting these groups to precarious transportation systems and daily routines marked by physical and emotional exhaustion.

Another central axis of racial urban segregation concerns the environmental dimension. Environmental racism is expressed in the unequal distribution of the impacts of urban degradation, disproportionately affecting racialized populations (Benini, Santos, & Souza, 2025). As Fernandes Rodrigues (2024, p. 151) observes, certain social groups experience heightened exposure to pollution, inadequate environmental services, the siting of toxic enterprises, and vulnerability to natural disasters. In Brazil, this reality translates into a scenario

in which peripheral territories predominantly inhabited by Black and Brown populations concentrate the greatest deficits in basic sanitation and are more exposed to flooding, landslides, and soil and water contamination (Godoy, Benini, & Palmisano, 2025).

Data from IBGE (2022) indicate that Black and Brown populations account for approximately 69% of those without adequate access to basic sanitation, living under conditions involving rudimentary septic systems, direct sewage discharge into water bodies, or the total absence of sanitary facilities—evidence of the structural dimension of environmental exclusion in the country (Mathias, 2024). This inequality also extends to solid waste management: as McClintock and Morris (2024) argue, the concentration of dumpsites, landfills, and waste disposal areas in peripheral territories reveals a racialized urban geography in which Black and poor populations are systematically exposed to environmental and health risks.

Policies involving the removal of racialized communities—often justified by urban revitalization projects or large-scale developments—reactualize historical practices of social hygienization. This model of urbanization, oriented toward real estate valorization and the commodification of space, has repeatedly disregarded the right of Black populations to remain in central and well-located areas, consolidating enduring patterns of territorial inequality (Godoy et al., 2024). As Ribeiro (2023) observes, the recurrent deterritorialization of Black communities demonstrates that *mestiçagem* never represented effective inclusion, but rather functioned as a narrative legitimizing exclusion and the loss of territorial, social, and cultural ties.

The historical refusal to recognize racism as a structuring element of urban inequalities has, for decades, hindered the implementation of affirmative action and urban justice policies. Almeida (2019) shows that structural racism manifests insidiously in the actions of public institutions, which often treat racial inequality as a secondary or nonexistent issue, relying on the myth of racial mixing to justify the absence of concrete interventions.

The notion of urban justice, as formulated by Harvey (2014), presupposes the equitable distribution of urban resources and opportunities, guaranteeing the right to the city regardless of racial origin or social condition. In Brazil, however, the ideology of *mestiçagem* has historically operated as an obstacle to such justice by producing the illusion of racial harmony and demobilizing demands for equity. Overcoming this condition requires recognizing *mestiçagem* as a mechanism of power and implementing explicitly anti-racist public policies oriented toward guaranteeing the right to the city for historically excluded populations (Torino, 2024).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analytical trajectory developed throughout this article demonstrates that socio-spatial segregation in Brazilian cities cannot be understood as a mere byproduct of general economic processes or as a collateral effect of accelerated urbanization. Rather, it constitutes a historical and institutionalized form of territorial organization in which race and class operate in an intertwined manner to determine who gains access to the formal city and who remains subjected to territorial precarization. From this perspective, the city does not merely express inequalities; it actively participates in their reproduction by selectively distributing

infrastructure, services, opportunities, and protection, thereby reinforcing racialized hierarchies under the guise of administrative routines and technical decisions.

The historical analysis of the post-abolition period reinforces this understanding. The absence of reparative and urban integration policies, combined with whitening strategies and the symbolic valorization of *mestiçagem*, shaped a durable pattern of marginalization of the Black population in labor, housing, and urban rights. Under discourses of modernization and progress, the reorganization of cities consolidated mechanisms of expulsion, deterritorialization, and invisibilization that persist into the present, demonstrating that the promise of racial integration functioned more as a legitimizing narrative than as an effective transformation of the material bases of urban inequality.

The findings also indicate that contemporary dynamics of exclusion—such as the financialization of urban land, real estate speculation, forced removals, the militarization of popular territories, and the unequal distribution of environmental risks—reproduce the same segregating matrix through new pathways. Although mechanisms vary across cities and historical moments, a recurring outcome is observed: the production of protected, well-served centralities contrasted with peripheries and favelas subjected to deficits in infrastructure, sanitation, and essential services. In this way, segregation operates as the everyday architecture of an apartheid that is not formally codified, yet is concretely experienced in spatial organization, mobility, exposure to vulnerabilities, and forms of territorial control.

Within this scenario, the article argues that fragmented responses—centered on isolated housing, mobility, or urbanization programs—tend to encounter clear limits when they fail to confront the structural and adaptive character of racism embedded in institutions and urban governance. The persistence of inequalities in access to sanitation, adequate housing, and environmental protection, for instance, suggests that deracialized policies often displace exclusion into other domains, leaving intact the logic of selective territorial valorization. Advancing beyond this condition requires recognizing that planning and public policies are arenas of dispute rather than neutral instances; when not guided by an explicit commitment to racial and territorial justice, they may reinforce the very vulnerabilities they purport to address.

As a practical implication, the democratization of the city requires an anti-racist urban agenda capable of combining historical reparation, territorial redistribution, and institutional transformation. This agenda includes: (i) prioritizing investments in infrastructure and sanitation in racialized territories; (ii) strengthening instruments that ensure permanence and protection against forced displacement; (iii) revising urban regulatory frameworks and administrative practices that reproduce inequalities under the mantle of technical neutrality; and (iv) incorporating intersectional metrics and public monitoring mechanisms capable of accurately assessing the racial impacts of urban policies. Equally central is the qualified expansion of popular participation—particularly of Black and peripheral communities—as a condition for breaking with historically exclusionary decision-making patterns and for recognizing territorial knowledge as a legitimate component of urban production.

Finally, this research outlines an agenda for future investigations aimed at deepening the analysis of urban resistance and the production of alternatives within racialized territories, examining the role of community networks, cultural practices, social movements, and

experiences of care and solidarity. It is also relevant to comparatively evaluate the performance of reparative and affirmative policies already implemented in different urban contexts, identifying conditions of effectiveness and institutional limits. In summary, the construction of urban justice in Brazil demands more than discursive recognition of the right to the city; it requires the concrete reorganization of priorities, instruments, and governing rationalities in order to confront the historical and institutional roots of racism that have thus far structured the very production of urban space.

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DECLARATIONS

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

- **Conceptualization and Study Design:** Sandra Medina Benini; Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy.
- **Methodology:** Sandra Medina Benini; Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy.
- **Formal Analysis:** Sandra Medina Benini; Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy; Angelo Palmisano.
- **Data Curation:** Sandra Medina Benini; Allan Leon Casemiro da Silva.
- **Investigation:** Sandra Medina Benini; Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy.
- **Writing – Original Draft:** Sandra Medina Benini.
- **Writing – Critical Review:** Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy; Angelo Palmisano; Allan Leon Casemiro da Silva.
- **Review and Final Editing:** Sandra Medina Benini; Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy.
- **Supervision:** Sandra Medina Benini.

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We, the authors of the manuscript “**Urbanization, Inequality, and Race: Socio-Spatial Segregation and Territories of Exclusion**”, declare that:

1. **Financial Relationships:** No funding institution or financial entity was involved in the development of this study.
 2. **Professional Relationships:** No professional relationships were established that could influence the analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the results of this manuscript.
 3. **Personal Conflicts:** There are no personal conflicts of interest related to the content of this manuscript.
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