

## ARTICLE

# Hide and rule: Accumulation by disappearance and necro-periurbanisation in Brazil

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Email: [jan.hutta@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:jan.hutta@uni-bayreuth.de)**Abstract**

This paper examines how peri-urban spaces are governed through practices of concealment and obfuscation, thus undermining and displacing techniques of making things legible. Focusing on the Baixada Fluminense region north of Rio de Janeiro, it connects clandestine practices of ‘*grilagem*’, or state-sponsored land fraud, to the obfuscation of violence as part of territorial strategies. Methodologically, the article combines a genealogical approach to analysing obfuscation as a multi-pronged technology of power with empirical research on the violent control of peri-urban neighbourhoods. In Rio de Janeiro’s hinterland, it is argued, the obfuscation of land entitlements has long been linked to the invisibilisation of violence and atrocities, facilitated by racialised conditions of willed ignorance and opacity. At a conceptual level, the paper contributes to nascent works in urban geography and anthropology that are committed to developing context-sensitive approaches to necropolitics in peri-urban and fringe spaces of the Global South. Moreover, it draws on work on uneven spatial development, control grabbing and forced disappearance to develop the notion of ‘accumulation by disappearance’. Such an approach complicates assumptions around modern power being built on ‘state projects of legibility’ (James Scott) and violent spectacles, while also extending engagements with racialised opacity by drawing attention to cunning techniques of obfuscation that traverse the governance of people and spaces. What emerges is a context-sensitive approach to interrogating powerful, yet contested processes of ‘necro-periurbanisation’.

**KEYWORDS**

accumulation by dispossession, Brazil, forced disappearance, land fraud, necropolitics, peri-urbanisation

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*A gente vive em um mundo, a gente vive em um mundo aonde as pessoas querem cobrir tudo, sabe? Elas querem cobrir tudo, querem cobrir tudo, tudo, tudo.*

[We live in a world where people want to cover up everything, you know? They want to cover up everything, they want to cover up everything, everything, everything].

Joseane Martins, the founder of *Filhos nos Braços do Pai*, a collective of mothers and relatives of victims of state violence.<sup>1</sup>

*Esses arquivos vivem sumindo! Desaparecem! Justamente, porque essas instituições de controle fundiário, mesmo quando elas existem, elas estruturalmente criam mais problemas do que ajudam.*

[These files keep disappearing! They disappear! Precisely because these institutions of property control, even when they exist, structurally create more problems rather than help].

Public servant working at the Land and Cartography Institute of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ)<sup>2</sup>

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The forms of visualisation and cartographic knowledge that have evolved alongside global modernity have long rendered subaltern existences invisible and represented them in disabling ways, as critical scholarship teaches, notably feminism as well as Black, postcolonial and decolonial studies (e.g. McKittrick, 2021; Spivak, 1988; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). More than casting shadows or distorting images, though, the government of people and spaces, especially in the urban peripheries, also involves more direct forms of concealment, obfuscation and annihilation. The Brazilian context, and specifically the state of Rio de Janeiro, which is at my focus, provides ample evidence for the powers of obfuscation.

For example, after the end of the civilian-military dictatorship of 1964–85, several state governments set out to advance the long-overdue land reform. The main aim was to make large unused estates, often illegally acquired, available to the market and effective taxation. For this purpose, Rio's government commissioned historians to conduct in-depth research on demarcations, titles and uses of land. The result was the milestone *Atlas Fundiário do Rio de Janeiro* (Land Atlas of Rio de Janeiro) published in 1991, a prime example of what James Scott (1998) has called 'state projects of legibility' that produce cartographic knowledge. Yet, as noted by the Land and Cartography Institute of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ) in 2020, all these research materials subsequently 'disappeared', further obstructing an already half-hearted process of land redistribution (ITERJ, 2020). The conditions of this massive archival loss have remained opaque to the present day.

This case indexes a power impulse opposed to making things legible, one that Ananya Roy in discussing the peri-urban fringes of Calcutta has aptly referred to as 'unmapping': 'a specific regulatory logic that operated precisely through the absence of knowable maps and records', thus allowing 'the proliferation of multiple territorial claims' (Roy, 2003, p. 139; see also Roy, 2009; Smith, 2023). Similarly, practices of unmapping in Brazil have long been associated with what is known as '*grilagem de terras*', or simply '*grilagem*': the forging of land titles and registers, which allows elite groups to illicitly appropriate rural estates and residential lots (see Holloway, 1980; Weaver, 2003). Across Brazil, *grilagem* has enabled large-scale land grabs in the major regions of agribusiness and shaped peri-urbanisation (de Oliveira, 2020). As such, it exemplifies both a rural and a peri-urban mode of accumulation that is assisted by systematic forms of fraud and obfuscation.

Practices of obfuscation also more directly shape the government of peripheralised populations in Brazil. For if maps, archives and titles have systematically disappeared in Brazil and the state of Rio de Janeiro, so have the records of numerous atrocities against subaltern communities—in even more perplexing ways. In the early morning on a day in late September 2015, a truck entered Quilômetro 40, a district at the outskirts of Seropédica, north of Rio de Janeiro, removing numerous dead bodies from the streets. Earlier that year, drug traffickers from the Comando Vermelho network had imposed a levy on a multinational company that was running a water sampling and withdrawal station for access to a river that passes by the neighbourhood. Not content with the unwelcome increase in production costs, the company had consulted the local government and the military police. Soon thereafter, hooded men equipped with muffled guns and a list of names and addresses entered Quilômetro 40 and executed at least 20 persons—largely young Black men. The day after, municipal cars cleaned the streets. The deaths were not reported in any newspapers, no police investigations ensued. All that remained were residents' memories of the atrocity, muted by the omnipresent *lei do silêncio*, the 'law of silence'.<sup>3</sup>

Such disturbing cases of people from the peripheries arbitrarily annihilated and disappeared, with institutional support, are far from unique across Brazil. In Rio's peri-urban regions—particularly in the West Zone and the Baixada Fluminense—killings and forced disappearance have intensified over the last decades with the proliferation of both drug-trafficking networks and the so-called '*milícias*', parapolicing groups associated with local police battalions and politicians (Benmergui & Gonçalves, 2019; Hirata et al., 2022). Among the most immediately victimised are young Black men as well as queer and trans people, alongside homeless and politically insurgent subjects and communities (Goulart et al., 2022). Moreover, women who lost their relatives suffer greatly from the psycho-somatic consequences of bereavement (Rocha, 2012). Increasingly, women have themselves become targets of killings and forced disappearance (Florentino & Goulart, 2023; Perillo, 2025).

While unmapping and forced disappearance initially may seem unrelated, as I seek to show in what follows, they have long been deeply entwined. Specifically, the two examples given both point to the strategic role of obfuscation in processes of territorial control and accumulation. In the case of the lost research materials around land use, the epistemic grounds for claiming entitlement to land were obfuscated; and in the Seropédica massacre, the concealment of mass violence was functional to armed actors' establishing local control, thus facilitating a company's access to resources. Both examples thus point to a 'hide-and-rule' type of necropolitics: a lethal mode of governing that operates through making people and things disappear. While not uncontested and often producing intricate paradoxes of absence and presence (Hutta, 2025a), such a necropolitics animates what in variation of Harvey (2003; cf. Hall, 2013) we might call 'accumulation by disappearance'.

This paper, then, picks up on emerging works on necropolitics in geography and political anthropology that are committed to illuminating the relationship between dehumanising violence, abandonment and uneven spatial formation (e.g. Alves, 2018; Kirk, 2024; McIntyre & Nast, 2011; Souza, 2021; cf. Hutta, 2025b), specifically in peri-urban contexts of extraction and dispossession (e.g. Janoschka, 2016; Leitner & Sheppard, 2018; Ortega, 2020). Specifically, it elaborates on the connections between necropolitics and disappearance, drawing together emergent engagements with disappearance as a social and political force (e.g. Denyer Willis, 2022; Huttunen & Perl, 2023; Wright, 2017), discussions of unmapping, fraud and spatial 'opacity' in urban geography (Roy, 2003, 2009; Santos & Silveira, 2001; Simone, 2011; Smith, 2020; Smith, 2023) and work on racialised obscurity (e.g. Bledsoe, 2015; Mbembe, 2019; Mignolo, 2011). Empirically, I focus on the peri-urban Baixada Fluminense, or Fluminense Lowlands, north of Rio de Janeiro, which has long served Brazil's extractivist economy through hyperexploited labour in agriculture, storage, logistics, construction and domestic services. I draw on long-term ethnographic research carried out intermittently since 2015, building on previous research in the region on LGBTQ+ citizenship (Hutta, 2010, 2013). Specifically, I use individual and group interviews conducted, between March 2022 and April 2023, with anti-violence and land activists, researchers, planners, as well as public officials, most of whom live in the municipalities of Nova Iguaçu, Seropédica and Queimados in the Baixada Fluminense.

The analysis proceeds in three steps: first, I revisit debates on disappearance, necropolitics and coloniality alongside works on uneven spatial development to propose an understanding of 'opacity' as a condition of both dehumanisation and infrastructural abandonment. I then provide an overview of peri-urban spatial formation in the Baixada Fluminense and examine how the imbrication of obfuscated land entitlements and concealed atrocities has shaped necropolitical government. Bringing this account into conversation with debates on accumulation by dispossession, I then outline 'accumulation by disappearance' as a mode of necro-periurbanisation that operates through cunning techniques of concealing and obfuscating diverse things, from land entitlements to atrocities and human bodies.

## 2 | RETHINKING OPACITY

In debates on decolonisation, the notion of opacity is often associated with Édouard Glissant's (1997) plea for a 'right to opacity' of the colonised in the face of Western projects of assimilating through making knowable (see Davis, 2019). Where governmental regimes of knowledge fail to count, and account for, subaltern lives, this opens up space for living otherwise, for 'black livingness' as McKittrick (2021) has also argued. At the same time, particularly works engaging with forced disappearance in Abya Yala/Latin America have examined institutional mechanisms of 'epistemological ignorance' (Wright, 2017), where the lives of racialised communities from the urban peripheries are allowed to slip away in various kinds of fast and slow violence, without hegemonic society taking notice (Araújo, 2014; Denyer Willis, 2022). That people may simply disappear, Denyer Willis explains, 'is a systematic assumption that is written through absent policy and inconsistent provision of life-giving infrastructures' (p. 19). These works also connect to engagements with coloniality and necropolitics that have described racialised and gendered forms of dehumanisation in terms of

‘non-being’ and ‘obscurity’ (see Bledsoe, 2015; Mbembe, 2019; Mignolo, 2011; Wynter, 2003), as well as to critiques of stigmatising and criminalising representations of peripheralised spaces and subjectivities that licence state violence (e.g. Larkins, 2015; Smith, 2016).

Opacity, then, can be understood as a condition of both being obscure to and cast into obscurity by governmental practice. As such, depending on its specific configuration, opacity can enable violence to occur without public accountability, but it can also support subaltern modes of being. Such an approach to opacity can assist in analysing necropolitics particularly in peri-urban and fringe spaces that are marked not only by ‘inconsistent provision of life-giving infrastructures’, to pick up on Denyer Willis (2022, p. 19), but also by specific forces of disappearance. For example, discussing spatial development in Brazil, Santos & Silveira (2001, p. 264) have described regions with a low density of technological and informational networks that fail to attract large amounts of capital as ‘opaque spaces’, which they contrast to the ‘luminous’ spaces of high infrastructural density. In a similar vein, but discussing governmental practices of representation, Scott talks about the urban periphery as the ‘dark twin’ (Scott, 1998, p. 261), or the ‘inevitable blind spots’ (p. 263), of the places subjected to state projects of legibility.

These authors, however, tend to reduce opacity to a reverse of infrastructural investments, failing to take into account how it is wilfully manufactured—and creatively inhabited from above as well as below. Pursuing this question, works on informal economies and ‘grey development’ in African contexts have scrutinised ‘invisibility, deception and concealment’ (Smith, 2023, p. 102) as modes of authority as well as makeshift urbanism. Focusing on Winterveld at the urban fringe of the South African City of Tshwane, AbdouMaliq Simone thus notes: ‘invisibility can act as a political construction—that is, a means of both configuring and managing particular resources and the medium through which specific instantiations of the political are deployed’ (2004, p. 66). These works bring to view regimes of power, accumulation and urbanisation that operate through disruptions of the very ‘synoptic vision’ (Scott, 1998, p. 11) commonly taken to serve capitalist development and colonial domination.

The specific techniques of power at work here require closer examination, though, especially as concerns the imbrication of accumulation with both violence and concealment. For example, when the loss and manipulation of documents occur alongside the systematic hiding of atrocities, this directs attention to obfuscation as a distinctive technology of power, one that is functional to racialised opacity, particularly in contexts of peripheralisation. To examine in more detail how opacity and obfuscation interact as part of such a hide-and-rule necropolitics, I now turn to the Baixada Fluminense.

### 3 | THE NECRO-PERIURBANISATION OF THE BAIXADA FLUMINENSE

The Baixada Fluminense, or Fluminense Lowlands, which stretches as a largely plain belt between the mountains of Serra do Mar to the north and the city of Rio de Janeiro to the south, forms a peri-urban landscape characteristic of many regions around major Brazilian cities (Chatel & Sposito, 2023). The Baixada Fluminense’s largest cities, Duque de Caxias, Nova Iguaçu, Belford Roxo and São João de Meriti, have grown rapidly since the mid-twentieth century, as diverse working populations moved into small homes on lotted lands. In the 1970s, urbanisation extended to the cities of Guapimirim and Magé in the west and Itaguaí, Seropédica and Queimados along the Dutra and Rio-Santos highways in the east, with infrastructures of social provision only precariously accompanying the process (Abreu, 1988; Simões, 2007). Today, the Baixada (pronounced ‘*by-SHAH-duh*’), as locals often call the region, counts four million inhabitants, yet retains a rural character outside its cities. Settlements are mostly low-rise, and off the main transportation lines, there are ample grassland and savannah plains.

Those campaigning for improvements and political change in the Baixada have long deplored the region’s opacity in public discourse, critiquing the periodic reports on extreme violence that reinforce stigmatisation (Enne, 2002). For example, a bulletin on violence and racism authored by the activist association Fórum Grita Baixada (Forum Baixada Scream, FGB) reads thus:

Despite the high mortality rate, the historical mark of violence and the characteristics that make up a segregated and unequal urban continuum, the Baixada remains an ‘invisible’ territory, except for the mediated situations that involve massacres, tragedies and pain.

(Fórum Grita Baixada, 2022)

Similarly, an urban researcher engaged in FGB points out:

I worked in favelas in Rio de Janeiro for five years and I always say this, working in the Baixada is difficult because we're invisible! And our work also ends up a little invisibilised, right? The reality here is very different from the reality in a favela like Alemão, which is on television every day, with 50 projects being carried out inside.<sup>4</sup>

These statements underscore the interconnections between opacity and what some scholars have called 'hyper-peripheralisation', one where precarious infrastructures lead to increased risks of health and environmental disasters (Torres & Marques, 2001). But more than that, opacity in the Baixada has been conducive to a particular mode of necropolitics, one related to extractivist accumulation, as an overview of the region's spatial formation shows.

After the French colonised the region in the sixteenth century to extract wood, the Portuguese settlers waged a deadly war against the indigenous Tupinambá, dividing the land into so-called *sesmarias* (royal land grants). They set up sugar plantations and, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had enslaved workers store and reload minerals from Minas Gerais and coffee from the Paraíba Valley, all bound to the empire's largest colonial port in Rio de Janeiro. By the late-eighteenth century, African descendents counted more than half of the population, constructing transportation systems, chopping woods and labouring on plantations and in transport under conditions of endemic violence and diseases (Alves, 2020, p. 85). In the late-nineteenth century, after the formal end of slavery, agriculture, especially citrus, expanded, allowing post-colonial *coronéis*—oligarchic landowners endowed with military rank—to establish a foothold in the region. After the First World War, the Baixada Fluminense became Brazil's main region for orange export.

From the 1940s onwards, whenever larger numbers of dormitory settlements spread along an expanding system of transportation routes, land was progressively parcelled in a process known as *loteamento*, estate owners and investors speculating on rising land and real-estate prices (Abreu, 1988). While citriculture declined, oil and gas extraction as well as chemical industries expanded, alongside several industrial districts that in the 1970s were created as part of the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, all catering to the city of Rio and São Paulo, as well as the industrial port of Itaguaí (Pinho, 2020; Tinoco de Souza, 2019). Today, logistics, weekend tourism and sand extraction also increasingly mark the regional economy (de Oliveira et al., 2021; Müller, 2024). At the same time, large numbers of construction, domestic and other service and informal workers commute long hours every day to Rio de Janeiro.

As in many contexts of the colonised world, the diverse forms of extractivism marking the region—from wood logging, the plantations and mineral transport to *loteamento*, logistics and sand extraction—have been associated with intense forms of dispossession (for other cases, see Janoschka, 2016; Leitner & Sheppard, 2018). For example, Albuquerque (2020, p. 182) points out that the private and public actors orchestrating *loteamento* in the mid-twentieth century saw the Baixada Fluminense as a region of populations already expelled from the metropolitan centre, whose labour power could still be exploited in the capital. How extractivist accumulation was assisted by practices of obfuscation unfolding in the context of opacity merits further attention though, as a historical sketch of the significance of *grilagem* in the Baixada's spatial formation indicates.

Already during the colonial and imperial periods, extractivism was intimately connected to arbitrary uses of violence, facilitated by conditions of opacity. Removed from the sovereign gaze through spatial distance, patchy administrations and complicit officials, various colonial and postcolonial elite groups enjoyed ample scope for the arbitrary use of violence (cf. Hutta, 2022). Most prominently, this was the case for the colonial 'donos da terra', or 'masters of the land', the slave-holding beneficiaries of *sesmarias*. Simultaneously, the donos were able to subvert the colonial *sesmaria* regime through various techniques of obfuscation. For example, practices of forging *sesmaria* letters and subverting attendant laws were generic in the region (Prieto, 2020; Weaver, 2003). Frequently, the donos acquired more than one land grant, using front people to conceal their identities. At the same time, they used combinations of genocidal violence and co-optation of indigenous communities to ensure the integrity of large *sesmarias*, all the while creating 'legal confusion' (Prieto, 2020, p. 136 n. 42) by occupying positions in the judiciary.

Subsequently, when the postcolonial Land Law of 1850 (Lei de Terras) regulated private land ownership, planters and local investors continued this tradition of fraud and violence, developing virtuosic ways of manipulating land titles and registers while hiring henchmen to outdo rivals (Alves, 2020). Out of nowhere, centuries-old *sesmaria* letters would appear and so would supposed predecessors or natural heirs (Holloway, 1980, pp. 120–122; Motta, 2001; Weaver, 2003). Especially on the plantations concentrated in today's north-eastern state of Rio de Janeiro, the donos widely exerted arbitrary violence against the enslaved. We can see here the origins of *grilagem* as a type of land grabbing that proceeds through obfuscation and fraud combined with arbitrary violence (cf. Motta, 2001). The term '*grilagem*' refers to

an allegedly old technique of placing documents for several months into boxes full of crickets (*grilos*) to make them look older. Across Brazil, *grilagem* has played a key role in perpetuating and exacerbating uneven land distribution (de Oliveira, 2020). But *grilagem* also connects to further forms of secretive fraud—not least to the ‘modes of silencing and not seeing’ (Chalhoub, 2012) that enabled enslavement even after transatlantic slave-trading was legally prohibited in 1831.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, with the (inconsistent) expansion of modern projects of legibility since the mid-nineteenth century, practices of concealment and obfuscation became even more elaborate. Liberal elites, interested in access to real estate, advocated for orderly land registers. The administrations and courts dominated by the donos responded by turning new laws into instruments that served to consolidate illicit land claims.<sup>6</sup> For example, registrars in today's state of Rio de Janeiro routinely accepted bribes to hand out land titles. At the same time, land registers were kept precarious. Thus, although an imperial decree of 1854 stipulated land demarcations to be registered within a year, in practice, the majority of private lots remained without demarcation throughout the First Republic (1889–1930). This enabled landowners to arbitrarily extend the confines of land and avoid taxation (Prieto, 2020).

Rather than closing loopholes for illicit land appropriation, then, state institutions systematically helped create them. As laws and registers were deployed strategically, fraud and obfuscation remained the rule. Moreover, the process of land appropriation was shot through with patterns of white supremacy, class and gender. While claims to large pieces of land made by the postcolonial elites were amply met, small farmers' claims were systematically negated. And although the Land Law of 1850 would have allowed indigenous communities to acquire land titles, legislators effectively argued that, as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘errant’ people, they were incapable of owning property (Prieto, 2020, p. 136). Meanwhile, enslaved Black Brazilians were denied land ownership in the first place, and, even after the prohibition of slavery in 1888, were systematically disenfranchised vis-à-vis white immigrants (Bledsoe, 2015). More than that, the landowners-cum-*coronéis* continued the ancient practice of hiring henchmen to blackmail and kill adversaries or insurgents, as Alves (2020) has documented in detail. As this historical sketch shows, *grilagem*, which couples clandestine land fraud with violence, has emerged as part of a postcolonial necropolitics that builds on conditions of opacity. In its intimate association with necropolitics, *grilagem* can also be understood as a form of ‘control grabbing’ (Borras et al., 2012) enacted by assemblages of propertied, political and violent actors.

In the twentieth century, this necropolitical territorialisation assumed new shapes. As peri-urban sprawl moved into formerly rural areas—alongside intense infrastructural developments in central Rio de Janeiro—contestation around land intensified. The ensuing process of *loteamento*, which went along with a speculative real-estate boom, involved wide-spread *grilagem* coupled with proliferating state and non-state armed actors (Abreu, 1988; Albuquerque, 2020). In the 1960s, the first ‘death squads’ emerged in the region, committing blackmailing and killings on behalf of their propertied sponsors, coupled with intensified police violence against those deemed ‘*marginal*’ (delinquent/scum) and the emergent land movement (Albuquerque, 2020; Alves, 2020). Under the dictatorship, these death squads were integrated into the structure of the state's security apparatus, leading to unprecedented levels of killing and forced disappearance. With democratisation, these groups would give way to the so-called ‘*grupos de extermínio*’ (extermination groups) that were formally decoupled from the police but closely collaborated with merchants and politicians, carrying out systematic ‘social cleansing’, gendered violence as well as oppression of political rivals, small farmers and oppositional actors (Alves, 2020). Since then, necropolitical control grabbing has continued in dazzling variations, combining new extractive strategies with ever craftier techniques of hiding both atrocities and entitlements, as the next sections show.

### 3.1 | Hiding atrocities

Practices of obfuscation in the Baixada are particularly pronounced in connection to armed violence. This includes the concealment of traces and the dissimulation of perpetrators' identities as well as forms of witness intimidation. State institutions are variously implicated as well. Especially since the 2010s, forced disappearance has peaked in peripheralised communities that are controlled by the expanding *milícia* networks (de Araujo et al., 2023; Florentino & Goulart, 2023; Perillo, 2025), which today often include armed gangs composed of local young men as well as police officers, politicians and local administrations. Following in the footsteps of previous armed groups roaming the region, the *milícias* have consolidated dominion over entire neighbourhoods, combined with the generation of enormous profits through extorting protection money and controlling all kinds of markets and local services (Albuquerque, 2020; Alves, 2020; Benmergui & Gonçalves, 2019; Hirata et al., 2022).

Typically, milícia actions aiming at control of neighbourhoods and retaliation against drug-trafficking gangs are coordinated—and often carried out together—with local police battalions. They occur between dusk and dawn and involve a series of skilful techniques of obfuscation, as brought into relief by the accounts of local residents I spoke to. Orlando,<sup>7</sup> a student in his mid-20s, lives in a mid-sized city in the western Baixada, on an access road to a hillside neighbourhood I call Januário. In the late 2010s, a series of actions at the police-milícia nexus caused dozens, or even hundreds, of arbitrary killings—nobody can give exact figures. As Orlando describes, the operations would commonly start with the sound of the heavy cars used by the military police's tactical unit, the Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais, or BOPE. To obstruct visibility, killers and their allies would dissimulate their own identities. 'Then they'd pull up, and those hooded guys would get out', he explains. 'They'd climb through the bushes. And everything would disappear.' Orlando continues:

Then they'd go up into the hillside community [*dentro do morro*] and—POW!—shooting like hell, after dawn sometimes, you're almost asleep, you forget they're there, like, shooting like hell, BOOOM! Then, a little later, the car comes again. Then a car drives up, a car drives down, a car drives up, a car drives down. Then you couldn't see anything anymore. 'Nobody died, nobody died. Nobody died. It was just a shooting.' And you wouldn't see... you can't see any bodies because... the car is... because when it starts, you don't stand on the terrace trying to see.<sup>8</sup>

As clothes are changed, pathways are taken through the bushes, and vehicles drive off, 'everything would disappear', including perpetrators' identities. Finally, 'the car would drive off, the BOPE car'. Only afterwards would Orlando occasionally learn, by word of mouth or via social media, that numerous people were killed or 'had been disappeared'. Thus, while residents sometimes are able to reconnect the dots, rarely can they ascertain the precise authors and motives of killings—for example, whether they were committed by police or civilians, on or off-duty, independently or on someone else's orders. Orlando's mention of a car driving up and down the neighbourhood elliptically captures an act of annihilation where 'you can't see any bodies'.

Other interviewees confirmed variations of the same scenario (see also de Araujo et al., 2023; Florentino & Goulart, 2023; Perillo, 2025). Besides dissimulating their own identities, violent perpetrators also skilfully disappear bodies and obliterate traces, thus disappearing the very acts of disappearance. A stark example is provided by long-time anti-violence and land activist Sandra Fernandes,<sup>9</sup> who lives in another neighbourhood near Januário. Having for decades witnessed the state's repression of the local land movement, Sandra became involved in anti-violence activism in the wake of the 2005 Chacina da Baixada, a mass killing in which a group of police officers shot 29 people dead along the Dutra Highway, which runs through the region. As I interview Sandra, she mentions a recent milícia intervention in Januário. '[T]he milícias came in strong', she recounts, 'heavily armed, heavily... and killed a lot of people'. As Sandra hears about the killings, she goes to visit the neighbourhood and contacts a friend who works for a local newspaper. At the site, however, she encounters a perplexing aporia:

It happened very quickly, very quickly! You don't see... ooh... you're impressed, you don't see a trace on the ground that it was... that people died there. I don't know if there's some kind of thing they are using that erases the blood very instantly. And you can't see that people died there. There's no mark left. Not a mark. Not a single mark. It's absurd! How is it... that the killings are happening?!<sup>10</sup>

The bodies of the killed and disappeared end up at a variety of places. Often, bodies are burned or disposed of in so-called places of *'desova'*, a word derived from *'desovar'*, or 'to spawn', used to denote the undignified dumping or hiding of bodies (see Hutta, 2025a). Places of *desova* include rivers, so-called 'clandestine cemeteries' and a range of further urban and rural sites (de Araujo et al., 2023; Florentino & Goulart, 2023; Perillo, 2025). Even when those searching for loved ones learn about these places, they are often denied access.

Moreover, to accelerate the disappearance of bodies, perpetrators collaborate with the forces of earth, animals and water. At a gathering of the Baixada Fluminense Network of Mothers and Relatives of Victims of Violence in Nova Iguaçu, Joseane Martins, or Jô, who lives in the outskirts of Nova Iguaçu and lost two of her sons, gives a chilling example.<sup>11</sup> As she recounts, a mother whose son was killed, with his body subsequently disposed of at a nearby river, begged those controlling the neighbourhood for access to her dead son's body. 'It has already been eaten by the alligators!', they replied. Sometimes, Jô told me in a later interview,<sup>12</sup> corpses are even sprinkled with a garlic-salt blend so caimans and pigs eat them more quickly (see also Denyer Willis, 2022; Perillo, 2025).

Furthermore, to make sure that no effective claims for justice are made, violent actors routinely intimidate witnesses. It is common, for instance, that in the wake of a massacre, milícia-style armed men roam adjacent neighbourhoods telling residents to erase any images and recordings from their mobile phones. At the gathering in Nova Iguaçu, Roberta,<sup>13</sup> from the city of São João de Meriti, mentions a recent case where armed men approached a young man in the evening, shot him in the leg and then abducted him in a car. He has remained missing ever since. The young man's grandmother who witnessed the event was determined to make the incident public, so Roberta contacted a news reporter. But, '[w]hen the day to speak arrived', explains Roberta, 'she kept quiet. Because they threatened the old lady, the 90-year-old grandmother!' Even more:

They were going to kill the entire family [...] they went to each family member's house, one by one! Not just her house. They went to each family member's house one by one and threatened everyone! If any remark came out, that would be enough. If any remark was, they were going to die one by one. And the cars started driving past, all the time, all the time, all the time!<sup>14</sup>

Similar accounts of threats and even killings of witnesses abound. The number of lives thus taken across the Baixada Fluminense is hard to fathom. When even killings don't make it into public registers, the hiding of atrocities deepens conditions of opacity. This applies particularly to cases of forced disappearance that are not investigated by state institutions. As Wright explains in discussing the Mexican context, responsible actors often explain the lack of action, tautologically, by pointing to a lack of knowledge about people's whereabouts: 'Their lack of existence means that there is nothing to know, nothing to acknowledge and nothing to do about them' (Wright, 2017, p. 258; see also Araújo, 2014).

Forced disappearance, obfuscated traces of violence and institutional failure, then, are all connected. Such 'governance via disappearance' (Wright, 2017, p. 285) has become integral to how hegemonic actors establish territorial control through combinations of impunity, oppression and terror. For Alves (2020), especially the clandestine massacres committed at the police-milícia nexus differ from the retributive acts typically committed by Rio's infamous drug trafficking networks, who often use public forms of punishment. At the same time, even elaborate forms of concealment and obfuscation do not make atrocities locally go unnoticed. Orlando, pointing to another participant of our conversation, explains: 'It can be invisible to Sebastião, who is here [i.e. in another part of the city where the interview is taking place]. It may be invisible to you who is in Germany. But for the locals there, everyone knows that's what it is'— meaning killings committed at the police-milícia nexus. Similarly, places of desova often function as a kind of 'public secret' (Taussig, 1999) where covertness is established through barred access and oppressed discourse rather than erasure of knowledge per se (cf. Penglase, 2009). This means that atrocities might be removed from public systems of accountability, yet do not fail to produce terrorising and disciplining effects, thus serving territorial projects (cf. Alves, 2020; Oslender, 2008; Dutta, 2025a). Specifically, the hiding of atrocities and the inducement of terror also support the clandestine appropriation of land— often with the involvement of the same actors, as I elaborate next.

### 3.2 | Hiding entitlements

As outlined earlier, postcolonial elites in the region have played on social and spatial conditions of opacity to develop elaborate techniques of clandestine land appropriation, supported by armed actors. With the proliferation of the state-sponsored milícia-police complex since the 2010s, land and control grabbing have assumed new dimensions. An historically recurrent form of institutional complicity in the state of Rio de Janeiro, besides arbitrary police violence and staff accepting bribes, is archival loss. For example, already in 1877, a report by the Ministry of Agriculture on the state of land registration mentioned that 'some of the books in which the entries were made have even been lost [...]' cited in Motta, 2001). Half a century later, when pressure to redistribute large estates in private hands intensified, such loss continued at an even larger scale. As noted by the Land and Cartography Institute of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ) in a 2020 commentary on land to be transferred into public property (so-called '*terras devolutas*')

Various works that dealt with *terras devolutas* were lost in the archival chaos of the public machine. The documentation of the Geography Department, created in 1946, disappeared entirely, not only its 2500 aerophotographs but also its studies for the colonisation of *terras devolutas*. The same fate befell the paperwork of the

Commission on Terras Devolutas, created [...] between 1959 and 1961, when land conflicts were extremely acute in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

(ITERJ, 2020)

The archival loss mentioned here is enormous, both in terms of volume of material and importance. Not only did this obstruct land claims made by subaltern groups, it also deprived state institutions of the means to establish which estates ought to be classified as *terras devolutas* to be brought under public ownership. Characteristically, as the report mentions ‘archival chaos’, no malicious intent is officially acknowledged. While a certain degree of archival chaos might indeed be ascribed to deficient administrative infrastructures in the mid-twentieth century, if viewed against the backdrop of a plethora of similar cases, such chaos seems to be methodical (see Devisate, 2017; Prieto, 2020).

No less emblematic is the federal state’s tremendous loss of research material on land tenure in the early 1990s mentioned in the introduction to this essay. In an interview, I ask Fernando Santos,<sup>15</sup> an historian at ITERJ who conducts research on property claims, about this case. He responds by calling the ITERJ archives ‘extremely disorganised’ (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> Besides pointing to lacking access to important historical documents, he explains that the very administrative processes at ITERJ make his job of clarifying property claims difficult: ‘there’s never any clarity, the pieces of information are always hidden, it’s all kind of nebulous’. For example, Fernando notes that it is common for external professionals to be commissioned to prepare expert reports on cases which the institution’s own staff would be perfectly capable of preparing as well. This gives ITERJ’s management considerable leeway for taking decisions that respond to the interests of influential political and economic actors. Thus, a series of enabling mechanisms are in place that undermine the endeavours of even well-intentioned staff.

Further contributing to such institutional complicity are forms of violence that are both supported and concealed by state actors and which have intensified with expanding *milícia* networks. A revealing account of *milícia*-backed *grilagem* was given to me by Jorge de Souza,<sup>17</sup> a former member of the administration in the city where Januário is located. In an interview conducted in 2023, Jorge asks me to zoom in on the city’s environs on Google Maps. Using the satellite view,



FIGURE 1 Archive at the Land and Cartography Institute of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ITERJ). Photo by the author.

he points to a rural area, not far from an industrial district, where we can see several unpaved roadbeds. Commenting on this incomplete *loteamento*, Jorge explains:

There was this speculation that they [the plots] could turn industrial, that the price could rise astronomically, so... So, these allotments, with some plots sold and abandoned, became this 'no-man's land' place. [...] Someone goes there and discovers that nobody knows who owns it and says 'it's mine'!<sup>18</sup>

After I turn off the recording, Jorge tells me that by 'someone' he was referring to *milícia* networks, which also include investors and administrative staff. These people, he notes, would even commission killings to pursue their interests—which was why he decided to quit his job several years earlier. While staff engaged in such institutionally supported *grilagem* do not necessarily have full control of land registers, Jorge further explains, they use various techniques to clandestinely manipulate administrative routines. Thus one day, shortly before he left the office, the contents of a hard disk in the city's urban planning office containing land registers mysteriously disappeared. Someone, he surmises, must have entered the room outside working hours and formatted the device.

Such cases point to strong overlaps between the actors involved in killings and in *grilagem*. In particular, mayors and secretaries are in privileged positions to forge collaborations through nominating and exchanging staff. If we thus read the genealogy of illicit armed actors in the Baixada Fluminense alongside that of *grilagem*, we can trace a deeply entwined history, one where the obfuscation of violence is linked to that of land entitlements through both lost and manipulated archives. Shaped by peri-urbanisation, entrenched conditions of opacity in the region have assisted the continuous refinement of obfuscation as a necropolitical technology that supports hegemonic processes of territorialisation and accumulation. Thus, considering how necropolitics operates through opacity and obfuscation also invites theoretical reflection on the mechanisms of accumulation in peri-urban contexts.

#### 4 | ACCUMULATION BY DISAPPEARANCE

A growing literature on peri-urban spaces and urban fringes has underscored the intensity of enclosures and dispossession associated with extractive and speculative accumulation (e.g. Ablo, 2024; Follmann et al., 2023; Ortega, 2020). This links to writings on accumulation by dispossession in Latin America that have emphasised both the significance of extractivism and the contested nature of dispossession (Gillespie, 2016; González, 2016; Janoschka, 2016). While many authors have focused on either urban or rural contexts, those addressing the urban fringes have often conceived these as 'frontiers' of urbanisation, resource extraction and financialisation (e.g. Sarma & Sidaway, 2020). This approach relates to works that describe how frontiers can radically redefine relations of property, the ecology and the social as they impose new territorial and legal orders—all underpinned by gendered histories of imperialism and colonialism (ibid.; Abourahme, 2018), while sometimes also enabling subaltern groups to participate in new markets (Gururani, 2020).

The Baixada Fluminense, too, can be characterised as a fringe region in which the imposition of urban, resource and financial frontiers shaped by colonial capitalism has brought about successive rounds of expulsion and dispossession—from the elimination of the indigenous Tupinambá and the introduction of enslavement and plantations, via the expansion of citriculture, *loteamento* and logistics, to contemporary 'milícia urbanism' (Benmergui & Gonçalves, 2019; Hutta, 2022).<sup>19</sup> The mechanisms at work at the frontier require closer scrutiny, though. Often, territorialisation at and through the frontier is described as both disrupting and constitutive of legality (Levien, 2012). Abourahme thus characterises frontiers as spaces of 'law-making robbery' (2018, p. 109, emphasis in original). As the law is imposed in line with hegemonic interests, violence and law are coextensive. Interestingly, in associating disruption with arbitrary power, this approach highlights violence and fraud as characteristic of accumulation by dispossession. However, so far, the emphasis here has tended to be on '[f]orce, fraud, oppression, looting' being 'openly displayed without any attempt at concealment' (Harvey, 2003, p. 137). As such, fraud can be a means of setting a precedent for what should become legalised, or at least licensed by legal exceptions. But when land entitlements are obfuscated and mass-killings hidden—recurrent phenomena in the Baixada Fluminense—violence and law enter more intricate configurations. When hegemonic groups protect each other from criminal prosecution, legal figures of legitimisation are rendered unnecessary, thus suspending even the logic of the exception (cf. Hutta, 2019, 2022).

If the frontier operates here as a space where the urban violently pushes into the rural, it is often in ways that are more akin to the processes of 'invisible dispossession' as outlined by Rhoads (2023) in her study on Myanmar's urban frontier. Rather than through direct imposition of a new sovereign order, dispossession takes place as legal entitlements are

rendered opaque: ‘the opacity of relations, complexity of claims and passage of time’, explains Rhoads, ‘often meant that unravelling individual claims required too much effort and the *status quo* often prevailed’ (p. 126; cf. Serje, 2024). Such opacity of property relations—and, I would add, of accountability for violence—moves back and forth between obfuscating practices and structural conditions. Repeated obfuscation leads to entrenched opacity, where the grounds for land entitlements effectively become ‘unmapped’, to use Roy’s (2003) expression. The result is systematically missing demarcations and registers, as well as inscrutable claims and entitlements (cf. Smith, 2020; Smith, 2023). For example, experts have estimated that, today, around half of the land of the state of Rio de Janeiro remains without proper registration, as ownership and demarcations are contested or unclear. Infrastructural precariousness might compound such opacity, yet cannot fully explain it (cf. Leaf, 2015).

Considering such manufactured opacity extends approaches of accumulation by dispossession that have critiqued the ways in which ‘social cleansing’ and dispossession are often legitimated in cities through legal exceptions declared as part of spectacular projects and place branding. For example, invoking debates on revanchist urbanism, Gillespie discusses how those rendered surplus are displaced ‘from inner city neighbourhoods to the urban fringe’ so that they ‘do not disrupt the circulation of capital’ (2016, p. 74; cf. Moreno & Shin, 2018). While such accounts might resonate, for instance, with the evictions enforced in the preparations of Rio de Janeiro’s mega-events in the 2010s (see Gaffney, 2010), engaging with the very fringes demands an extended analysis. Absent a strong focus on urban spectacle, dispossession often eschews here the revanchist staging of exceptional precedents. Or, where this occurs, it tends to be entangled with forms of rendering relations of power and property opaque. As Simone notes, in many Southern fringe contexts, opacity takes hold, precisely, ‘where the bulk of institutional and financial attention is placed on other issues or places [...]—leaving particular domains off the radar’ (Simone, 2011, p. 386).

This directly relates to the ways in which violence-based territorialisation builds on opacity, as well. Again, the willed ignorance of the local state facilitates concealment. In either case, ordinary people seeking services or claiming rights are confronted with a protracted mix of delays, deferrals and contradicting statements, whether they are demanding the formalisation of inhabited land or enquiring into the whereabouts of their dear ones (Araújo, 2014). This connects to numerous quotidian situations, as when the police refuse to file criminal charges (Monteiro, 2011).

Many inhabitants of the Baixada Fluminense have ample experience with diverse manifestations of state-sponsored opacity and obfuscation, across cases of forced disappearance and clandestine land grabbing. Moreover, the ways in which institutions treat the matters entrusted to their care are also remarkably similar. As cadastral maps and documents disappear, so do records of violence—and even the bones of people in forensic institutes (cf. Denyer Willis, 2022). Furthermore, peripheralised subjects claiming land often face the same kinds of intimidation as those enquiring into the whereabouts of dear ones. And where violence is committed as part of expulsions, the obfuscation of entitlements and atrocities often forms part of the same necropolitical process. What I call accumulation by disappearance, then, is a necropolitical process of accumulating wealth through skilful techniques of obfuscating both entitlements and atrocities, all shaped by racialised and gendered conditions of opacity.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have sought to show how accumulation in a peri-urban context builds on a hide-and-rule type of necropolitics, one where entrenched conditions of opacity enable cunning practices of obfuscation. The notion of ‘necro-periurbanisation’ articulates and radicalises existent approaches to both uneven spatial development and necropolitics. So far, hyper-peripheralised regions like the Baixada Fluminense have tended to be viewed as the ‘dark twins’ of metropolitan spaces, delivering goods and labour, yet outshined by urban spectacles around nation-building, urban development or violence.<sup>20</sup> Works on coloniality and necropolitics, meanwhile, have positioned obscurity more clearly as racialised conditions of dehumanisation. As I have argued, opacity and obscurity need to be understood as connected, inasmuch as racialised populations in the peripheries are deprived of life-supporting infrastructures and subjected to dehumanising violence.

Specifically, I have approached opacity as constituted through distinctive techniques of power. Exceeding either deficient infrastructural investments or inadequate representations, I have argued, opacity is exacerbated by practices of obfuscation that make subjects, objects and spatial representations disappear—from the unmapping of land to clandestine killings. While this approach builds on postcolonial, Black and feminist critiques of how power operates by structurally silencing and invisibilising the subaltern, it centres more strongly on how accumulation intensifies as perpetrators and

sponsors of both fraud and violence disappear from public control. This also extends analyses that focus on urban violence as a spectacle supported by martial state interventions.

Moreover, approaching necropolitics through opacity and obfuscation affords a more nuanced understanding of frontiers and uses of the law. Akin to Povinelli's (2011) discussion of killing in contexts of abandonment—where '[s]ecret agreements are made to remove the body to be tortured far away from public sight and scrutiny'—power in the Baixada Fluminense is exercised in ways that seem 'not commensurate with an older sovereign power' (p. 22). Rather than limiting secrecy to more recent formations, however, I have suggested a genealogy that reaches further back, to the plantation and post-colonial state formation (see also Hutta, 2022).

Importantly, my aim is to expand, rather than displace, existing approaches to necropolitics. For hide-and-rule strategies can variously be combined with revanchist and exceptionalist ones, just as central and peri-urban spaces often intersect. Moreover, periurban opacity can itself be paradoxical, as when armed actors in Rio's West Zone and the Baixada Fluminense oscillate between dissimulation and openly asserted presence. Importantly, disguised acts of violence often intensify terror by giving a ghostly presence to an obscure force that appears and disappears at will—and that often manifests through intimation, narration, or nocturnal noise (Gilsing, 2020; Hutta, 2025a). But where state institutions fail to map and register people and spaces, this also enables 'various insertions of people coming from different walks of life', as Simone (2011, p. 386) highlights. The many informal—yet often culturally rich—ways of creating livelihoods and cultural expression in the Baixada Fluminense merit further attention (see Pope, 2023; Reist, 2018). Thus, how opacity is variously inhabited, contested and co-produced bears further investigation.

But sometimes, subaltern communities also break out of opacity through acts of insurgence. Just a few days before of my conversation with Sandra Fernandes, a rare moment of insubordination occurred in Januário. A young worker had been shot dead during a milícia raid in the early morning while walking to the train station. The next day, just as the well-known regime of obfuscation was about to take hold, family and neighbours began a protest. As Sandra describes, 'the hill came down, they came to the central square of [the city] and there was a whole fury of people demanding justice for the death of the boy'.<sup>21</sup> This uprising was short-lived, though. 'And then,' Sandra continues, 'we began to realise the presence of the police, heavily armed... beating people in a deeply violent way. And so, when we look deeper,' she concludes, 'it's linked to the milícia, right?' Still, the protest succeeded in forcing the fate of at least one among uncouneted victims of police and milícia violence in Januário into a wider public.

This connects to Joseane Martins' statement that I cited in opening this essay, and with which I would also like to end. Living in Nova Iguaçu's Quilômetro 32 neighbourhood, Joseane lost two of her three sons. Despite suffering from profound trauma, Joseane has managed to build up a network of mothers in which she struggles against entrenched opacity. Her statement started with the following words that bring into strong relief the ongoing struggle between obfuscation and visibility:

Sadly, our bodies are killable here in the Baixada. There's no visibility here and I can't speak in silence, silencing myself. I have to scream for the world to hear and that's it. And if I also have to die, I speak out. Well, what am I going to do? At least I died fighting for, for my granddaughter, for my son, for my son's child, you know? That's it, that's it.<sup>22</sup>

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Interview on 23 Mar. 2023. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Portuguese texts are provided by the author.

<sup>2</sup>Interview on 8 Mar. 2023.

- <sup>3</sup>The event was recounted to me on 29 November 2018 by sociologist José Cláudio Souza Alves, who lives in Seropédica and is a leading scholar on armed violence in the Baixada Fluminense region, where Seropédica is located (see also Alves, 2020, p. 54).
- <sup>4</sup>Group conversation in Nova Iguaçu on 11 Apr. 2022.
- <sup>5</sup>'Modes of silencing and not seeing' is a translation of the fourth chapter of Chalhoub's (2012) book *A Força da Escravidão*.
- <sup>6</sup>As Weaver (2003) shows, the Brazilian case is distinctive in that fraud was systematically privileged over the strategic deployments of law common in the British settler colonies.
- <sup>7</sup>Name changed.
- <sup>8</sup>Interview on 15 Apr. 2023.
- <sup>9</sup>Name changed.
- <sup>10</sup>Interview on 10 Apr. 2022.
- <sup>11</sup>Group conversation in Nova Iguaçu on 11 Apr. 2022.
- <sup>12</sup>Interview on 23 Mar. 2023.
- <sup>13</sup>Name changed.
- <sup>14</sup>Group conversation on 11 Apr. 2022.
- <sup>15</sup>Name changed.
- <sup>16</sup>Interview on 8 Mar. 2023.
- <sup>17</sup>Name changed.
- <sup>18</sup>Interview on 29 Mar. 2023.
- <sup>19</sup>For a related analysis of the frontier in the rural hinterland of São Paulo, see Holloway (1980, Ch. 2).
- <sup>20</sup>Mike Davis's (2006) treatment of the Baixada as part of the so-called Rio/São Paulo Extended Metropolitan Region veers towards such an approach (cf. Hutta, 2013).
- <sup>21</sup>Interview on 10 Apr. 2022.
- <sup>22</sup>Group conversation in Nova Iguaçu on 11 Apr. 2022.

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