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The concentration camps for famine victims in Brazil and the struggle for their public memorialisation

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ABSTRACT

After the 'Grande Seca' of 1877, the deadliest famine recorded in Brazil, the government installed so-called concentration camps to prevent famine migrants from the dry Northeastern backlands from reaching Fortaleza, capital of the Ceará state in 1915 and 1932. Officially, the camps were depicted as relief centres, but their inhumane conditions earned them the nickname of 'death camps'. After their closure, the camps and their famine victims fell into oblivion. Recently, however, both government and civil society actors have taken initiatives to commemorate them. In 2019, the Patu Concentration Camp (the only one for which physical remains can still be found) and the Walk of the Drought (a religious pilgrimage) were officially recognised as heritage sites. This article introduces the research by emphasising how famines are rarely publicly commemorated and describes investigation initiatives that contribute to breaking the silence around famine victims in Brazil. To conclude, the article refers to background literature, document analysis and interviews to discuss the efforts that have been put into public memorialisation so far, as a means to overcome the marginalisation of the memories of peasants from the Northeastern backlands.

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Introduction

> Contrary to what happened in the past, it is now time to bring to life that dark page of our history […] so that all Brazilians and the world know what happened here.
>
> - Official advertisement by the City Government of Senador Pompeu, 2019.[1]

Hunger is an inextricable part of Brazil's history (Ribeiro 2017; Silva 1990; Martins 1981; Castro 1984). Over the years, severe droughts in the Northeast have resulted in waves of displacement within the country, mostly made up of peasants who left the semi-arid climate of the Northeastern backlands (*sertões*) and headed towards the cities in the more humid zones or state capitals near the coast. In 1915 and 1932, however, the government implemented a policy of containing the displaced in what they called concentration camps in the Northeastern state of Ceará.[2] Officially, the camps were sites of voluntary settlement, established to protect their residents' lives, health and dignity. In practice, however, the starving

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masses had few alternatives to staying there; their movement was restricted, and the food, health and sanitation conditions were disastrous. The camps housed hundreds of thousands of migrants, and many of them did not survive (Castro [1946] 1984, 331).

Despite their violent history, few Brazilians are aware of the famine camps. This silencing is linked to a broader global trend where victims and survivors of famine – unlike those of wars and terrorism – only very rarely are officially remembered (De Waal 2018; Parashar and Orjuela 2021; Orjuela, this volume). This is because of many factors, from the use of forgetting and silencing as strategies for coping with trauma (Freitas 2003; Martins and Kupperman 2017) to the interest of avoiding exposure by those who either benefit or are responsible for it (Edkins 2008; Conley and de Waal 2019). The Northeastern peasants in Brazil have a history of brutal social marginalisation and deep political exclusion (Wanderley 2014; Buckley 2017), resulting in something like a social amnesia of the violence against them (Motta and Zarth 2018), including famines and the responses to them.

Nevertheless, public knowledge about the concentration camps for the famine-displaced has increased significantly in the last 10 years. The Walk of the Drought, an annual religious pilgrimage to honour the victims of the Patu Concentration Camp, gathered approximately 10,000 pilgrims in 2019. In the same year, the city of Senador Pompeu registered the walk as an intangible heritage, and designated the camp's material remains as material heritage. This article aims to understand these recent moves towards official memorialisation of the Patu Camp.

The formation of memories – and of forgetting – after traumatic events occurs through different processes and in different social spaces, from local to global (Edkins 2003; see also Resende and Budryte 2014). Social struggles and state instruments are fundamental for the construction of memories that seek, for instance, identity affirmation, reparation and redemption (Ferreira 2011; Ansara 2012). This article uncovers the processes through which the victims of the concentration camps came to be recognised and officially remembered.

The study adopted a case study method (Yin 2003; Della Porta 2008) oriented by the broader discussion on memorialisation of famines (De Waal 2018; Parashar and Orjuela 2021; Orjuela, this volume). It builds on and develops the limited international and Brazilian research so far conducted on the famine camps and their memorialisation (see Buckley 2017; Kenny 2009; Martins 2015). Official documents and newspaper articles were used to construct a timeline of the processes of memorialisation, especially those linked to the official efforts towards material and immaterial heritagisation. Also, references to those processes were found in newspapers and academic work, through interviews, and by searching judiciary, legislative and bureaucratic official websites. When documents were not publicly available, access to them was granted by petitioning the bodies through the Access to Information Law or by turning directly to public servants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key mnemonic agents involved in the memorialisation efforts, via video link in 2021.[3]

By presenting both primary and secondary data, this article contributes with new knowledge about the case of Brazil to the broader debate on the memorialisation of mass atrocities – including famines (De Waal 2018; Parashar and Orjuela 2021; Orjuela, this volume). The story of the camps for the famine-displaced draws attention to the role of displacement during hunger crises, the fate of the displaced, and how their silenced memory can be revived. The fact that the people fleeing hunger belonged to the marginalised group of backland peasants also highlights that there is a class and racial dimension to the official commemoration – or forgetting – of famine victims.

From this point on, the article focuses on the discussion around the social formation of Northeastern backland peasants and the great droughts of 1877–1879 and 1898–1890, which shaped how the famine-displaced have been represented and dealt with and laid the ground for the use of concentration camps in the first half of the twentieth century. The third section describes the establishment of concentration camps in 1915 and 1932. The fourth section analyses the initiatives to turn the concentration camps into official heritage, focusing on three main efforts: (1) the Walk of the Drought; (2) Cultural Team 19-22, a cultural group that has mobilised to investigate and communicate the history of the camps; and (3) institutional efforts to gain heritage recognition of the camp and the walk. The three initiatives are interconnected through religious, cultural, economic, political and judiciary spheres, and have contributed to overcoming the structural marginalisation of the backland peasants by uncovering the history of the concentration camps. The last section summarises the conclusions and highlights the importance of memorialising the Patu Concentration Camp in the face of the historical injustices that have been imposed on the Northeastern peasants, including those of hunger, famine and displacement.

The backland migrants and the memory of the great droughts of 1877–1879 and 1898–1900

Since the sixteenth century, Brazil's economy has been built on predatory extractivism, through the installation of plantations and large cattle farms by Portuguese colonisers. After independence in 1822, this process was commanded by Brazilian and foreign political and economic elites (Furtado 1971). The extraction and colonisation started along the coast and still, to this day, is moving farther towards the countryside, including the Amazon forest and the Cerrado savanna in the Center-West region of the country. The system has led to massive ecological destruction and a genocide of the Indigenous population (Ribeiro 2017). Moreover, it was largely based on legal slavery of the Indigenous population and Africans. Some slaves managed to escape and moved to the countryside. The national abolishment of slavery in 1888 made those still enslaved instantaneously landless and homeless. Some migrated to begin the formation of shanty towns, *favelas*, in the cities, while others went to the countryside, including the backlands (*sertões*) of the Northeast. There they mixed among themselves and with the few poor White people who also moved there in search of work or wealth. They became Brazil's backland (*sertanejo*) peasants, whose history has included extreme misery, marginalisation and violence (see Motta and Zarth 2018; Martins 1981). In Brazil's colonialist-capitalist and racist structures, they were placed at the bottom (Castro 1984; Góes and Faustino 2002).

The violence against the peasantry and the cattle expansion throughout the backlands pushed the *sertanejos* to lands that were once scarcely populated by the Indigenous people, and which had an inhospitable, semi-arid climate. The people from the backlands were vulnerable to rainless seasons, and the fight against droughts caught political attention from the 1800s – despite state efforts to build hydric facilities to store water, and roads to facilitate the transportation of food aid (Nelson and Finan 2009; Buckley 2017). The efforts to improve the living conditions in these areas were, in Davis' words (2001, 388),

> constrained by what might be called 'triple peripheralization': the underdevelopment of the Brazilian financial system vis-à-vis British capital; the Nordeste's declining economic and political position vis-à-vis São Paulo [in the Southeast]; and the sertão's marginality within state politics vis-à-vis the plantation elites of the coast. (Davis 2001, 388)

For poor people, leaving the backlands was often the only option, thus creating the famine-displaced – the *retirantes sertanejos*.

The great droughts of 1877–1879 and 1898–1900 were the worst episodes of famine registered in Brazilian history, and the most severe noted in Latin America, leaving around 500,000 and 1 million people dead, respectively (De Waal 2018, table 4.8). The horrific experiences of that period, and the racist attitudes against the Northeastern peasants, are part of what explains the establishment of concentration camps in 1915 and 1932. The 1877–1879 drought produced an unprecedented movement of people in the Northeast, and the state of Ceará was one of the hardest hit (Davis 2001, chapter 12). Hundreds of thousands had to leave their homes. Around 100,000 *retirantes* added to a population of 27,000 in Fortaleza (Neves 1995). As there were no railways to connect the backlands to the state capitals on the coast and other parts of the country, there was no alternative but to walk – under an excruciatingly hot sun and with no water or food – up to hundreds of kilometres in a deadly and slow escape for survival. This flow continued for around two years.

In 1877–1879, many of the migrants were agglomerated in precarious temporary camps in the city, *abarracamentos*, with poor hygiene conditions and awful – even rotten – food (Garcia 2006). Epidemics of smallpox, yellow fever, diarrhoea, cholera and beriberi exploded in Fortaleza. Its citizens were also scandalised by what they considered to be the migrants' immoral behaviour: eating improper food, begging, nudity, defaecating in the streets, robbery and prostitution. Some citizens of Fortaleza used their power over the extremely vulnerable migrants to benefit from cheap labour (Secreto 2003; Rios 2014) or sexual relations (Neves 2003). As Rangasami observed, in famine contexts, 'benefits accrue to one section of the community while losses flow to the other' (Rangasami 1985, 1748). Historically, those losing were the backland peasants.

Like most famines globally, the great droughts of the late ninteenth century have not become the focus for official commemoration or heritagisation. However, unofficial works and practices kept some memories alive. In Brazil, some classical novels (among other arts) help us imagine the famine-displaced of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Neves 1995, 2007). Rodolfo Teófilo (2011) published *A Fome* (*The Famine*)[4] in 1890, which is representative of the collective memories of 1877. The author, aside from being a writer, was also a pharmacist who worked with the displaced of 1877 and in the droughts thereafter. It was these experiences on which he based his literary work (Albuquerque Jr. 2017; Brito 2013). His fictional book contains terrifying passages about what desperate, starving people are capable of, including cannibalism – something that Ó Gráda (2015, 29) argues is a narrative strategy commonly used to 'convey the "stark horror" of famine conditions'. In Teófilo's work (2011), we also see how slavery, racism and prejudice against the backland peasants pave the way for the extraction of benefits from the displaced as well as for the inadequate relief provided to them.

A Bagaceira (*Trash*: official translation to English) by José Américo de Almeida (1928) is set in Ceará's neighbouring state Paraíba. Almeida, a law graduate who held many positions in the state government, was a local leader of the national dictatorship commanded by Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945) and became a powerful politician in the Northeast of Brazil. He was Vargas' Minister of Federal Inspectorate of Works Against Droughts and supervised the concentration camps built in 1932 in Ceará. However, he 'became disillusioned with Vargas' fickleness toward his native region and resigned from the ministry in 1934' (Buckley 2017, 127). In the novel, Almeida describes the beginning of the migration process during the drought of 1898–1890 from the perspective of a character who was a plantation owner, showing how humans were losing their humanity:

> It looked like dust lifted, the dirt from the ground in a gust of wind. It was the exodus from the drought of 1898. A resurrection of ancient cemeteries – revived skeletons, looking earthy and reeking of rotten graves […] They had no gender, no age, no human condition. They were *retirantes*. Nothing more. (Almeida [1928] 2017, 86)

Prejudice against the backland peasants, or *retirantes sertanejos*, was solidified by these descriptions, and such images persisted into the 1900s. Seen as uncivilised and barbarians, they were treated less than humanely. This perspective is important as we consider deeper questions about why those people were vulnerable to recurrent droughts and forced migration in the first place (see Akesson and Mansson, this volume). As Edkins (2000, xxi) argued, 'Each famine is the product of particular, historical social relations set within a framework of a particular political and economic structure. These relations establish what can be owned and how food is regarded; they settle what obligations exist between people within that social group', including the specific practices of food aid and broader perspectives of social relief. In Ceará, they also established the right of the government and economic elites to control and trap famine migrants by disguising the segregationist racism as a humanitarian policy.

The famine-displaced people from the Northeastern backlands have also been depicted in art. Some of the most iconic images of these *retirantes sertanejos* are the paintings by Cândido Portinari. One of his most well-known paintings, *Os Retirantes* (1944), is part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Art in São Paulo. Using oil on canvas, Portinari portrays a Northeastern family, with emaciated bodies and despair in their expressions, traversing a dry and inhospitable landscape. Another of his paintings shows a family mourning a dead child. Furthermore, the popular artwork called *Cordel* drawings, for instance by J. Borges, brings back the memory of the famine migrants in a simple and beautiful way.

In a context where the authorities had kept silent about the history of the drought and the poor treatment of its victims, a collective memory of these traumas has nevertheless persisted over time, largely thanks to these authors and artists. As is the case with other traumatic events that have been silenced in official discourse, unofficial memorialisation through literature, arts, documentation and storytelling in families has served to keep the memory alive and pass it on to new generations (see Macmanus 2020; Edkins 2003).

The concentration camps of 1915 and 1932

The end of the novel *Trash* states:

> The year 1915 reproduced the pitiful pictures of drought. There were the same misfortunes of the exodus. The same pathetic flight. Dismantled homes; the *sertanejos* uprooted of their sedentary lifestyle. The desolate *retirantes*, hollow of hunger, crestfallen like those who are counting their own steps. (Almeida [1928] 2017, 252).

It was one more lap in the circuit of drought–famine–displacement in the Northeast. Once again, Ceará was hard hit. Marches by starving people and episodes of looting began to multiply along the inland roads towards the largest cities, especially Fortaleza. The press described horrific scenes, like the abandonment of babies, and cannibalism, fostering widespread terror among the city's citizens and evoking memories of 1877 (Pinheiro Neto 2014). Further, in the drought of 1898–1900, the government did not gather the migrants in improvised camps as in 1877, with two key consequences. First, dispersion meant that there were

no epidemics, except for smallpox. Second, the city was once again occupied by thousands of starving migrants (Neves 1995).

Thus, in 1915, the Ceará government and the economic elites decided to protect the city, despite the harmful consequences this might have. They established the Alagadiço Concentration Camp, six kilometres from the centre of Fortaleza. The camp operated for six months and held about 8000 people. Perhaps 32,000 people passed through it (Pinheiro Neto 2014). The famine-displaced were attracted there by false promises of employment and relief distribution.

Teófilo, author of *The Famine*, worked in this camp, and referred to it as 'Holy Field', a euphemism for cemetery (Pinheiro Neto 2014, 84). Recalling 1877, the public authorities and the local citizens expected that the containment of *retirantes* would protect the city and halt the spread of diseases. The camp was established less out of humanitarian concern – although some involved were committed to charity (Neves 2003) – and more for the 'protection of private property, public order and morals and good manners' (Pinheiro Neto 2014, 77).

The concentration camps also need to be understood as a legacy of the freeing of slaves a few decades earlier. By 1915, large numbers of freed slaves and their descendants had become *sertanejo* peasants. The elites attempted to control their movement, by promoting migration to other regions during drought and famine, and distributing train or ship tickets, unless it was possible to 'retain the emigrants through work' (Secreto 2003, 43). The containment camps of 1915 and 1932 were thus partly a public policy to retain the slaves who had become a free labour force (Rios 2014).

With roots in the improvised camps of 1877, the 1915 Alagadiço Concentration Camp was a social technology that reflected the 'scientific methods' of the state (Montebello and Silva 2018). It was guarded by soldiers and inspectors, and illuminated by electric light, while Fortaleza would not receive public lighting until the 1930s. The government made a point of calling the site a 'concentration camp', *campo de concentração*. According to Pinheiro Neto (2014, 76), the Brazilian press conceptualised such camps as 'a temporary shelter where people were confined but maintained with dignity and even some comfort'.[5]

The prejudice against the *sertanejo* was reinforced as urban citizens – who saw themselves as civilised, modern and White – observed the non-White migrants' behaviour. The perimeter of the Alagadiço Camp was delimited by wood fences through which 'Observers seem to agree that [there was] "nothing more repugnant and contrary to the more elementary rules of hygiene and charity than the Concentration Camp of the Alagadiço in 1915"' (Neves 1995, 100). Nevertheless, the government of Ceará considered the camp a success in terms of protecting the city (Neves 1995).

The book *O Quinze* (*The Fifteen*, in the English version), published in 1930 by Rachel de Queiroz (1910–2003), is the first and most important novel to document the Alagadiço Camp. The novel denounces the deplorable conditions of what one protagonist, a *retirante sertanejo*, called 'the hunger corral' (Queiroz 2020, 136). Reflecting on his journey and his family's situation in the Alagadiço, he attributed his 'uncertain future to the perversity of a drought that had pushed him to the misfortunes of the road and to the miserable promiscuity of an *abarracamento* for drought migrants' (Queiroz 2020, 103). He compares his condition with the collective memories of the improvised camps of 1877, where the *sertanejos* from the previous generation were agglomerated in the most inhumane conditions. He blames the bad weather; ignored is the colonial political economy that produced him as a social subject

constantly suffering the slow violence of hunger and cyclical episodes of famine (see Parashar and Orjuela 2021).

Again in 1932, a huge wave of backland peasants began to flee from the *sertões*. Ceará's newspapers stirred fear in the population by recalling the terrible memories (real or invented) of 1877 and 1915. Plus, 'underlying the stamped panic in the newspapers, there was an irrefutable aphorism: Protection is needed' (Rios 2014, 59). This did not refer primarily to the protection of the starving migrants but to the protection of people in the cities. Although it had been publicly recognised that the 1915 containment camp was indeed a death camp, which had also triggered epidemics, the authorities went ahead and built camps far from Fortaleza, to keep as many displaced persons as possible away from the capital and its population. From 1932 to 1933, the state government held tens of thousands of people in seven concentration camps in Ceará, with direct involvement of the Federal Inspectorate of Works Against Droughts. The smaller camps (named Urubu and Matadouro[6]) were built in Fortaleza, while the other five were in the cities of Senador Pompeu (Patu Camp), São Mateus (Cariús Camp), Crato (Burity Camp) and Quixeramobim e Ipu (Rios 2014).

Statistics about the camps are imprecise and difficult to find because the government destroyed most of the official documentation when the camps were dismantled. Authoritarian president Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945), in a speech held in Ceará, expressed his satisfaction with the fact that the authorities had organised '"concentration camps", where more than one million people passed through, assisted with worthwhile hygiene and care services'. Newspapers reported that 73,918 people stayed in the camps, and researcher Frederico Neves pointed to around 90,000 (Albuquerque 2019). News reports and testimonies of survivors make it clear that there were massive deaths (Rios 2014). Yet the government presented the camps as a well-executed relief policy, even including an external visit to the camps on one touristic route in 1932. Moreover, the media reported on health measures and vaccination campaigns in the camps, even though those were minimal compared to the actual need (Rios 2014, 52). In her research, Kenny (2009) found no documentary evidence that the camps were designed to

> repress or subjugate *retirantes* [… but] narratives speak to the squalid conditions, morbidity, mortality, piling up of bodies in mass graves, and partial liver extractions from cadavers that caused camp residents to perceive that the government's intent was to annihilate them. (2009, 23)

A lack of adequate infrastructure for hygiene, not to mention the awful water, food and shelter conditions, again made the camps a hotbed for diseases.

According to Rios (2014, 93), the camps 'functioned as a prison […] there was always close vigilance to prevent escapes or rebellions. The migrants only moved outside the camp transported in trucks and, at all times, were under the watchful eye of guards'. Rios synthesises the *retirantes*' views:

> The corral is a prison. More than that: it's an animal prison. The Camp was therefore not a place for us. It was a prison that treated human beings like animals. In the memory of many *sertanejos*, the corral was another case that explained the cruel way in which the Government used to assist, and still assists, the dispossessed. (Rios 2014, 102)

There were many factors behind the use of concentration camps for famine migrants in 1915 and 1932 in the Northeastern state of Ceará: (1) preserving urban cities from social disturbances caused by the arrival of crowds of displaced persons; (2) preventing the

spread of diseases in cities; (3) exploiting the migrant workforce at minimum cost; (4) reducing emigration of the labour force to other states; and (5) rationalising charity and government relief (Neves 1995; Rios 2014; Garcia 2006; Pinheiro Neto 2014; Secreto 2003). The terrifying collective memories that urban citizens held of the waves of starving migrants from the backlands during the Great Drought of 1877, and after, also had a role to play. The descriptions, decades later, of the emaciated and sick famine-displaced, of their deplorable strategies for survival, and of the destruction and distress that the starving mobs caused in Fortaleza reinforced the racist prejudice against peasants from the *sertões* (Barbalho 2005; Neves 2003, 2007). Because they were not White and were considered less human or uncivilised by the economic and political elites – who were of White, mainly Portuguese, origin or creole – the government thought it was both tolerable and desirable to hold them in concentration camps (Neves 1995; Kenny 2009; Rios 2014; Pinheiro Neto 2014). Thus, racism was a condition that allowed the existence of the concentration camps (Neves 1995; Rios 2014).

After these episodes, however, concentration camps were not established for displaced persons of other severe droughts. This may be because the term 'concentration camp' and the practice of containing starving people became politically and morally unacceptable after the Nazi camps. The association with the Holocaust may also help us understand why the history of the concentration camps in Brazil was silenced for a long time. Yet, something changed in the 2000s; currently, the Ceará state government is incentivising people to consider the immaterial legacies and visit the material remains of one of the camps. The next section looks into how and why.

Paths to the public memorialisation of the Patu concentration camp

The Patu Camp was located in the city of Senador Pompeu, which today has about 25,500 inhabitants. It was the second largest camp of 1932–1933 and accommodated around 20,000 people (Neves 1995, 110). The construction of the Patu Camp began in 1919 to support the building of a dam at the Patu River, with the aim of providing hydric resilience for the backland peasants. However, the work was interrupted in 1923. Ironically, when the 1932 drought came, the authorities contained the *retirantes sertanejos* there, keeping them from reaching Fortaleza. Death statistics are imprecise, but a 2017 report by the Institute of National Historic and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN) states that deaths were so numerous that interned *retirantes* had to dig collective graves every morning to bury each day's bodies. The graves were closed in the evening, 'only to begin everything again the next day' (IPHAN 2017).

While other camps had been constructed of materials that could be easily dismantled or burned, some facilities of the Patu Camp were made of bricks and cement. It was a complex of large warehouses and a village for workers. The ruins of these remain spread over 16 hectares. Because the usual lack of material evidence may make the memorialisation of famines more difficult (see Orjuela, this volume), this case is particularly interesting.

This research found three main efforts that led to the public memorialisation and official recognition of the Patu Camp and the displaced persons who passed through it: (1) The Walk of the Drought; (2) Cultural Team 19-22, a cultural group which investigates and communicates the history of the Camps; and (3) institutional efforts to gain recognition of the camp and the walk as heritage.

The walk of the drought

The first effort is a pilgrimage known as the 'Walk of the Souls of the Patu's Dam', 'Pilgrimage of the Holy Souls', 'Walk of the Souls', or 'Walk of the Drought'. Its objective is to pray for the souls of those who suffered and died at the Patu Camp. This religious manifestation started after the end of the drought and closing of the camp in 1933. Apparently, Patu had been the only camp without a regular priest. Many *sertanejo* peasants are deeply religious, and some of them began to walk to the site of the camp as a spiritual service for its victims. In 1973, people living in the area built a symbolic cemetery in the complex to honour the camp victims. This movement grew, and people in the area developed faith in and prayed for a collective saint called 'Souls of the Dam'. The participants, who seem to have gathered spontaneously, without a specific leader (Martins 2015), believed that those who perished in the camp experienced such immense suffering that they became saints capable of producing miracles. Hence, the pilgrims ask the 'Saint Souls' for miracles and benevolences.

In the 1980s, an Italian Catholic priest arrived in Senador Pompeu and decided to channel the spontaneous mystic manifestations of the peasants into Catholic rituals. First, he installed a catholic sanctuary inside the popular cemetery. Then, along with local politicians and artists, the priest created an ecumenic pilgrimage called the 'Walk of the Drought' in 1982. Since then, every year on the second Sunday of November, pilgrims march around seven kilometres from Senador Pompeu's Catholic Mother Church to the Sanctuary (Martins 2015; Kenny 2009).

This spiritual pilgrimage grew through the decades, attracting pilgrims, tourists and researchers from other cities and states. Newspapers report 1000 participants in 2005 and 6000 in 2010 (Martins 2015, 75). In 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 10,000 people joined the 37th Walk of the Drought.[7]

The fact that the history of the concentration camps for famine victims began to be publicised by mainstream media in Brazil contributed to this growth. For instance, in 2012, there was a five-minute report on the camps' history on the *Programa Fantástico*, the most popular Brazilian TV show.[8] Regional, national and foreign news outlets, such as O Povo, Diário do Nordeste, Folha de S. Paulo, O Globo, El País, Deutsche Welle and BBC Brasil, also published special reports detailing that history.

What began as a religious movement also sparked political discussions about the causes of the tragedy and about themes of current interest to the backland peasants, like hydric public works and land use (Martins 2015).[9] The city government of Senador Pompeu published a well-produced 10-minute advertisement video on Facebook in 2019, explicitly describing the concentration camps as a heinous policy disguised as humanitarian relief. The quote at the beginning of this article, stating that 'it is time to bring to life that dark page of our history', comes from there.

Tourism around the Walk has become increasingly important for the local economy, attracting the attention of entrepreneurs and politicians. In September 2021, State Law 17.698 included the 'Walk of the Drought' in the official touristic route of Ceará, justifying this by its 'cultural, touristic and religious relevance', and the necessity of 'stimulating tourism in the region with aims of creating income and jobs, and incentivizing local development'.[10] Politicians have publicly defended the memorialisation of the Patu Camp as a quest for historical justice.

Cultural Team 19-22 and the history of the camp

The second effort was carried out by a movement of university students and artists from Senador Pompeu, called *Equipe Cultural 19-22* (Cultural Team 19-22; hereinafter the Team). The Team was formed during a Cultural Week in Senador Pompeu in 1994, when a group of artists decided to visit a large house (*casarão*) at the Patu Complex, which the local people claimed was haunted. The group took its name from a sign on the house displaying the number 19-22. Activists Fram Paulo and Valdecy Alves were among its original members.[11] This cultural group came to contribute to the public memorialisation of the Patu camp through research, information, education, art and the spreading of information, often on online platforms (cf. Mwambari, this volume).

Even though the expression 'hunger corral' was frequently utilised to refer to some areas of Senador Pompeu and although there was a pilgrimage to the 'souls of the dam' until 1994, nobody on the Team knew anything about the forced containment of *sertanejos* there.[12] Eventually, the Team located the daughter of a guard of the Patu Camp, who became their first source of oral history. A film with her testimony was released in 2021.[13] Other people, including camp survivors, also gave their testimonies for the first time, overcoming both the shame and pain of remembering and the previous lack of interest of others.

The Team became researchers and activists, discovering official documents forgotten in governmental archives. About the same time, academic works such as that of Neves (1995) began to be published. After gathering knowledge, the Team began the struggle to turn the site and the pilgrimage into material and intangible heritage, respectively. To achieve this, they decided to speak out about the camps, to educate the public but also to garner popular and political support (Kenny 2009; Martins 2015).[14] As we will see in the next section, they also acted through formal political, administrative and judicial processes to get the camp recognised as heritage.

In the wake of the involvement of Cultural Team 19-22, there has been an increase in the content produced by media and activists. The activists engage as individuals or are organised in movements or non-governmental organisations, some with support from governmental institutions like Ceará's Secretariat for Culture. Some media outputs are made for profit, and some are civic projects. An example of the latter is the mini-documentary *Walking to the Holy Field*, directed by Karla Samara (2012) and supported by the Secretariat of Culture of the State Government of Ceará. There are also testimonies of survivors of 1932, such as that of Mr Cícero Clara, filmed by Fram Paulo and available online.[15] In 2019, the docudrama *Currais* (Corrals), by Sabina Colares and David Aguiar, was released, evoking the history of the camps of 1932, with images of the ruins and touching interviews with survivors and local people.

According to Fram Paulo,[16] the Team understood that 'the community had to appropriate that history in a fundamental way, and several activities should be held around that history' to that end. The Team used theatre, photograph exhibitions, sculptures, poetry contests and documentaries to raise awareness of the history of the camp (Martins 2015, 82–101). They also published a magazine, *Jornal Patubuiú*, with 1000 copies per month, and organised school activities to foster dialogue about the Patu Camp. The 2012 mini-documentary *The Souls of the People are the Saint of the People*, directed by Fram Paulo, was shown in schools and at public movie sessions, resulting in widespread publicity.[17] People had heard stories about the 'corral of hunger', *curral da fome*, but not the history in a more refined way.

In Paulo's view, religiosity was a crucial ally of the cultural movement. People were ashamed of living in a place nicknamed *curral da fome*, but religiosity enabled ways of understanding the suffering of the famine-displaced and even reframing them as saints, generating a deep respect for them. However, there have been criticisms that the voices of the pilgrims have been unheard in the dominant narrative, which is mainly authored by the Catholic Church and the Team (Martins 2015). Despite this, the alliance of culture and religion – boosted by tourism – evidently played an important role in breaking the silence around the concentration camps and the treatment of the famine-displaced.

Gaining heritage recognition

The third effort towards reviving the memory of the famine camps was an institutional struggle for justice through heritage protection. In Brazil, the act of transforming something into heritage (*patrimônio cultural*) is an administrative act by any of the executive branches (municipal, state or federal) based on articles 215 and 216 of the Federal Constitution. The processes of designating something as Material Heritage or Intangible Heritage are called *Tombamento* (Listing) and *Registro* (Registration), respectively. Any citizen or public institution can request the opening of a technical process to assess the cultural value of a historical object, site or practice.

Heritage listing or registration means that the asset gains public recognition of its cultural value for the society, at the municipal, state or federal level. For material heritage, there is an obligation of maintenance and conservation of that asset, whether it is public or private property (Rabello 2015). In the case of intangible heritage, registration implies that it is to be disseminated and promoted widely (Fonseca 2015). Heritagisation thus designates assets as 'sacred', and 'superior to other day-to-day practices, since representing Brazilian culture means figuring as a banner or emblem of the nation' (Canani and Markowitz 2006). Examples of designated Intangible Heritages are the *Frevo* (carnival dance) and the *Capoeira* (a combined fight and dance). Rio de Janeiro's Corcovado Mountain, with the Cristo Redentor statue, is a designated Material Heritage.

In March 1996, the Team led the proposal of a 'bill of law by popular initiative', signed by more than 5% of the city's voting population, in Senador Pompeu's parliament.[18] They attached research material and demanded municipal heritage protection for the artistic, historical and cultural assets related to the Patu Camp (Martins 2015, 85). The bill achieved the necessary votes to become law, but one legislator requested an adjournment and 'buried' it through inaction.[19] In 1997, the Team also commenced a heritage process at Ceará's Secretariat for Culture (state level), but it did not advance.

In June 1997, the Team commenced a lawsuit against the city government of Senador Pompeu[20] (municipal level) for its failure to preserve the camp. However, because the Patu Complex belong to a federal agency, the National Department for Works against Droughts (DNOCS),[21] the process was transferred to the federal justice level in 1999. After years of stagnation, a federal judge ordered the IPHAN to provide a technical report on the issue.

This 2007 report says that the city government already had a plan to turn one of the complex's buildings into heritage, as well as a historical-religious and tourist project for the site. It also noted that there had been negotiations between the City and DNOCS. However, public authorities had 'difficulty […] with regard to issues relating to preservationist policies and practices'. Notably, Fram Paulo was the local guide for IPHAN's specialists during their technical visit. IPHAN's report recommended the listing of the relatively well-preserved

architectonical set at the Patu Camp called *Vila dos Ingleses* (Englishmen's Village) at the state level, and a public discussion about a policy for the whole area, considering its historical importance to Ceará and Senador Pompeu. The strong popular religious attachment to the place was also highlighted. The report, however, was silent about federal-level protection.

From that point onward, there were unfruitful negotiations between Senador Pompeu and DNOCS about sharing responsibility (including costs) for the preservation of the material heritage. Finally, in April 2011, the Team obtained a federal judicial decision favouring the protection and preservation of some structures. The verdict concluded that Senador Pompeu had failed to protect the historical material and intangible legacies of the Patu Camp.[22] The judge ordered the city government to adopt preservation measures of the material structures and to carry out education campaigns in schools, on radio stations and through other means – as the Team and others were already doing. The city, however, argued that they needed federal support, including money, because the structures to be protected were federal buildings – DNOCS property.

The process stalled again until Ceará's Public Agency for Law Enforcement (MPCE) started a Public Civil Inquiry (PCI) in 2014, probably because of pressure from activists. The PCI is a procedure to gather evidence on the infringement of a right or public interest which may demand enforcement. In 2015, a new public prosecutor of the MPCE, Geraldo Laprovitera Teixeira, began to work on the Inquiry. He became personally interested in the case, drawing comparisons with what he had learned about the Nazi camps during his time in Germany from 1999 to 2001.[23] Since Senador Pompeu had been condemned by the federal judiciary, and a new (2014) IPHAN report[24] reiterated the recommendation for municipal and state – but not federal – protection of the Walk and Patu's material remains, the MPCE's prosecutor fostered extra-judiciary dialogue with the city government, which resulted in an agreement (Termo de Ajuste de Conduta – TAC no. 002/2017) signed by the MPCE and the city government in March 2017. This agreement suspended the city's infringement of the federal decision of 2011 in exchange for the promise to initiate and accomplish the whole heritage process in 12 months. Nevertheless, in 2018, the MPCE found that the heritage process had not advanced. The MPCE granted prorogations until January 2019, but the city still did not accomplish the task. The MPCE then adopted a harder strategy: it asked the judiciary to impose a fine of R$1000 (a value close to the minimum wage for a month of work) for each day of delay, to be charged against the city's mayor, beginning in January 2019.

In April, the mayor of Senador Pompeu published the Executive Decree 15/2019, establishing the preservation of the Patu complex. Although the decree mentions the 'Walk of the Souls', it does not explicitly establish it as an intangible heritage. Nevertheless, on 20 July 2019, a ceremony marked the conclusion of the material and intangible heritage processes. The public signing ceremony took place at the ruins of the building where food had been distributed to the interned *retirantes*, in the presence of both Valdecy Alves and Geraldo Teixeira. The MPCE considered that Senador Pompeu had fully accomplished both the material and intangible heritage processes.

Thereafter, the mayor and civic movements increased the pressure for heritage recognition at state level. In August 2022, the State Council for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage of the State of Ceará finally concluded the heritage listing process of the Patu Camp's remains. On that occasion, one of the heritage coordinators said that 'The sufferings of the people who went through the drought process, the scourged, will be remembered and valued by the State'.[25]

The process of gaining heritage recognition for the camp – and thereby officially memorialising its victims – shows the many obstacles in the way of remembering those who suffered during the drought and famine. An important aspect of the silence surrounding the fate of the backland peasants fleeing hunger is 'the racist caricature of the indolent, backward *sertanejo*' (Davis 2001, 388). Memorialisation of famine victims by recognising the Patu concentration camp as official heritage may foster reflection on the social formation of the backland peasants and expose those who have taken advantage of their difficulties. It is thus likely that powerful elites would want to avoid making that history part of a Brazilian canon, which links famines with mass atrocities like genocide and other crimes against humanity (see De Waal 2018, 42).

Final remarks

This article contributes to scholarly efforts in the understanding of when, why and how famines arise. Furthermore, it allows deeper analyses to be made about famine history as it promotes discussions on how these problems are confronted and on how they are remembered as mass atrocities – as well as how they are not remembered and why. In this regard, the role of activists in uncovering and spreading information about the past and the legal procedures to recognise the Patu Concentration Camp and the Walk of the Drought as official tangible and intangible heritage, respectively, strengthens the debate around representation and commemoration of hunger victims.

Two elements help us understand why and when famines and their victims are not treated as mass atrocities worthy of public remembrance in the Brazilian case. First, the concentration camps of 1915 and 1932 were presented to society as a relief policy for famine-displaced persons. While there were some humanitarian components and agents working in the camps – like Rodolfo Teófilo in the Alagadiço – the main goal was to protect Fortaleza and other cities from the masses of famine migrants – and to take advantage of them. It is also apparent that the camps were already perceived as a humanitarian disaster in 1915 and 1932–1933. That perception, coupled with the later world acknowledgement of the Nazi concentration camps as canonical examples of mass atrocity, may explain why subsequent governments avoided the remembering of that past. Second, this conclusion must be interpreted in the context of the social and political relations that govern food systems from a broad perspective (Edkins 2000). In the Brazilian case, it is impossible to dissociate hunger from the colonialist social formation of the *sertanejo* peasantry and the brutal marginalisation of this group (Castro 1984; Martins 1981). Any reckoning with this past ultimately fosters reflection on why the *sertanejos* from the Northeast are so exposed to hunger in the first place.

The academic literature has built a strong consensus that famines are, above all, political. So are the responses to them. The public memorialisation of the Brazilian concentration camps, manifested in the Patu Concentration Camp and the Walk of the Drought, might shed light on this political aspect of famines. Referring to the legacy of the Nazi camps, it may raise questions about whether this should be seen as a crime against humanity, and about who was responsible for it.

These questions effectively emerged in the 1990s in Senador Pompeu, mainly through the work of *Equipe Cultural 19-22*. Being part of a cultural and politicised elite in that small town in the Northeastern backlands, the Team enacted a multidimensional and consistent

effort to turn the history of the camps and the famine migrants into official tangible and intangible heritage. A combination of their work and academic research created a political constituency interested in granting heritage status in Senador Pompeu, and attracted media attention at the regional and national levels, especially in the 2010s. Perhaps most consequential was the associated cultural boost, mainly in religious tourism around the Walk of the Drought. Economic opportunities amplified the interested constituency. In fact, the relevance of the Walk surpassed the city of Senador Pompeu, and entered the official touristic circuit of the state of Ceará in 2021, a concrete sign of official recognition at the state level.

The other official memorialisation was the heritage protection assigned in 2019, to which a judiciary process was fundamental. But why did this process take so long? Some interviewees[26] pointed to technical difficulties (eg a lack of qualified personnel) in executing the procedures. Senador Pompeu is a small town, with few budgetary and human resources. Also, the official heritage process at the city level was not perceived as a vote-winner. While the Walk was already a growing success, material heritage recognition would simply imply more budgetary costs. In that sense, if a memorialisation project can attract enough tourists or sponsors, like a museum-park through the buildings of the complex, so too can political support.

All of this must be understood within the context of the deep prejudice against *retirantes sertanejos* and their political marginalisation; that is, political elites do not recognise their history as needing elucidation and memorialisation. This aligns with the thesis of 'social amnesia' related to the violences practised against the peasantry (Motta and Zarth 2018), even though the growing exposure of the camps' history may make it more electorally important and imperative for some agents in relevant positions within Brazil's and Ceara's institutions. As this article highlighted how race and class relate to the suppression of the memory of the concentration camps and the famine-displaced, it is suggested that future work also investigate the gender dimensions of the response to the famine and the displaced, and the memorialisation efforts themselves (see Parashar and Orjuela 2021).

To summarise, this research has shown how the path towards recognition and memorialisation of the famine victims by the authorities at the local, state and federal level has been long and driven largely by civil society initiatives. However, the role of literature and art in preserving the memory of Brazil's periods of great drought should not be neglected. By documenting and drawing attention to the experiences of the backland peasants, authors and artists, together with more recent memory activists, have contributed to the official recognition of the suffering that took place in the concentration camps.

Memorialising the Brazilian concentration camps for famine-displaced persons may be a step in the direction of justice, emphasising that hunger and famine are political phenomena, even when occurring during severe drought. The process is not simple in Brazil, nor is it in most countries (see Orjuela, this volume). The most famous famines that have been memorialised as part of a nation-building narrative, like the Irish Famine and the Ukrainian Holodomor, could attribute responsibility to foreigners (De Waal 2018). In the Brazilian case, the main perpetrators were co-nationals. As painful as it may be, reencountering this history and speaking about it might be necessary if we are to follow a motto like 'Hunger and Famine, Never Again!'

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Notes

1. https://www.facebook.com/prefeituramunicipalsenadorpompeu/videos/37%C2%AA-caminhada-da-seca-senador-pompeu-2019/1420790368070182/
2. While 'containment camp' might be a more appropriate term for these camps (see Nelson and Finan 2009), I will adopt the official term 'concentration camp', which is also used in the Brazilian academic debate.
3. The research adheres to the ethnical norms and guidelines of my institution, including regarding informed consent of the interviewees.
4. Throughout the article, translations of texts in Portuguese into English are done by the author, unless otherwise stated.
5. The first camp was established some 25 years before the Nazi camps. Although the Brazilian concentration camps did not resort to Nazi extermination tactics, they were built on a similar logic of dehumanisation and desire to govern bodies.
6. Literally Vulture and Slaughterhouse.
7. http://blogs.diariodonordeste.com.br/sertaocentral/religiao/71098/71098
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaY4YhNE6XU&t=3s
9. Virtual interview with Fram Paulo, November 29, 2021. Paulo is a member of the Walk's organising committee and one of the first activists to promote the official memorialisation of the Patu Camp.
10. Ceará state's Ordinary Law no. 17.689 of September 28, 2021. Available at: https://leisestaduais.com.br/ce/lei-ordinaria-n-17698-2021-ceara-inclui-a-caminhada-da-seca-no-roteiro-turistico-do-estado-do-ceara-por-sua-destacada-relevancia-cultural-turistica-e-religiosa
11. Interview with Alves, October 27, 2021.
12. Interview with Fram Paulo, November 29, 2021.
13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tY2ho_nkJsM

14. Interview with Fram Paulo, November 29, 2021.
15. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTSDnb6T7cc
16. Interview, November 29, 2021.
17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kFWjWtIQGA
18. The following timeline builds on the excellent research of Martins (2015) and my own primary documentation of administrative and judiciary processes. Some institutional actions of the Team have been omitted for reasons of space. Other agents also acted through these means, but they have been omitted because they did not advance as far as the Team 19-22 processes. For example, in 2001, a group of professors and students of History of the State University of Ceará started a judicial process against the government, demanding the protection of the Patu site.
19. Interview with Fram Paulo, November 29, 2021. Also, there is a mention of a memo filed by the Team 19-22 on June 3, 1996, petitioning fundamentally the same thing. Source: Coordenação de Patrimônio Histórico e Cultural, Secretaria Estadual de Cultura do Ceará. Parecer Técnico: Tombamento Estadual. Imóvel: Vila dos Ingleses. Processo no. 2854220/2010. Fortaleza, June 14, 2017.
20. This Popular Action is fully available in the Federal Justice Process no. 99.008929-4, through which the city was ordered in 2011 to provide heritage protection.
21. The DNOCS is the new name for the Federal Inspectorate of Works Against Droughts, which was headed by the earlier discussed author José Américo de Almeida in 1932.
22. Federal Justice Process no. 99.008929-4.
23. Interview with Geraldo Teixeira, November 29, 2021.
24. Informação Técnica 0124/14 – DITEC/IPHAN-CE.
25. https://www.opovo.com.br/noticias/ceara/senador-pompeu/2022/08/08/campo-de-concentracao-do-patu-e-tombado-como-patrimonio-do-ceara.html
26. Interview with Geraldo Teixeira, November 29, 2021; and Interview with Alves, October 27, 2021.

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