The Politics of Differentiation and the Co-Production of the "Model Periphery" in Brazil’s Public Housing

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Abstract
In Latin America’s pink tide democracies, peripheries were pivotal openings into the ambiguities of political and economic urban governance. Once portrayed as territories of decay, state disregard, and societal oblivion, peripheries turned into key moral and spatial assemblages in Brazil’s post-neoliberal project of a “de-poorer,” middle-class country. This article draws on ethnographic research conducted in two peripheral Minha Casa Minha Vida projects—Brazil’s large-scale public housing program—in the city of Porto Alegre. Charting the long-term entanglements of local activism, communal hope, and national developmentalism, I argue that peripheral zones illuminate the ambivalences of state- and place-making. Unveiling the politics of differentiation and distended governance that render one periphery a successful case of state and market intervention over the other, I explore how images of the “model periphery” are enforced through local infrastructures of worth and the effacement of its failed Other: the intractable faraway periphery, deemed to disappear in the name of public accountability and social and economic development. In conclusion, the article suggests that the consorted travails of leaders, citizen activists, politicians, and planners in casting visibility onto the model periphery contribute to bolstering and obscuring extant patterns of urban segregation and social inequality.

Public Policies; Peripheries; Minha Casa Minha Vida; Governance; Moralities; Worthiness

Introduction
Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, political and economic governance in Brazil’s urban fringes took new directions. Initially consolidated through autoconstruction (Cavalcanti 2007; Holston 1991; Caldeira 2015, 2017), organized political mobilization (Kowarick 1979; Bonduki and Rolnik 1979), and insurgent activism (Holston 2008; Earle 2012; Caldeira and Holston 2005), peripheries have become socially and culturally heterogeneous (Feltran 2014, 2020). Increased demographic density, advancing deindustrialization and informality, and sprawling illegal markets (Feltran 2011; Beckert and Dewey 2017; Dewey 2018) have coexisted with unprecedented external aid levels—from mass public housing to private developers to low-income consumer markets (Marques 2013).
The inclusion of vulnerable populations and peripheral areas in the *modus operandi* of markets and governments distended the boundaries of urban governance. Still, peripheries and their subjects have not been evenly integrated into official state narratives about development and access to low-income consumerism that marked Brazil’s early twenty-first-century growth (Kopper and Damo 2018). Differences in access to workable public infrastructures, communitarian organization, and participation continue to define the kinds of peripheries to enter public debates, and the politics of representation and visibility of peripheral space more generally.

This article examines how peripheral residents in Porto Alegre, Southern Brazil, coalesced around a project of urban, political, and economic development to co-produce what they termed a “model periphery.” Leveraging communitarian and governmental structures, these residents mobilized to expunge ideas about peripheries as decaying, hopeless, and violent enclaves. In their efforts to undo decades-long images of danger and cultural backwardness (Lewis 1959), they modeled themselves against the perceived failures of another peripheral space, thereby highlighting their own centrality to the city’s politics and economy (Fischer 2014).

I explore how differences in place-making are enacted through “local infrastructures of worth.” By this term, I refer to the moral maneuverings and apparatuses through which local leaders, activist citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats co-produce a model periphery. They attempt to do so by contrasting their travails against the backdrop of other peripheries—and peripheral subjects—deemed less worthy of public attention and relief. Relying on these infrastructures of worth, model citizens develop prospective forms of waiting and hoping for housing, even when they do not meet all the criteria to become a beneficiary. By interrogating the production of these moral differences, I attend to peripheries at once as moral and spatial zones co-produced at the intersection of intervention programs, grassroots organizations, and activist subjectivities.

I conducted ethnographic research for this project between 2012 and 2017, accompanying housing activists as they organized, in 2009, to demand apartment units through Brazil’s largest housing policy, the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (MCMV) program, and in 2014 moved to Residencial Bento Gonçalves. Throughout and after this process, I followed political activities, expert commissions on housing, and meetings between activists, leaders, street-level bureaucrats, and state and market representatives. I interviewed beneficiaries at their old homes and in their new apartments, and implemented a sociodemographic survey amongst the 160 heads of household on their changing political, economic, and subjective conditions.

This paper is divided into four sections. Part one locates MCMV within the broader context of Brazil’s peripheral housing initiatives and describes how the program grew into a pervasive technology of government to produce model urban peripheries. Part two offers an ethnographic...
narrative of the fraught encounter between organized community representatives and residents of a purportedly failed MCMV project. Section three discusses the politics of place-making and the interplay of visibility and effacement that arises from this social clash, suggesting that model peripheries in Brazil came to rely on governmental and market forces to strategically promote the erasure of social, political, and economic failure.

Part four examines how a model activist, excluded from MCMV due to registration inconsistencies, prompted local leaders to tinker with official selection criteria and devise alternatives to keep the quest for the model periphery afloat. In conclusion, I juxtapose the lower and upper moral boundaries of political, economic, and communitarian governance that have modulated Brazil’s peripheral spaces in recent years. I suggest that the joint efforts of leaders, citizen activists, politicians, and planners to cast visibility onto the model periphery has contributed to reinforcing and obscuring extant patterns of urban segregation and inequality across the city.

**Governing Through the (Peripheral) House**

D esigned and launched in 2009, toward the end of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s second presidential term, MCMV was tasked with constructing 3.4 million homes as part of an ambitious effort to infrastructurally upgrade and modernize the country’s big ailing cities. Bankrolled by the government’s Growth Acceleration Program and the public bank Caixa Econômica Federal, the program first received a budget of R$ 34 billion (ca. US$ 14.17 billion) to grapple with burgeoning housing deficits and sub-optimal living conditions. The federal government estimated these to encompass 10.4 percent of all Brazilian households—nearly 6,123 million housing units (IBGE 2009). Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Cities, another R$ 72 billion (ca. US$ 30 billion) was allocated in 2011 to roll out a second phase of the program.

The government announced MCMV at a critical juncture of the 2008 financial crisis (Shimbo 2012). It helped consolidate the Workers’ Party’s governing style, which relied heavily on the concession of savings-leveraged financial subsidies to investors and the expansion of consumer credit amongst lower-income groups. By issuing highly subsidized mortgages to families earning up to three monthly minimum wages (some US$ 650 as of 2009) and granting below-market interest rates on mortgages to families earning between three and ten monthly minimum wages, MCMV became a stalwart fixture in Brazil’s pledge against endemic poverty.

As I discuss elsewhere (Kopper and Damo 2018), between 2004 and 2013, Brazil accrued 40 percent GNP growth and 58 percent household income growth, while unemployment rates plummeted to an all-time low 4.8 percent in 2014, and fiscal cuts on household appliances incentivized domestic consumption. Brazil ended 2012 with its lowest Gini coefficient since 1960, leading economists and policymakers to hail the end of endemic poverty and the incorporation of some 40 million people into Brazil’s nalwart fixture in Brazil’s pledge against endemic poverty.
into what was proclaimed Brazil’s “new middle class” (Xavier Sobrinho 2011; Pochmann 2012; Neri 2008; Souza 2010; Salata 2016). Minha Casa Minha Vida stood at the forefront of these large-scale transformations, both reflecting extant narratives of social and economic upward mobility and bolstering the expansion of social policies and consumption markets into remote peripheral space.

From the perspective of Brazil’s urban peripheries, MCMV blends in as the continuation of a longstanding tradition of social and economic initiatives targeting the country’s persisting housing deficit. The story of unequal land access dates back to post-abolition society, but it deepens its roots throughout the twentieth century via the joint mechanisms of industrialization and reckless urbanization (Fischer 2008). Early urban ethnographies documented the fraught “processes of integration” (Cardoso and Durham 1977, 133) of these new social and economic contingents into the city fabric, which gave rise to vast squatter settlements of low-skilled labor in the outskirts of vertically growing, urban, middle-class centers (Durham 1973).

Throughout this period, the built environment of peripheries was an important site of poverty governance. Favelas, with their piecemeal arrangements of self-construction and ways of living (Cavalcanti 2007; Valladares 1978), were recast by urban planners as decaying byproducts of modern growth and urbanization, paving the way for the construction of low-income housing initiatives on the outskirts of the city (Bortoluci 2016). Writing about the predicaments of the informal city (Fischer, McCann, and Auyero 2014), anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2015, 2017) has explored the concept of “autoconstruction”—the construction of homes and neighborhoods by residents themselves—as a pervasive way of producing urban space and place-making in cities of the Global South. Peripheral urbanization, she argues, intertwines grassroots politics, state-led urbanization, and ways of experiencing the city that reflect patterns of inequality and social heterogeneity.

While MCMV made a dent in such patterns of peripheral urbanization by widening the scope of state and market intervention, it did not significantly revert the number of informal settlements or the piecemeal architecture of favelas (Cardoso and Aragão, 2013; Cardoso et al., 2017). Instead, it added new layers of urban complexity and infrastructural unfinishedness, yoking diverse societal interests around the promises of necessary infrastructure for the poor while also revalidating the fraught power of homeownership ideologies as critical technologies of governance and nation-building.4

Low-income projects became the battlegrounds for experimental forms of democratic governance via inclusive consumption as they were taken up as political flags by grassroots movements advocating the right to housing. Traveling through the local arms of the state, housing benefits were contentiously adjudicated by city housing authorities, overhauling previous municipal initiatives and eliciting new bureaucratic infrastructures to document, monitor, and engage the poor’s hope for homeownership.
In what follows, I show that direct participation in the outcomes of public policies shaped novel forms of distended governance in Brazil’s urban peripheries. Autoconstructed peripheries remain essential byproducts of selective urbanization—and their dwellers continue to live mostly outside the radar of societal outcry and without access to workable infrastructures. Still, the expansion of social and economic policy targets created new peripheral assemblages shaped, in an unprecedented way, by the consorted forces of state intervention, access to consumer markets, communitarian organization, and citizen activism.

Together, they elicited what I call “model peripheries”: highly visible moral and spatial zones wherein people’s will to thrive conflates with local “infrastructures of worth,” low-income consumer markets, and a state eagerly promoting the erasure of poverty through nationwide middle-class discourse. In the next section, I draw on my ethnography in Porto Alegre to document how one version of the model periphery came into being through the moral work of two housing activists seeking to contrast their experience of state-market-community collaborations against the backdrop of a failed project deemed to fall into oblivion.

Communities of Hope and Failure

“The situation cannot get worse,” said a confident lady in her sixties as she burst through the door. With her deep voice, Benedita addressed an inconspicuous entourage of right-hand allies standing in the back of a makeshift building used as headquarters for a local housing association. She was distressed by the announcement made that same afternoon by the city’s Secretary of Housing, threatening to upend the construction of Residencial Bento Gonçalves—the latest of seven projects constructed under MCMV on the outskirts of Porto Alegre.

As was usual with public-private partnerships, the construction conglomerate had been undergoing severe financial problems since signing the contract with the Municipal Housing Department in 2009. Bureaucratic deadlocks with Caixa Econômica Federal escalated quickly as the program reached Brazil’s most remote cities. By February 2013, rumors had spread that the construction would be suspended due to bankruptcy, unsettling hundreds of families slated to move to Residencial Bento Gonçalves from various informal settlements in Porto Alegre’s peri-urban Partenon neighborhood.

Located some ten kilometers away from the city center, Partenon is a vast and socioeconomically diverse area that was once the pinnacle of Porto Alegre’s literary intelligentsia and home to many nineteenth-century state institutions. Between 1940 and 1980, it grew into a receptacle for rural and informal migration. Today, formal land in the neighborhood’s modernized and urbanized sectors is scarce and mostly under the control of real estate developers—a reoccurring reality that pushes MCMV projects to remote peripheral space with precarious urban infrastructure (Cardoso and Lago 2013; Kopper 2016; Bonduki 2009; Cardoso et al. 2017). Thus,
it came as a welcome surprise when the municipality announced the construction of Residencial Bento Gonçalves in Partenon’s prime real estate market, promising to work alongside grassroots movements to address the region’s historically high housing deficit.

The association, presided over by Benedita, enjoyed direct communication channels with municipal authorities, honed over years of activism in Porto Alegre’s renowned Participatory Budgeting. On that scorchingly hot summer afternoon, city authorities assuaged Benedita that she should continue to assemble militants and not let them lose hope in their homeownership. As uncertainty mounted, leaders wanted to reinstate the dream that the poor could finally descend from the “hilltops” into a modern world represented by the “asphalt.”

João and Pedro, two of Benedita’s closest advisers, then had the idea of traveling to Restinga, a remote periphery located in Porto Alegre’s rural south and host to all six other MCMV projects. Restinga was a direct product of extemporaneous housing resettlements in the 1960s, when the Municipal Housing Department, to cleanse the overpopulated and decadent city center, forcibly resettled thousands of families in a newly designed space on the fraught promise of creating jobs and expanding urban infrastructure. Sixty years later, Restinga’s obdurate precariousness has become publicly associated with ruination and failure. Yet, cheap land and underpaid labor make it amenable to receiving new waves of affordable housing.

João and Pedro wondered what sort of life could emerge from the lack of communitarian organization and state effacement. João gestured at my camera and thought I could be of use. By producing videos and pictures of a project deemed to have failed, they wanted to generate comparable data that could be organized and presented to the association’s members during the following meetings. Contrasting images of entrenched precariousness with their travails as housing activists, João and Pedro would help warn their selected constituency of the pitfalls of losing sight of collective mobilization.

João, Pedro, and I soon left the association’s headquarters for a one-hour bus ride that dropped us off at a poorly lit dirt road. There was not much to see, except for the immense gated complex of buildings rising from the bushes. João announced this was Residencial Ana Paula, an MCMV project comprised of 416 units and inaugurated only a few months earlier. Pedro was holding a new edition of Diário Gaúcho. This newspaper regularly published about how public housing in Restinga was being vandalized, deserted, and taken over by traffickers, causing anxiety and uncertainty amongst the remaining dwellers.

Even though we arrived unannounced, we quickly spotted the building manager, who told us that the central plaza and playground had been destroyed shortly after the condominium’s inauguration. Outsiders had squatted some thirty or forty unused units while others had been ravaged and graffitied. He complained about too many kids left roaming unattended in the common area while their mothers were preoccupied with arguments, gossip, and yelling at neighbors. “They started selling the apartments the day we moved in,” he added.
As we walked through the common areas, we called the attention of many bystanders, who amassed in the plaza's windows and on benches. While Pedro jotted down notes and “interviewed” residents, I was intrigued by the pervading suspicion sparked by our presence. As beneficiaries, I thought, people must be aware of public housing’s political relevance for planners and state representatives wanting to model a better city.

Map 1. Porto Alegre, Partenon, and Restinga. Source: Google Maps [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

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Although locally administrated, MCMV projects follow an overarching architecture determined at the national level by Caixa Econômica Federal. Buildings are usually made up of several five-story towers placed next to each other to enable sociability. As anthropologist Teresa Caldeira has shown (2000), fortified enclaves constitute a widely deployed form factor amongst traditional upper-middle classes in their quest for safety and isolation in Brazil’s urban centers. They have now been scaled-up and deployed to govern, secure, and rescue people from endemic poverty. Attempts to evaluate the sort of life made possible by such condominiums are part of how housing projects tap into public debates, but they are also at the core of how beneficiaries engage as integral parts in these projects.

We found Seu Ivo, a retired man, resting under a tree. During weekdays, he kept himself busy drinking mate tea and watching kids playing with stones near the shared parking lot. He told us that families were not fully prepared to move to a regulated social environment. Initiatives to raise awareness (trabalho de conscientização) were necessary to help build appreciation for the tidy apartments they had received. He stopped midway to reprimand a kid who was climbing on a car then carried on: “I often find myself in a position where I need to educate other people’s children. There is a cultural shock (choque cultural) happening here. People come from places where everything was acceptable, where there were no rules.” After a brief pause, he concluded, “It all happens like drug dealing. They prey on people by giving them stuff. The government just gives; it gives subsidies; it gives money. But in reality, it doesn’t fight the causes. Receiving is easy, but what comes next? This is the real question. The government’s programs don’t work as expected. That’s why Brazil is as it is.”
Seu Ivo’s compelling juxtaposition between how state policies and drug dealers operate, by enticing people with seemingly “free” benefits, stuck with me for a while. Conditional cash transfer programs such as Bolsa Familia had taken over since 2003, and, alongside other state policies, were accountable for the country’s improved social statistics (Paes de Barros, Foguel, and Ulyssea 2007; Paes de Barros, Mendonça, and Tsukada 2011; Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei 2011). Conversely, by the end of the decade, housing resettlements conducted under MCMV had become pervasive instruments of poverty governance in Brazil’s peripheries (Mesomo 2014; Neves 2011; Gutterres 2014). More frequently than not, removals worsened already precarious livelihoods and did away with informal or temporary jobs without offering comprehensive labor and infrastructural alternatives (Carvalho and Cavalcanti 2018; Ivester 2017). Still, these projects helped sustain official statistics on poverty alleviation and the state narratives of a post-neoliberal, middle-class country.

Opinions like Seu Ivo’s—that housing resettlements fail because people lack the resilience to adapt to an environment marked by novel rules of conviviality—were not uncommon. Increasingly, anti-welfare sentiment as a response to state failure has shaped essential contestation sites, even amongst strugglers like Seu Ivo, who saw themselves as “deserving” amongst the poor. These opinions were of particular interest to João and Pedro. They were looking for evidence to prove to their community of housing activists that the homeownership dream could only be achieved through proactive, hard work.

During our visit, we also met individuals who expressed more explicitly political views on public housing. A few towers away from Seu Ivo, a small group of residents began arguing about the future of the place. What was the condominium about to become? How would the lack of broader infrastructural planning affect their attempts to build a new life? “These units were supposed to address low-income families,” reasoned a forty-five-year-old man, “yet, we pay annual property taxes, monthly condominium fees, individualized water and electricity bills, and apartment installments. I know people who live in a bourgeois condominium (condomínio de burguês) who don’t have to pay half as much! Why do we even need to have surveillance cameras?”

Another person followed: “There are no grocery stores around. Essentially, this project was poorly conceived. You know what? I think President Dilma Rousseff messed up, wasn’t it Dilma who built this?” A woman objected that the local market, not the federal government, should be held accountable for the lack of infrastructure. Someone else reminded us that most beneficiaries were also enrolled in Bolsa Familia. After a brief silence, a man summarized it: “But they give us Bolsa Familia only to make us pay our bills and installments. The government is clever: it gives us money and, at the same time, takes it away.”

We found a disgruntled Maria Janaína staring hopelessly at a picture of one of the city’s oldest politicians taped on a broken window. “All of
us here voted for him.” The sixty-year-old woman pointed to the image, eager to tell us more about the condominium’s grievances. Nostalgically, she recalled when Doctor B., as the public health physician turned politician was known, volunteered to give free gynecological consultations and talks promoting women’s health in one of the now-depredated shared party saloons. “Everything has turned into a mess. Women don’t want to help themselves. It has all been abandoned. Not even the military wants to take over this place.”

Maria Janaína referenced the forceful juxtaposition of people originating from different communities and parts of the city, pointed out by experts as one critical impasse in the program’s implementation. “People were brought from all over. . . . You don’t include viladores [vileiros] in a project like this!” she bellowed. In her jarring view, governmental programs should disavow those unable to meet the minimum conditions to progress. The government should dispense free lectures on etiquette and civilized behavior to all selected beneficiaries.

João inquired about the number of withdrawals and dropouts amongst residents. “Well,” Maria Janaína raised her eyebrows, “many units have never seen their owners. They were subleased or informally transferred. I know of people who sold the keys (venderam as chaves) for US$ 100 before the construction was even ready! I earned it through so much sacrifice; why would I sell?” Other complaints included the absence of
daycare facilities and schools in the surroundings. “I would help take care of the children if only there was a place inside the condo to accommodate them. But these mothers are careless; they don’t want their children to have a good education,” she concluded.

João and Pedro did not reserve their comments on our way back to the association’s headquarters. They saw the residents of those newly constructed condominiums as too unprepared and uneducated to adapt to the broader concepts of sociability and mutual conviviality underlying the planned architecture. In a context where limited housing benefits were unevenly distributed amongst the urban poor, they reasoned that the absence of hope for upward mobility should avert those beneficiaries from partaking in a national project for social inclusion via access to goods and services. Such residents simply would not know how to use a house and spend governmental money wisely to carve out a dignified life.

However, by unearthing the policy’s limits, people were drawing a critique of PT’s collaborative mechanisms of poverty governance. Such mechanisms enacted a redistributive politics that reached hundreds of cities across the country, albeit without providing comprehensive infrastructure or long-term economic sustainability. They entrusted the poor with small amounts of cash that promoted their market inclusion but also bolstered large-scale economic profiting, financial speculation, and new patterns of real estate bubble and exclusion.

Still, the above ethnographic vignette shows that João and Pedro were not concerned with anticipating or addressing the policy’s structural failures as much as they wanted to collect narratives—including Seu Ivo’s—that pointed to the long-term perils of ill-implemented public housing. As their reflections during and after the visit evince, successful policy implementation was envisioned in terms of the urban poor’s ability to manage, hone, and maintain communitarian hope amid entrenched economic uncertainty. This would draw a moral line between those they perceived as being deserving of state benefits—because they multiplied public spending through their will to thrive—and those undeserving of such assistance, for whom returns on public investment would compare unfavorably. Ultimately, this distinction would become ingrained onto and enacted through the built environment of peripheral space—against Restinga’s debacle, Partenon could write a fruitful story of collaborative development.

While João and Pedro drew from their own experience to persuade other ordinary citizens, like them, of the benefits of actively mobilizing for housing, their efforts aligned more broadly with those of state bureaucrats invested in transforming urban space through homeownership. The next section unpacks some of the subjective and moral dimensions embedded in this form of peripheral governance, linking the pursuit of a model community to a broader constellation of political, social, and economic interests.
João and Pedro saw their membership in “intermediary power formations” (Biehl and McKay 2012, 1210), such as housing associations, with their longstanding routines and infrastructures of participation, as critical for the instantiation of new political subjectivities and the proper implementation of policies. Grassroots organizations enforced many of the technologies whereby participation was assessed and amassed, including the digital control of sign-in logs, the issue of membership cards with personal information, and the management of bookkeeping records that tracked members’ monthly payments toward keeping the association and its activities afloat. These techno-moral practices (Bornstein and Sharma 2016) helped re-create the periphery as a socio-physical zone amenable to state intervention, discursive porosity, and subjective modulation. They reveal how state-making practices at various scales conflate with local infrastructures of worth to concoct the effacement of the unwanted from the urban fabric, political-economic formality, and societal outcry.

João’s and Pedro’s understanding of the relationship between housing programs and the construction of model peripheries resonated with the practices of state representatives I encountered throughout my fieldwork. The experience of these officials in adjudicating housing was linked to a moral understanding of space, which influenced the calculation of housing shortages, the bureaucratic infrastructures used to enlist potential beneficiaries, and the segmentation of urban space into “risky,” “green,” and “informal” areas. Together, these elements defined people’s prospects toward earning a house.

“These people are not used to paying bills or to living in harmony,” I heard from Cleber, the head of the MCMV division in Porto Alegre’s Municipal Housing Department.9 From his smartphone, he browsed pictures he had collected during visits to Restinga projects to showcase human abjection. “Sometimes, you can’t stand the bad smell coming from the units! People have all sorts of animals, like guinea pigs, rabbits, dogs, cats, all living together with five, six people under the same roof.”

Sitting in his office just a few months after my visit to Restinga with João and Pedro, I got a very realistic understanding of the limits of dis tended governance enacted by public housing. Cleber scrolled left and right voraciously; photograph after photograph, his gestures shaped a movement that rendered faces indistinguishable from one another. Lost amidst thousands of other lives sprawled over the vast territories of Brazil’s urban peripheries, the human faces in the deputy’s smartphone were institutionally sanctioned ways into oblivion.

Against such a bleak backdrop, Cleber enshrined the partnership with Partenon’s housing association as one in which “the state governs together with organized social movements, honoring a longstanding
tradition in Porto Alegre's participatory politics.” These bold words resonated with Benedita's numerous public statements that “the housing association is indeed the eyes of the state. Through our will to struggle and thrive, we have to help the government see how to best channel its investments.”

This combination of pragmatic and moral reasoning shaped the deputy's discretion to act in case-by-case stances, update registries as people's living conditions changed, and monitor existing beneficiaries in their new apartments. Like pictures in a smartphone, specific “categories” of citizens—the homeless, the unemployed, or those living in extreme poverty—were shuffled around in calculations of housing allocation as they were deemed too helpless and hopeless. Activist citizens searching for their rights, organized housing movements, and “model” beneficiaries, on the other hand, were granted individual treatment, all the while having their life stories publicly promoted as examples of policy success and state accountability (see Kopper, 2019).

The moral grammar that extended between street-level bureaucrats and community leaders, which guided their decision-making, was one in which the universalistic principles built into public housing were continuously made amenable to pragmatic calculations of worth. In practice, governing peripheral space through large-scale housing meant that benefits were not made available for all. In the day-to-day operation of MCMV, the limited availability of housing units was continuously pointed to by policymakers, local state representatives, and community leaders as the touchstone for a moral economy of worth. This regime ranked potential beneficiaries according to their will to thrive and become new political and economic subjects. And as these moralities conflated with broader discursive formations about the role of peripheries, consumer markets, and post-neoliberal governments in recent Brazil, they also became pervasive technologies of nation-building and place-making.

The literature on processes of poverty objectification suggests that distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor emerge from within the design and contentious implementation of welfare policies (Gupta 2012; Fassin 2012), determining those “who deserve to be provided with cash, food, housing, medical care, or other goods and services” by the state (Katz 2013, xii). By contrast, my ethnography of the making of a model community in Porto Alegre calls for a collaborative understanding of how government technologies actually work by generating bottom-up and contingent allegiances. As they assess members' capacity to participate and thrive, leaders like João and Pedro act as proxy agencies of the state and the market, putting to work the techno-moral reasoning sponsored by government officials like Cleber in the enforcement of socioeconomic hierarchies amongst the urban poor.

The next section provides an ethnographic account of how breakdowns in this circuit of worthiness elicit a form of “deferred hope,” as members learn to cope with broken expectations to reinvent their self-worth and regain hopes to project life into the future. I document how
the contours of this model community are fabricated in the case of a sixty-year-old man and his family. They were cut from the housing program as their income exceeded the three-minimum-wage threshold. I also discuss the moral negotiations that unfolded as leaders sought to keep this family engaged in the collective dream of homeownership.

Deferred Hope

I was introduced to Seu Miguel by Benedita, the housing association president, in May 2013. Back then, Seu Miguel and his wife received us in the living room of their old home, a makeshift shack on the Maria da Conceição hill, just a few miles from where Residencial Bento Gonçalves was being finalized. They were eager to share their plans for moving. During our conversation, Seu Miguel did not speak much. Fifteen years earlier, the former metalsmith had suffered a stroke that left part of his body paralyzed. He had since retired. Like many other poor Brazilians, he moved to Porto Alegre at the age of twenty-one, searching for a job and upward social mobility. Still, he wound up settling in what was then
a peripheral and mostly underdeveloped area of the city called Partenon, with no public infrastructure for sewage or drinking water or even electricity. He and his wife invested their meager savings in building a two-room home, first a wooden hut (casa de madeira) and later transforming it into a brick house (casa de material). Many others did the same, and the area grew rapidly, becoming a complex patchwork of self-built homes very similar in shape to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (Caldeira 2017). “Villagers (o povo da vila) are like the Red Ovenbird (João-de-Barro),” Seu Miguel remembers, “they keep building annexes (puxadinho): wherever there is some space, as the family grows, to the top, to the sides . . .”

However precarious, the existing infrastructure came to be thanks to community efforts to lay underground water and sewage pipes. Because they are undersized, these pipes tend to clog up daily. In such cases, neighbors call the appropriate municipal division, which takes days to respond, leaving behind foul-smelling and muddy alleyways. Similarly, most electrical installations result from makeshift and irregular extensions (gatos in everyday jargon) erected over decades of state disregard. As hundreds of shacks feed on only one circuit breaker installed at the complex’s entrance, Seu Miguel’s wife added, power outages are a daily annoyance.

I noticed Seu Miguel’s eyes were distant; he seemed distressed. “There are only a few of us here who pay our duties as citizens. Most benefit from our kindheartedness, stealing water and electricity from us.” Living amid entrenched precariousness, Seu Miguel clung to moral attributes to differentiate himself from the undeserving poor around him. “That’s why our electricity bill is always too high,” he said. He then alluded to comments made by municipal officials in response to neighbors’ requests. “They say there are too many tangled wires. But we keep on living this way. What can we do?”

Dissatisfaction with their current place of residence did not end there. The wife pointed to the lingering effects of rain, which brings all sorts of debris, trash, and mud downhill in a swirling torrent and right into their house. One day, Seu Miguel interjected, rainwater flooded the entire hut, leaving the couch, mattresses, and other items permanently soaked after floating for hours. He continued: “It’s been a while that we wanted to leave this place. When MCMV was announced, I felt, for the first time, there was a real opportunity to pursue a better life upon something rightfully mine,” referring to the “squatted” land and his yearning for tenancy.

Benedita interrupted the account, mentioning Seu Miguel’s visibly degraded living conditions and her role as a community leader in local instances of state bureaucracy. She reminded the family that she has addressed much of their dissatisfaction in her political brokerage as the head of the housing association within the city’s Participatory Budgeting scheme. She then volunteered her entourage, including her brother, a retired electrician, to help with emergencies or small fixtures in the house. Finally, she provided a summary of Seu Miguel’s predicament:
“We have at least three kinds of social risk being enacted here”—she used a common term amongst street-level bureaucrats and social workers to qualify housing vulnerability. “First, there is the issue of the quality of the house. Then there is the social risk per se: Seu Miguel is an older man, partially disabled due to a stroke. And if you look into the ethnic question, then he checks all boxes.”

In this short yet powerful intervention, the leader intentionally mixed official eligibility criteria for the housing program with the moral injunctions informally established by the housing association to monitor and rank their members and grant them housing units. She noted several ways that Seu Miguel made himself visible in the model community: by being a constant presence at the association’s meetings and social gatherings, by earnestly paying membership dues, and by cultivating good relationships with other members and leaders. Additionally, she gestured that if Seu Miguel was prepared to do so, he could capitalize on his ethnicity—advice she passed on to several other African-Brazilians as both a form of historical compensation and racial pride.

Seu Miguel proceeded to talk about how he was found and recruited by the association leaders in 2009. Benedita intervened again to explain that she had ventured into even the farthest peripheries of the Partenon neighborhood to enlist families to mobilize for housing units. During meetings, while members and newcomers waited to own their first homes, they received strategic information on how to become and remain a public housing beneficiary—from bureaucratic procedures to practical knowledge on condominium bylaws and sociability. While proudly recounting her role in bringing qualification to her community of chosen beneficiaries, Benedita also reviewed the trajectory that made her into a reputable community leader and all she envisaged for the model association in the years to come. “We are going to live in a nicely located and highly valued area. Everybody will be looking to see how we’ll fare. And once they build a shopping mall in the vicinity, our real estate value will skyrocket!”

Once again, the leader mingled public housing with the projected economic value that would accrue with market speculation in the region. As I learned throughout my interactions with Benedita, the objective was not to persuade members to marketize their social assets but to encourage them to perceive their symbolic and social travails through a language of economic value in which a house was their righteous reward for years of yearning and painstaking mobilization efforts. While listening to Benedita’s words, Seu Miguel’s wife had been imagining her new domestic environment, crowded with consumer objects and the advantages of living by the asphalt. “Every time I pass by the construction site, I stare longingly at the apartments. I can’t believe I will be catching a bus just across the street . . .”

Benedita cleared her throat and took the conversation in another direction. She is also the bearer of bad news. The list with those members selected to become housing beneficiaries, which she submitted to Caixa
Econômica Federal, the federal bank in charge of issuing mortgages, for screening, had been returned with several problems. Seu Miguel was amongst the candidates with registration issues; at the bank, his family income had been calculated to be roughly US$ 800 a month, hence above the limit of three minimum wages.

“Everybody at the association was taken by surprise,” Benedita continued. Nobody on the board knew Seu Miguel was married. “I’ve heard of people getting divorced to split their incomes. This is what the system does! Had you not been married on paper we could gladly omit this information from your application. There is nothing wrong with omitting for the greater cause. It’s all the system’s fault anyway.”

Benedita kept talking, trying to free herself from being held responsible for Seu Miguel’s exclusion, while he sat on the couch and stared fixedly at a point on the wall. His wife brought papers from their retirement pensions, and they determined their joint income was indeed US$ 150 above the threshold.

Benedita insisted that “social programs are designed to be manipulated.” She backed her strong argument with her perception that many beneficiaries in other projects had been paid to act as strawmen and were replaced immediately after the projects were in place with the “real” occupiers—families earning two or three times the limit for public housing and who were ready to become lawful owners once the apartments were available to be sold on the market. “I don’t like the idea that just because we are poor, we have to present ourselves as suffering subjects to the state, but in this case, his disabled condition helps us plead for an accessible unit on the first floor. Unfortunately, we have to fight to prove (tem que brigar para provar).”

Seu Miguel pondered these comments. “I will continue to attend the gatherings,” he said, “to meet with Benedita; I won’t give up. We will fight. For I hope to go live there one day as well.” In his view, the inconsistencies in his application did not represent endpoints. Instead, they were swiftly transformed into openings for new forms of subjectivation capable of keeping him engaged with the association’s collective project of upward mobility. The vocabulary of personal worth through struggle that had made him into a desiring housing activist would remain part and parcel of this new subjective reconfiguration.

Seu Miguel’s decision to keep going against all odds was Benedita’s utmost accomplishment as a community leader. Her challenge was to bridge the law’s grammar and the contingent political decisions made in backstage agreements—which sometimes led to the exclusion of entire sections of her constituency due to changes in the municipality’s strategic priorities—without significantly infringing on members’ local moralities.

We can think of the ways in which this structure of governance is activated to steer people’s expectations as “deferred hope”—despite falling back into structural uncertainty, Seu Miguel’s condition is neither one of unfreedom (Sen 2000) nor of frustrated freedom (Victor et al. 2013),
for he is still persuaded by local leaders to keep his hopes alive and forward-looking. Even as he has to put his projects on hold, he is still given the tools to imagine a future away from the past-oriented tropes of informal infrastructure that have marked his life thus far. In Portuguese, both these processes—to wait and to hope—translate as one: esperar. Therefore, deferred hope is a form of inhabiting an uncertain future while simultaneously embracing the ever-changing and contingent uncertainties of present-day opportunity structures.

To maintain social ties, Benedita draws the contours of an imagined community of deferred hopers; she mentions other cases of families excluded due to minor differences in income; she describes their suffering and disintegrating living conditions; she stresses their resilience and capacity to play the role of the idealized subject of aid that the state expects them to be; she reaffirms her allegiance to local senses of justice. The latter point means that Benedita knows she cannot leave without offering an alternative. “How can we guarantee his rights amid unfavorable state regulations?” she asked, looking around at her small audience. Spotting the couple’s eldest daughter in the corner, she drew her into the conversation. “Come closer, daughter. I’m sure you are aware of your parent’s plight. We are trying to reverse the state’s decision, which is based on an unfair criterion. It’s not our will. Our sole criterion is participation, and your parents excel at it.” After a short pause, she carried on: “You are single and don’t earn more than three minimum wages, right? If I could revert this apartment unit to your name, would you be willing to let your parents live there?”

Benedita’s impromptu proposal caught everybody off-guard. An awkward silence followed. She resumed her pitch—she would soon meet with the head of the Municipal Housing Department, and she could pull some strings. “Here, we are obliged to make arrangements to guarantee their rights.” Besides, she reasoned, the daughter had nothing to lose. “You will be the only heir, and you won’t need to share the apartment with your siblings in case—God forbid—your parents pass away.” She gave it some time before concluding: “If you agree, I’ll have to collect your paperwork, register you with the housing association, and the Housing Department ASAP. We have to move fast. But this is the only Plan B I envisage.”

Astonished, the daughter sat motionless without knowing how to respond. With a similar demeanor, Seu Miguel intervened, nodding his head in agreement. “It’s the only sensible thing to do,” he mumbled. Benedita did not waste time and pushed for the documents. She also urged the daughter to get registered in the unified social database at the local branch of the state’s social assistance foundation, through which housing beneficiaries are monitored and filtered. “It’s time for her to do her part,” she said, wrapping up. Turning to me, she added, “There are a lot of lies in this process.” She spoke profusely about the political games played by the Housing Department in the process of allocating Residencial Bento Gonçalves’ 540 apartments. “I need them to disclose
the list of nominees. I want to know how many other mismatches there are so we can pledge to have our people indicated for more units. We know that for the poor, everything is more difficult. In the end, it all boils down to political will.”

Later on, that day, I learned that Benedita was an ingenious calculator of people’s urgency. Not every person was given the same prerogative as Seu Miguel. In her quest to build the model periphery, Benedita reckoned that some could afford to wait longer than others. She applied the same everyday discretionary reasoning to another case of income-based exclusion from the program, which she also shared with me: “A mother and daughter living together, earning US$ 350 a month each. Their situation is not as difficult. When evaluating vulnerability, one has to consider people’s capacity to wait and hope (esperar). One has to work with the idea of time.”

Seu Miguel and his wife continued to attend the association’s meetings and social gatherings, despite his exclusion from the program. In public, Benedita was very vocal in praising his resilience and will to thrive. Despite the leader’s insistence, the couple’s daughter did not embark on the idea of switching ownership of the apartment to her. Seu Miguel was now hoping to get his paperwork fixed to become available for a second phase of the project, a far-fetched idea that Benedita advertised to all disallowed members to keep them engaged. Almost seven years after the inauguration of Residencial Bento Gonçalves, no official announcements have been made about the construction of the project’s purported second edition.

Still, Seu Miguel’s story of struggle and resilience serves to cast light on the mechanisms of poverty governance available to grassroots movements seeking to build model communities through collaborative partnerships with local governments. Thanks to his proactiveness, Seu Miguel—and the governance and preservation of his hopes—stand in stark contrast to the anonymous hopelessness João and Pedro found in Restinga. His case reveals how local infrastructures of worth produce the model peripheral subject through a combination of political, communitarian, and subjective efforts at redeeming poverty in post-neoliberal Brazil.

Conclusion

During a decade of economic prosperity, peripheral space in Brazil was impacted by the joint mechanisms of distended governance and pro-poor politics. Government programs like MCMV and expanding consumer markets together reshaped the built environment of peripheries. Stories of grassroots activism and collaborative governance gradually replaced entrenched images of decay and failure that had characterized these spaces in public culture for decades. Extolled by a state deeply invested in proclaiming the end of poverty and the upward
mobility of millions into a middle class, particular peripheral spaces were hailed as “model peripheries” to exemplify the new urban boundaries of political and economic governance.

In Porto Alegre, one such model periphery came together through the workings of community leaders, bureaucrats, and organized housing activists. Drawing on a visit made by two community leaders to a project in Restinga, I described their moral efforts to distinguish themselves through their ongoing political and communitarian achievements in a geographically more central neighborhood called Partenon. What is more, these practices of differentiation dovetailed with the moral economies of municipal authorities in charge of the MCMV program. Yet model peripheries were also perpetuated as they came to rely on the governance and engagement of individual hopes, as attested by leaders’ efforts to disenthrall official eligibility criteria following the exclusion of a key member from the program.

The political economy that emerged from these empirical juxtapositions is one in which social mobilization, political participation, and economic inclusion helped promote the public erasure of poverty. Recasting the remote periphery as a zone of helplessness and hopelessness, stable inequality, and forgettable poverty, activists extolled their efforts to build a model periphery. The capacity to wait and hope—joint processes that came together in the Portuguese word esperar—became critical in modeling both the periphery and the narratives surrounding it, casting visibility on urban governance patterns, state accountability, and economic profit.

The practice of housing and the construction of space more generally produce moral, affective, aesthetic, and sociopolitical orders (Bourdieu 1979; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995) “that give mankind illusions of stability” (Bachelard 1958). In MCMV model communities, I have argued that socio-spatial differentiation took unique contours. At the national level, it coalesced around the political and economic developmental discourse of Brazil’s “new middle-class,” which followed Brazil’s improved social and economic statistics. This narrative sought to de-poor peripheral subjects by promoting their access to consumer markets and mortgage-driven public housing while also downplaying the related issues of indebtedness and new everyday exclusions that such selective access yielded.

At the local level, MCMV model communities rose out of politically contingent infrastructures of worth via a process of ongoing differentiation from other housing communities deemed to have failed to integrate socially and economically into the city fabric. Although universalist in principle, housing programs allocate highly scarce benefits, making boundary-drawing integral to the operation of social movements (Caldeira 1994). Over the last fifteen years, mechanisms of distended governance in Brazil’s urban peripheries had the effect of sharpening the symbolic contours between groups perceived as deserving of state benefits against those seen as the new “undeserving poor.” What is more,
this politics of moral differentiation, emerging from amongst the poor themselves during the late years of the PT administration, may offer elements to grasp the mounting political polarization that crested in the 2018 election of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, with the support of critical urban peripheries like São Paulo (Richmond 2020).

Less peripheral than Restinga, Partenon stood for the distended state and market boundaries and their collaborations with grassroots activism at a time when Brazil cultivated ambitions to become the world’s fifth-largest economy. Governments, markets, and society addressed Partenon’s resourceful and resilient housing militants while Restinga’s residents—and their powerful critique of the limits of urban governmentality—were deemed to disappear.

Today, writing amid the unraveling of the Covid-19 pandemic, modulations of success and failure in peripheral space are likely to take on new paths. Forms of social differentiation that emerged during the years of Brazil’s economic boom are being rapidly occluded by the demise of social and economic programs such as the MCMV by the Bolsonaro Administration. Simultaneously, the pandemic has unveiled more inclusive political alliances amongst the poor alongside the precarization of their livelihoods. These developments evince the complex ways in which peripheries and their subjects continue to be co-produced and remade as objects of sociomoral governance in the post-pandemic world ahead.

Notes

1 Brazilian peripheries remain socially, economically, and geographically heterogeneous spaces. They can encompass favelas; slums characterized by irregular occupation or squatting; neighborhoods that have undergone piecemeal urbanization and regularization, often achieved through political organization and articulation with governmental agencies; and self-constructed homes with high rates of property ownership (Holston 2008).

2 Throughout the article I use 2013 average currency conversion rates to preserve purchasing power parity.

3 MCMV divides into three income brackets, of which only bracket one (the lowest, for families earning up to three monthly minimum wages) is, strictly speaking, public housing. Supply and demand, under this bracket, are administered by municipal governments, which control the allocation of funds and the selection of beneficiaries. However, by 2019 only 34% of all contracted MCMV units fell under bracket one, despite it representing 90% of Brazil’s housing deficit. MCMV funds can also be allocated directly to housing movements via a subsidiary program called MCMV Entidades. Although the result of a collective mobilization, Residencial Bento Gonçalves, the project here discussed, was a municipal initiative implemented with MCMV funds under bracket one.
4 MCMV projects reenacted core deficiencies of previous initiatives, such as the lack of comprehensive urban planning and policy integration, reflected in the low-quality, large-scale nature of housing projects erected in segregated areas of the city through low-qualified and cheap labor forces (Bonduki n.d.; Nascimento and Tostes 2011; Botega 2008; Rolnik 2015; Shimbo 2012).

5 All names of individuals have been anonymized to preserve identity and privacy. Names of places and neighborhoods are kept in their original forms to preserve historical singularity, insofar as geographical location and media resonance are pivotal in shaping place-making and collective identity.

6 Due to the social nature of MCMV, beneficiaries are granted a ten-year-long contract that allows them to compromise only 5% of their domestic income with mortgage payments (about US$ 33.4 a month for a family earning three minimum monthly wages). Sale of the property is only permitted after the transference of deeds to homeowners at the end of the ten-year period.

7 Doctor B. graduated in the early 1970s and worked in sanitary and preventive medicine for many years, at a time when public health overlapped with the provision of affordable housing. Doctor B. was also the head of the Municipal Housing Department by the time the first MCMV condominiums were inaugurated, becoming inextricably associated with the struggle for affordable housing in Porto Alegre.

8 “Vileiro” is a derogatory term used in Porto Alegre by residents of housing projects and middle-class neighborhoods to refer to inhabitants of densely populated and irregularly occupied pockets of poverty known as “vilas.” The term carries a similar connotation as “ghetto” in the USA.

9 At the time, Porto Alegre’s municipal government was run by the Democratic Labor Party (PDT), which integrated the PT’s governing coalition at the national level. Still, in their everyday interactions with beneficiaries and associations, I witnessed agents like Cleber downplay the federal government’s stewardship of MCMV, foregrounding instead municipal interests and initiatives.

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