

“Not a cozy dwelling”: Exploring Aspirational Anxieties and the Politics of Displacement in São Paulo’s Squats

Introduction

July 2018

São Paulo’s dense traffic was unpredictable; still, I was punctual, if also in a rush. What I found when I arrived at my destination was not what I had expected: the entrance to the Cine Marrocos squat was barred with plywood board, the flags removed, the inhabitants gone. Looking up the empty facade, I remembered the lively hours I had spent inside: the improvised cinema, the foosball tournament, the heated debates of the meetings. I fondly recalled the slow walks with Zé Roberto around the neighborhood, him making fun of the gluten-free cake at the fancy café of the nearby Teatro Municipal.¹ Zé Roberto, whom I had planned to meet, had seemingly forgotten to mention that the squat, his home of nearly three years, no longer existed.

Of course, the *reintegração* (literally, reintegration; in this context, the return of a squat to regular ownership) of the Cine Marrocos was not a surprise. For months, the dispute between the lawyers of the Movimento Sem-Teto de São Paulo (MSTS) and the city administration had simmered in the background of the squat’s everyday life. The stark contrast between the squat’s graffiti-filled plywood walls, garbage, and rat-infested sofas and the faded glamor of a once sophisticated luxury cinema had made Cine Marrocos particularly emblematic of São Paulo’s self-image, caught in the tension between a promising utopia and accelerated ruination. Finally, again, one of the city’s antiquated center’s countless occupied houses had been evacuated through the force of the military police, with more than three hundred families removed and the building reentered into the possession of the São Paulo city administration.

That Zé Roberto had not informed me that they would be moved made me realize—again—that such displacement is not exceptional; instead, it is, perhaps, even taken for granted. In the following pages, I make clear that many organized squatters reject ideas of permanency and residency as (hetero-)normative ideals that prop up the nexus among state control, (im-)mobility, and (il-)legality. On the one hand, in Brazil, the *longue durée* of violent struggles for land, access to urban space, and the political recognition of marginalized groups invites squats to be understood through a historical lens as sites that reinscribe the often racialized persistence of dislocation and exclusion in the contemporary moment.² On the other hand, within the particular social encounters of the squatter movement, key actors frame the lack of spatial durability and property ownership as nonsedentary and non-individualistic forms of human existence. This framing forces us to question how these values and normativities are perceived by less politicized and less vocal squat inhabitants.

An understanding of displacement as a complex and multilayered condition inextricably linked to the ailments of advanced capitalist societies is reflected throughout this special issue.³ It is an approach that divorces notions of displacement from a particular type of trauma related to political persecution and flight.⁴ Considering the contradictory experiences of displacement that are negotiated within a utopian housing project such as Cine Marrocos, this article argues that experiences of displacement that occur in people's lives take multiple forms and do not necessarily relate to movement from place. Rather, the diversity of experiences can reveal a disjuncture between contradictory experiences, the values emerging in these processes and divergent future orientations resulting from the desire to achieve them.

Only recently have researchers begun to investigate the negotiation of internal differences within fluctuating and often highly unstable collectives.⁵ Current forms of shelter-like squatting—in which citizens and migrants share space—may test assumptions of shared values as additional elements of difference and power inequality emerge.⁶

In the following, I consider squats to be spaces of aspiration, where people cohabiting across social categories can meet, interact, and transcend their internal differences for engaging in a housing project that is both utopian and solidarity-driven. In these spaces, different orientations encourage different forms of socialization and processes of place-making. As I intend to show, these processes can entail a particular striving for the “betterment” of life, that is not disconnected from the individual's past, but instead is socialized and spatialized in highly fragmented and sometimes even antagonistic ways. Compared to other forms of future-making, such as anticipation, expectation, speculation, and hope, aspiration describes an ambitious attitude, intrinsically motivated by the determination that this future is not only better but also feasible and plausible.⁷ In *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), Arjun Appadurai suggests that aspirations are an unevenly distributed resource and part of the cultural regime within which people function.⁸ Appadurai believes in the particular potential of new social movements to create a shared political horizon that can strengthen the capacity for aspiration.⁹ In contrast, I employ a power-critical approach and focus on the heterogeneity of these encounters. This tack will distinctly illuminate the aspirational horizons that are negotiated in these transformative but still asymmetric housing projects.

Methodologically, I refer to intermittent anthropological fieldwork conducted in São Paulo between 2014 and 2018. This work involved accompanying recent arrivals to the city as they engaged with different types of care-providing institutions, including churches, NGOs, humanitarian shelters, police stations, medical centers, and squats. My research was inspired by what Chris Vasantkumar would term “arbitrary itinerations.”¹⁰ That is, in order to avoid that the social pre-structuring of the research setting would determine my own epistemology and knowledge production in the research process, I avoided clear spatial, organizational, or social boundaries and categories. This paper's narrative concentrates on a small number of individuals who lived together under the roof of Cine Marrocos for several years, with whom I was in contact at various stages. Following Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, I understand these biographical trajectories as both exemplary future orientations that are part of a collectively shared historical momentum and as specific displacement experiences within particular social constellations, an approach enabling noticeable divergences to be assessed.¹¹

Squatting as a Form of Utopian Place-Making in Times of (Brazilian) Crisis

Until now, research has mainly focused on squats as symbolic laboratories of urban citizenship, in which we expect redefinitions of the relationships between property, citizenry, and cosmopolitan belonging. Their radically transgressive character has directed significant scholarly attention on squats as particular “spaces of hope.”¹² That is, they are seen as utopian political projects that transform the present into the future by resisting the consequences of urban evictions and global austerity policies through the horizontal, self-managed transformation of public spaces into commons:¹³ “abandoned space is recuperated and named not by the authorities but by squatters, territorial stigmatization is challenged, gentrification opposed and borders disarticulated.”¹⁴

In São Paulo’s old center, numerous squats function as places of bricolage for claiming the “right to the city.” This phrase refers to a promise made in the country’s 1988 constitution, which recognized the social function of property and decreed the involvement of citizens in urban polity decision-making processes.¹⁵ Accordingly, Brazil’s contemporary squatter movement can be understood as part of a rights movement with origins traceable not only to the (failed) agrarian mobilization of the military dictatorship but also to the early acts of peasant resistance in the nineteenth century, which similarly culminated in a struggle for land rights.¹⁶ More concretely, the mid-1980s observed the emergence of so-called *sem-teto* movements,¹⁷ which can be interpreted as a response to several intertwined political conflicts:¹⁸ thousands of poor people living in *cortiços* (privately built dormitory houses) had been expelled to the city’s periphery while public space was becoming increasingly privatized.¹⁹ Today, much of the São Paulo’s downtown area appears disheveled; however, it remains symbolically important not only for the poor but also for business people and the public administration, as it houses the offices of many state and municipal institutions. Hence, the “invasion” or “appropriation” of an empty building needs to be understood as a social, legal, and public act of resistance. These social movements exploit the absence of the state involvement in urban livelihood by appropriating these spaces and subsequently re-signifying national law, which affirms and protects the social meaning of property as a social right.²⁰ Notably, many occupations eventually led to the appropriation of the building from its original owner and transformation into social housing, proving the functionality of the movement’s strategy.²¹

The normality, the ordinariness, and the legitimacy of squatting must also be viewed through the lens of the circumstances that characterized Brazil during the years of my research, which saw the country marked by overlapping economic, political, and institutional crises. Several authors have analyzed how falling commodity prices, government failure to manage the economic crisis, and underinvestment in basic social services blew up in the form of corruption scandal Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash), which snowballed into a corporate drama entangling the country’s biggest companies.²² Further exacerbated by new austerity measures, in conjunction with political abuses linked to mega sports events like the World Cup (2014) and the Rio Olympics (2016), protesters mobilized and campaigned against President Dilma Rousseff and the Partido dos Trabalhadores (the Workers’ Party). This atmosphere of mass dissatisfaction built momentum for new conservative groups and populist voices, who encouraged the re-articulation of old hostilities toward ethnic and sexual minorities and immigrants.²³ In this tense climate, squats like the Cine Marrocos proved their political relevance as social integration spaces, with their sensitivity to social difference and the particular needs of minorities inherent to

their recruitment procedures. As spaces that not only host displaced people, but also push toward new political grounds, they are value-driven, resisting the marginalizing forces in Brazilian society.

Originally constructed in the 1940s as an administrative building, Cine Marrocos reopened in 1951 as a movie theater known as “the most luxurious in South America.”²⁴ It was closed in 1992 due to unprofitability and stood empty for two decades. In a year already characterized by the political crisis, 2013, the MSTs staged its “invasion” of the building. In contrast to the activists, who understood their squatting as an articulation of their legal claims, other residents moved in for other motives. Some came from the *favelas* (shanty towns) to live closer to public facilities. Others arrived as labor migrants from remote regions of Brazil, often from the north-east, unfamiliar with São Paulo’s unwritten and complicated housing rules. Still others were affected by individual life crises—social abandonment, drug addiction, or former incarceration—and wanted to avoid ending up in the city’s streets.

Finally, increasing numbers of foreigners reached São Paulo from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In the period since 2015, a period associated with the so-called refugee crisis and Europe’s politics of radical deterrence, many international migrants saw Brazil as a promising alternative and benefited from the relative generosity of Brazilian embassies in various African, especially Maghreb, countries, where they would receive a visa and book a flight to Brazil, a country some of them knew little about.²⁵ These new arrivals—especially those who had traveled on their own and had only weak pre-existing familial or ethnic networks—found support or basic accommodation at municipal or humanitarian organizations, at least for a few weeks or months.²⁶ This first phase was often followed by the monumental task of finding accommodation in São Paulo’s overcrowded megalopolis. According to my observations, many of these recent arrivals did not initially consider moving into a squat because they perceived its appearance as “rebellious” or “subversive.” However, over the course of their searching, they came to recognize squatting as a possible alternative residential mode; significantly, squatting promised more durability and eventually even advocacy, important characteristics in a city shaped by shared feelings of unrest, rupture, and the collective yearning for a better life. The following three sections will document my encounters with organizers and residents of Cine Marrocos in the context of their regular life; each of these case studies will distinctly illuminate not only different experiences and perceptions of displacement, but also modes of dwelling and future aspirations.

Isabel and Xinho: Aspiring to Unifying Visions

March 2016

While we set up chairs, cleaned the table, and arranged plastic cups, Isabel was nervous, wondering whether they would “all” turn up, referring to those she had contacted via WhatsApp that morning to remind them of the meeting. “Of course, we’re all busy; they all have other things to do on a beautiful Sunday,” she said impatiently, switching between first and third person. “But this is a political project, you know, this is not a cozy dwelling.” During my fieldwork, I heard this a lot. Squatting is not a “nice” or “comfortable” activity, Brazilian activists told me repeatedly, and it is not related to “arriving,” “settling,” and “establishing” a life. Echoing Isabel’s words, for many of them, it is, first of all, a political project.

A Brazilian activist in her late twenties, Isabel was one of the most engaged members of the MSTs. In contrast to others who lived in the squat, she did not usually spend the night there; instead, she lived with her parents in the city's more affluent north-west. Much of the time, especially on Sundays, she could be found organizing and conducting community activities, which she did in addition to her job as a youth worker. She had been involved in the *invasão* (invasion)—the occupation of Cine Marrocos—and the time-consuming work of repairing, preparing, moving in, and establishing a collective daily routine. On this day, a discussion was required about the art and flea market Isabel wanted to organize, primarily with the African residents, to increase their visibility and raise awareness for their unifying concerns. For Isabel, involvement in this squat is directly linked to the larger project of Brazilian society and the aligned struggles for decent living, such as the promotion of indigenous rights and the fight against biopiracy. Over the past five years, Isabel had begun to concentrate on São Paulo's squatter scene. In one of our conversations, Isabel described her joint activities as a way of "building a better future."

On this Sunday, Zé Roberto was among the first to appear, arriving with another resident. After greeting Isabel and me briefly, the two sat down in the first row. Gabriel and Xinho, two of Isabel's Brazilian friends who also were among the squat's main organizers, arrived and stood next to Isabel, with several others showing up over the next few minutes, mostly women and mostly Black, several with their children. Other attendees included some long-term squatters and some inhabitants who were generally happy to engage in community activities. I sat down at the back, next to Lucille and Angela, two Congolese women in their late thirties whom I had met previously.

There was a lively discussion during the meeting, with Isabel leading the group through the provisional agenda she had introduced at the beginning. After about an hour, the dynamic was flat; while Zé Roberto continued to follow Isabel's words with admiration, his friend had long since fallen asleep. The children became restless, some of the women left the room, and a lethargic atmosphere arose, which annoyed Isabel because she still wanted to organize the flea market. When a male Haitian resident remarked that he did not want anything to do with it anyway, there was a brief murmur of approval, causing Isabel to lose her patience. She addressed the man accusingly: "Who do you think you are? You have your job, your *permanência* [permanent residency], your little space, your wife, your family, and that's it? What is it that we're doing here?" An uncomfortable silence followed, with most attendees keeping their eyes down, the children staring at Isabel in surprise.

Xinho added, with slight condescension,

Neither the family, nor the little house, nor the workplace, nor the Worker's Party, nor the state or any other party can provide security. There is no security in these times. We are all displaced. The earth is no longer ours . . . This is not a cozy home. This is a political project; it's a struggle. We are—we have to be—against private possession. You cannot be comfortable here. We will not stay. We have to move our actions to another, really new, common ground. We need a new "us." (Translated from Portuguese)

In my readings, Xinho's words, "*estamos todos deslocados* (we are all displaced)," move beyond a narrow sense of displacement referring to forced removal from urban live-

lihoods. In contrast, Xinho seems to understand these conditions as symptoms of a wider process that prioritizes individualistic accumulation over the values of collectivities. Current social pressure in Brazilian cities are seen to directly follow traditional land rights issues, such as deforestation, exploitative industrialization, and hyper-metropolitanization. Within Xinho's outburst, a particular frustration was apparent, a frustration shared by large sections of the political left who feared that the political achievements of the 1990s—especially in the field of state-subsidized social benefits—would be undermined by the current political and economic crisis.²⁷ Xinho's words reminded me to understand displacement as relating to past ruptures and to the collective's attempt to build a better (i.e. a shared) future. This desire to bridge social differences corresponded with Isabel's view who, at another occasion, emphasized the particular interests of women living in the squat, arguing that they should unite to find alternatives for the lack of public institutions. According to Nathalia C. Oliveira and Amanda Paulista, women constitute a considerable majority of players in Brazil's housing movements.²⁸ Many single female residents had previously lived in the city's outskirts, where they were particularly poorly connected to public transport, schools, pediatricians, and other facilities. Given single mothers usually need to combine income-generating activities with domestic work, any social movement that advocates for decent living closer to the city center defends women's interests more than men's.

Thus, the activists, many of them Brazilian feminists, were all the more disappointed when female migrants and refugees living in the squats were reluctant to participate in the suggested activities. The tension between activists, who perceived the squat as a political space from which to build a more inclusive and egalitarian Brazilian future, and many of the other residents, who participated for different reasons of place-making, was palpable.

"Well, that's it for the moment," said Lucille firmly, in French, as she clumsily got up and stretched her limbs. Although she did not comment on the meeting itself, she rolled her eyes and whispered as she passed, "I'll be out of here soon. I'll tell you later. No more sermons." Leaving the room a few steps behind her, I recalled an earlier encounter with the two Congolese women, when they described their tumultuous arrival in São Paulo and their attempts to avoid ending up in the streets. How strange Xinho's stern reminder that inhabitants could not be comfortable in the squat must have sounded to those who had already been traveling unpredictably for years.

Lucille and Angela: Aspiring to a New Legal Foundation

February 2016

Lucille and Angela were possibly among the women targeted in the activists' criticism. Originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, the two and their three kids had lived in Cine Marrocos for more than two years. Following my repeated greetings and friendly gestures toward the children, we started talking; finally, they invited me to visit them in their room on the sixth floor, where the two shared an approximately fifteen-square-meter room. While we sat at a small table and talked, Angela prepared rice and beans for the children on a two-burner stove. During this longer conversation, both women honored the friendship they had forged during their first weeks in Brazil.

Immediately after their arrival in the city, the women had met in a shelter organized by a Catholic mission, where they were allowed to stay for three months. According to Lucille, who had been working as a primary school teacher in Kinshasa, moving into the

squat felt awkward at the beginning. However, given they had no place to stay, it offered them an invaluable alternative. Interestingly, Lucille's description focused on those aspects of squat life that she found "normal" and "correct." "Just like at *a casa* [the short name of the catholic shelter], they have a doorman, and only the doorman has the keys," she said. Before being allowed to move in, they had to present themselves in front of an assembly and accept a range of house rules concerning organizational matters such as cleaning, the use of communal spaces, and carrying a membership card to permit access to the building. Importantly, the movement's *carta de principios* (charter of principles) was addressed, which enunciated the idea of a political struggle, including the claim to the right to decent living circumstances. My attempts to understand their perception of living in a squat produced the following deeply considered remarks from Angela:

Every person who has just arrived needs to find their place. This is really a complicated city; in fact, it's a completely new world for me. Living together in this building is a bit like learning to live together in Brazil. Blacks, homosexuals, women, migrants, refugees, Syrians, Senegalese, Haitians, we have everything here [laughter]. This is something I like. And it also makes it easier for us. We don't have to do everything. Sometimes another woman takes care of the kids, and I try to get some papers done. These things are very complicated in Brazil, and they often take the entire day. You go here, then there, and then the day is already over. I am happy when I am back home, but the most important thing is to get these things done so that we know that we're legal here in Brazil. Then everything can continue in an easier way.

Angela referenced at least two different aspects of displacement and reorientation: socialization and legalization. The social dimension was represented as the absence of familiar social belonging compensated for by the feeling of collectivity in a new social environment. Having left her former life and citizenship status behind, she experienced the diversity of Brazil's society as something she had to get used to. The squat's microcosm derived from its diversity, with inhabitants from a variety of backgrounds required to support each other, if only for pragmatic reasons; this environment helped Angela navigate the unfamiliarity. Furthermore, both women appreciated that this daily routine did not "just happen" but was organized and well structured. They compared the organizational features of the squat with forms of spatial and social order they had experienced when living in the shelter. Indeed, their perceptions stood in contrast to large segments of the scholarly literature that problematize humanitarian bureaucracies as technologies of segmentation; to them, the strict organization was not a form of control or confinement, but rather engendered the possibility of belonging to a regular(ized) and securitized social entity.

Nevertheless, the rupture from their political and legal foundations seemed more critical to the two women. In their narratives, Lucille and Angela repeatedly used the terms *réfugiés* (refugees) and *personnes déplacées* (displaced persons) and alluded regularly to the parameters of international humanitarian aid by describing themselves as *solicitantes* (in this context, asylum seekers). Over the course of their more than a year long journey from Central Africa to Brazil, they had both dealt with a variety of normatively charged mobility categories and learned to use or problematize the political frameworks associated with these concepts—frameworks that changed according to the respective

national context. Under conditions of forced migration, these terms signal something more profound than individual experiences, becoming powerful and politicized conceptual templates that are suitable for both self-positioning and demarcating categorical boundaries with other groups.²⁹ Angela insisted on showing me her *protocolo*, a provisional document provided by the Brazilian government that constitutes a temporary legal umbrella, and her SUS card (granting access to the publicly funded health care *Sistema Único de Saúde*).³⁰ Furthermore, the two women repeatedly highlighted how their entry to the country had been documented *correctement*—in this context, officially and legally—and that this status allowed them to access certain social benefits.

Against this background, the two women's encountering "authorities" of different kinds in their everyday routines can be understood as important for their individual place-making. This sentiment was based on the powerful legal connotation of *faire avancer les choses* (getting things done), a term they used to describe the satisfaction of completing bureaucratic acts associated with the nursery, the upcoming schooling of Lucille's oldest child, certain medical exams, and especially their asylum procedures. Various anthropological works have thoroughly examined the significance of not only paperwork but also personal encounters with bureaucratic entities in conditions of migratory legal limbo. Such researchers have demonstrated that many asylum seekers infuse these bureaucratic procedures with their hopes for belonging, recognition, and "legibility."³¹ While they realized the frequent arbitrariness of these bureaucratic institutions, Lucille and Angela seemed to express their gratitude for the legal support they had received, especially at the beginning of their stay in Brazil, by continuing to visit the Refugee Center of the Catholic organization that accompanied their asylum claim. Although no legal proceeding had been communicated for several months, they still considered it important to make short visits at least once a week to express their loyalty. It struck me as particularly apparent that some asylum seekers understood the type of communal accommodation, the organizational structure, the advisory services of humanitarian institutions and the squat's legal struggles as comparable forms of support.

However, legality should not be confused with a territorialized understanding of place-making. Several works have indicated that, especially for female refugees, bureaucratic and medical encounters can accrue particular meanings in connection with themes of physiological and social reproduction.³² Similar notions emerged from Angela and Lucille's conceptions of the future, which evidently incorporated a capacity to move beyond the squat's status-quo, especially with regard to their children's futures.

A few days after the meeting, we bumped into each other by chance, and Lucille impatiently asked me to come to her room. There, she told me that her appointment with CONARE (the National Committee for Refugees) had already taken place, that everything was moving very quickly, and that the lawyers at Caritas had told her that the granting of the asylum has already been entered into the database. As a recognized *refugiado* (refugee), she said, the situation was about to change. With her son, she planned to move to the apartment of a friend in Vila Suzana, one of the city's better districts, where she might even find a job. Additionally, as soon as possible, she planned to apply for a visa to the United States, where her favorite cousin lived. Confidently, she told me, "An occupation is not a thing where you stay; I never wanted to stay, in fact. As an accepted refugee, you receive more respect; you have your papers clean, *tu peux être procédée* [you can be processed]."

Lucille had experienced not only the asylum-seeking procedure but also other moments of documentation and monitoring of her presence in Brazil as modes of inclusion, which correlated with her aspiration to a better—that is, appropriate—and recognized form of human existence. Interestingly, upon achieving this type of recognition—that is, when her asylum claim was approved—she felt empowered as a proper, that is, “processable” subject. The law’s perceived ability to provide sufficient protection was evident in Lucille’s immediate and unrestrained use of the bureaucratic gain as a galvanizing moment, announcing *bientôt je sortirai d’ici* (I’ll be out of here soon). That is, this new, promising legal condition was a springboard to her next goal, the continuation of her journey farther north. This was a critical juncture: where her future previously felt diffuse, contingent, and even faltering, Lucille clearly sensed her future orientation shift, becoming an aspiration, something concrete and more reliable. These aspirations structure how and why she engages with the squat, but they also reflect her own personal readings on a future that may not align with those of other inhabitants of the squat, where the anxieties of a slow and risky legal process prevailed.

Zé Roberto: Aspiring to a Residential Future

August 2015

I spoke to Zé Roberto for the first time following another meeting at Cine Marrocos, during which obligatory *atos* (activist activities) were planned. During the meeting, the dark-skinned man, who was around sixty years old, sat next to me, constantly dozing off. Later, when we left the room, I asked him his opinion of the event; hesitantly, he told me how much he liked their talk: “They always speak in a very beautiful way, I like it a lot.” Later, standing at a nearby street corner, I recognized him and his friend in a bar and joined them. I tried to understand their impressions of the meeting over a beer, but Zé Roberto mainly laughed at my questions. Finally, he reluctantly showed me a WhatsApp message that had been sent to him and others to mobilize them. Although I barely understood his northern accent, I sensed that he was trying to tell me that he had participated mainly out of a sense of duty, or loyalty, rather than because he was intrinsically interested in the event.

Over the coming weeks, I ran into Zé Roberto repeatedly, and we always made small talk. He had grown up in Caxias, a small town in the northeastern Brazilian state of Maranhão, and had been married twice. While he described the relationship with his children—two sons and a daughter—as particularly important, he also portrayed his family situation as *uma abagunça* (a mess) caused by poverty, drugs, violence, and his son’s constant conflicts with the police. Like thousands of other *nordestinos*, Zé Roberto had come to São Paulo about fifteen years ago, when a construction boom hit the city. Broadly speaking, millions of domestic migrants had traveled from rural to urban areas in Brazil during the twentieth century, contributing to the physical and social construction of its expanding cities.³³ For Zé Roberto, this move meant both distance from his family’s issues and easy access to work. Although he remained irregularly employed, he managed to send part of his salary back to his family in Caxias, beginning to invest his income in the construction of a small house there in the north, a project that had come under threat when he lost his employment several months before we met. However, he maintained that one day he would return to his place of origin and spend his retirement close to his grandchildren.

Zé Roberto had opted to live in squats mainly on pragmatic grounds. Renting an apartment in São Paulo was impossible without a solid guarantor, an obstacle even many middle-class Brazilians cannot overcome. For a while, it had been common for activists who were better off and had reliable connections to a local bank to sell guarantees to poorer squat residents. However, Zé Roberto did not get one, which he interpreted as a personal rejection. My inquiries about the notion of squatting as a political project first prompted Zé Roberto to speak of his two roommates, with whom he always drinks a beer in the evening. Then, speaking softly, he came back to the *movimento*, the MSTs: “Wow. These people speak in such a beautiful way. If we do not fight, we cannot win . . . We are workers, we too are struggling every day, so that we can continue, so that things go on. Things get better, and, at some point, I can go home, and there my house will be. To me, this is important.” In contrast to the examinations of the previous two sections, for Zé Roberto, the term *deslocamento* (displacement) does not explicitly apply. Like many other *nordestinos*, Zé Roberto has had no higher education and could do little with the activists’ often overtheorized positions. Instead, he was impressed by their charisma and the power of their performances, using the aesthetics of political speech to express his feelings of solidarity with the political project he had become part of. Accordingly, my questions possibly forced him to confront the challenges of understanding the semantics of the political aspirations of the movement, reminding him of just how much he differed from the squat organizers. The ideological distances and language barriers that often surfaced between activists and other inhabitants can be understood as a reflection and (often unintended or careless) reproduction of structural inequalities. Miguel Martínez’s study of squats in Spanish cities observed a comparable configuration; that is, white, European, middle-class, and highly educated activists—often constituting the majority of squatters—employ a purely theoretical anti-fascist and anti-racist rhetoric without consistent encounters with inhabitants from different educational and (one might add) class backgrounds.³⁴

Zé Roberto could be said to have experienced displacement three times. First, alienated from his family, he searched for less conflictive social conditions when he moved to São Paulo. However, his identification of the squat as a replacement for family was compromised by the intentionally provisional nature of the political project; as such, this constituted his second displacement. Additionally, barely identifying with the idea of politicized struggle and not sharing the language for articulating this position, Zé Roberto’s future plans were focused on his daily labor and the generation of income, which enabled him to imagine his house project and understand himself as a socially engaged and valuable person. Referring to Ghassan Hage, Annika Lems reminds us that in conditions of displacement, references to past and future places, can be equally relevant in constructing a meaningful and livable present.³⁵ As such, Zé Roberto’s unemployment, a fate he shared with many other *nordestinos* living in São Paulo during this period, constituted a third instance of displacement: it prevented him from sending his money home and threatened his construction plans, hence also destroying the material grounds of his social aspirations.

The day I found Cine Marrocos empty, in July 2018, I contacted Zé Roberto via Facebook Messenger. Although finding his concrete location was difficult because he replied only sporadically, we managed to meet a few days later. As we hugged, I noticed that he had apparently been drinking a lot, which had not previously been his custom.

I also didn't remember his teeth being so black; he looked neglected. We walked "our" route—on which he once again had a great time making fun of the visitors at the theater café who paid a fortune for a simple couscous. I told him how much had changed since my last stay in Brazil, how I could hardly manage to keep up, and that everything changed so quickly, especially given the country's political crisis. I imagined that Jair Bolsonaro's election must have been perceived as a frightening turning point for lives at the margins of the Brazilian state. However, Zé Roberto told me that he got accustomed to the government's most recent shifts and did not worry about them anymore. He also explained that he had decided not to live in a building, instead living "sometimes here, sometimes there," and added that his friends also preferred to sleep outside, where there was no need to pay rent. "The Marrocos" had been far too expensive anyway, he said. Only later, on my own again, I understood that these euphemisms were probably Zé Roberto's way of avoiding admitting that he had begun sleeping on the subway air ducts at night.

Concluding Thoughts

This political housing project brought an enormous diversity of residents together for at least a certain period of time, giving rise to hopes for a better future, a future more equal and politically committed. Beyond Cine Marrocos and contemporary Brazil, political actors try to equalize the diversity of displacement experiences and create a shared political ground in numerous comparable transitory hallways, occupied spaces, solidarity encounters, self-help initiatives, and other activist projects around the world. Not focusing on where they come from but on where they intend to go, the people involved in these projects find pragmatic commonalities that enable their particular form of future-making.

Being aware of this diversity of experiences, Ramsay and Cabot, in the introduction to this special issue, clearly elaborate that displacement may represent the "new normal." While this observation is likely accurate, it is worth recognizing the aspirations that emerge along with these processes of displacement; aspirations that can be differential and contingent. At concrete moments of social interaction that are intended to produce a new, lived form of sociality for demanding social justice, new anxieties over differences in attitudes, prospects, and power positions surface.

For example, the Brazilian activists hold onto memories of a repressive political system and fear the possible loss of democratic achievements, leading to the perception of daily routines loaded with static notions of "comfort" and "coziness" as disturbing, if not threatening. Their very specific past experiences make such anxiety understandable, including their contention that challenges—and, ultimately, social justice—can only be approached through solidarity and political mobilization.

The perspectives of the two refugee women, driven by their loss of political and legal incorporation as citizens of their nation, differ markedly. For asylum seekers, different formalized and bureaucratized modes of encounter under conditions of involuntary collectivization can serve as compensatory forms of emplacement within the broader context of overcoming their experience of political exclusion. It is the continuity of legal liminality, rather than control or containment, that is felt in a way that is comparable to the anxieties felt by the activists and organizers.

Meanwhile, the third case study, that of Zé Roberto, moves beyond the normative and legalistic connotations of displacement, acknowledging its existential dimensions.

That is, when humans experience dispossession in a profound and deeply disturbing way, when their work, their material achievements, and their social relations prove unreliable and unsustainable, their foundations as social beings are erased.

My observations make clear that all actors involved actively struggled to collaborate effectively and support each other; however, remaining part of a fragmented, polarized social system, they experience their future aspirations disintegrate. That is, while Brazilian society fails to dispel the shadows of its past, while refugees have to fear the revocation of their legal basis, and while welfare protection excludes the poor and the poorest, the possibility of a shared political foundation remains precarious. My research reveals how the lack of political, legal, or social reliability—which can eventually negate future aspirations—is accompanied by the affective reflexes of anxiety. From a scholarly perspective, this tension between differently positioned perceptions and orientations should be understood as a key component of the aspirational regime that needs to be recognized as an immanent element of these housing projects. That is, the capacity to aspire does not “just happen”; instead, it is a precious resource that must be extracted, ultimately reifying social differences once again. By recognizing this—that aspiration is distributed unevenly around a heterogeneous set of competing values—we can fruitfully avoid a universalizing or even trivializing perception of displacement.

NOTES

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1. All personal names are self-chosen pseudonyms.

2. See the introduction to this special issue.

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 8. Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (New York: Verso, 2013), 187–88.
 9. Appadurai, *Future as Cultural Fact*, 190.
 10. Chris Vasantkumar, “Becoming, There? In Pursuit of Mobile Methods,” in *Methodologies of Mobility. Ethnography and Experiment*, ed. Alice Elliot, Roger Norum, and Noel B. Salazar (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), 82.
 11. Bryant and Knight, *Anthropology of the Future*.
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 15. The legal instrument is Law n. 10,257, passed on July 10, 2001; i.e., twelve years after the enactment of the Brazilian Federal Constitution. The law, called “Estatuto da Cidade,” regulates the development of the social functions of the city and of urban properties; see Raquel Rolnik, *Guerra dos Lugares: A colonização da terra e da moradia na era das finanças* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2015).
 16. Raquel Rolnik, “The Financialization of Homeownership and Housing Rights,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 3 (May 2013): 1058–66; Rolnik, *Guerra dos Lugares*; Bea Wittger, *Squatting in Rio de Janeiro. Constructing Citizenship and Gender from Below* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017); Wendy Wolford, *This Land Is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meaning of Land in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
 17. Literally, “movements without a roof”; these are social movements that define their identity to include the absence of decent housing.
 18. Successful overviews of the history of these organizations can be found in Nathalia C. Oliveira, “Os Movimentos Dos Sem-teto Da Grande São Paulo (1995–2009)” (master’s thesis, University of Campinas / São Paulo, 2010) and Wolford, *This Land is Ours Now*; Earle, *Transgressive Citizenship*, and Rolnik, *Guerra dos Lugares*, focus on more recent developments.
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35. Lems, "Placing Displacement."