INTRODUCTION

A Common Space to Enjoy

Ilha de Paquetá

> The downtrodden do not feel entirely abandoned by the gods if before their
> eyes one street opens onto another.
>
> João do Rio[1]

The streets of Paquetá Island have followed a radical, alternate pathway
to the present. The island lies tranquil at the heart of Rio de Janeiro's great
inner bay. Although slight in size, a shapely, verdant slip less than 3
kilometers in length, it is the largest urbanized space in the city not
connected to the national automotive network, an urban landscape with-
out cars. The bay's encircling shoreline hosts the congested centers of Rio
de Janeiro, Duque de Caxias, Mauá, São Gonçalo, and Niterói, whose
noise never quite seems to reach Paquetá's gentle shores. The island has
been an oasis from the city, a garden that "emerges out of the midst of the
sea like an immense bouquet of flowers," as one Frenchwoman described
it in the mid-nineteenth century.[2] A place of inspiration for artists, the isle
was also a resort for amorous encounters, a reputation that was reinforced
by King João VI who called it the Island of Loves and who made many
a discrete visit without his estranged queen. Not surprisingly, Brazil's first
romantic novel, *A Moreninha*, which offers a love story as pure as nature
and childhood, took Paquetá as its setting. For much of the twentieth
century, Paquetá remained a popular destination for lovers who slept,

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[1] João do Rio, *A alma encantadora das ruas* (Rio de Janeiro: Prefeitura da Cidade do Rio de
Janeiro, 1995), 4.
[2] Adèle Toussaint-Samson, *A Parisian in Brazil: The Travel Account of a Frenchwoman in
Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resource Books, 2001),
51.

according to one popular song, in each other's arms through the most radiant of sunrises, and for beach-going families who enjoyed the island's glassy waters and its golden sands interspersed with weathered granite rocks that have all the appearance of raw loaves of bread rising.[3]

Despite its seclusion, modernity pressed itself on Paquetá after the turn of the twentieth century. The island's most famous artist, Pedro Bruno, born on the island that inspired his painting and poetry, resisted his home's modernization with a certain horror. When the city introduced electricity in 1922, he sobbed privately to a friend, "they have killed my island." Bruno also opposed the construction of apartment buildings, the introduction of swifter ferries, and, most vociferously, the growing number of automobiles – all without success. Still, the island's Artistic League, which Bruno had founded, tried obstinately to protect the island's natural beauties, preventing the capture of birds, the paving of streets, and the felling of trees, a number of which grew with prominent roots in the very centers of the streets.[4]

Locals had introduced automobiles to the island early in the century. By the 1940s the car's multiplication caused many accidents and some deaths among neighbors and visitors. Bruno continued to fulminate against the car until his death in 1949, but Paquetá's streetscapes had come to be dominated by automobiles. Then, in September of 1950, a truck leaped onto a Paquetá sidewalk and ran down a father, a mother, and their infant child, sending all three to the hospital with severe injuries. The driver fled, but with nowhere to run, the police jailed him, and the local papers vilified his conduct. Capitalizing on the tragedy, the Artistic League persuaded Rio's mayor to sign Decree 10,643, which banished all automotive vehicles from the island. Garages, even in private residences, were prohibited outright, and the decree limited wheeled transportation to one ambulance, two utility trucks, and horse-drawn carriages. Newspapers praised the mayor for his bold act: "[T]he graceful island was destined to suffer the same fate as the beauties and attractions

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[3] For the novel, see Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, *A Moreninha*, first published in 1844 and twice adapted for film. Macedo actually never specifies the novel's setting as Paquetá, always referring to it as "*Ilha de* _____," but no reader has doubted the reference. For the song, listen to João de Barro and Alberto Ribeiro Nuno Roland, "Fim de semana em Paquetá," first recorded in 1947, but frequently interpreted.

[4] W. Guarnieri, "O namorado de Paquetá," *Revista da Semana*, Apr. 2, 1949, 28, 52. According to Coaracy, the island's kerosene lamps prior to electrification were also not lit on nights around the full moon, presumably to save fuel or simply because they were unneeded.

that used to surround our city – it too would have succumbed to the
stupidity of utilitarianism." Even the Touring Club of Brazil, long
a defender of the automobile's right to the public street, commended the
mayor.[5] The car-free law did have local challengers. The island's parish
priest imported a motor scooter so he could, he claimed, give last rites in
a timely manner to his dying parishioners, but this encouraged a number
of young men to ferry in their own motorcycles, many without mufflers, so
he desisted in his ecclesiastical exemption, and all the motors were again
exiled.[6]

The mayor decreed one of the rare spaces in the contemporary, urban
world where no cars go. Today, to disembark from the island's ferry is to
enter a world substantially alien to the modern eye, ear, and psyche. Some
would say it is to step back a century in time, but the present is never
entirely like the past. Granted, horse-drawn carts will greet you, but rather
than the graceful, low-slung carriages of the nineteenth century, today's
horses pull inelegant carts sporting recycled Michelin tires. The island's
most striking sensation, the deafening quiet, takes time to comprehend
and appreciate. Here, in a densely inhabited place of streets, homes, and
shops, human voices, laughter, and the song of birds, not the internal
combustion engine, are the dominant sonic presence.

Increasingly polluted beaches and reports of crime have diminished the
island's cachet as a destination, and the number of visitors has declined in
recent decades. Still, due to the emergence of *favelas* on the island's hills
from the 1960s, residents today fill the streets with more bodies than had
visitors in the past. Despite familiar socio-economic tensions, community
thrives. Measured in conversations heard, the building of community is on
obvious and audible display, especially at the island's center. Adults and
children, of all classes, utilize the street to gather, recreate, and gossip, and
informal groups dot the streetscape to share the day's news. Church
congregations meet in the street's open air, and religious and civil festivals,
as well as less formal celebrations, can happen spontaneously, without the
need for permits, police, or traffic control. Even movement is an oppor-
tunity for community: on bicycles of every vintage, pedaling fathers steady
trusting sons who stand confidently on frames; schoolgirls, three to a bike,

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[5] Decreto 10,643, Nov. 22, 1950, *Legislação do Distrito Federal* [LEX], 1950, 133;
"Proibido o trânsito de veículos motorizados em Paquetá," *Diário de Notícias*, Nov. 23,
1950; "Toda a família atropelada," *A Manhã*, Sep. 30, 1950, 3; "A graça natural de
Paquetá," *Diário da Noite*, Nov. 23, 1950, 2; see also Vivaldo Coaracy, *Paquetá: imágens
de ontem e hoje* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1965).

[6] "Paquetá: o paraíso proibido," *Quatro Rodas*, Aug. 1963, 118.

pool rides in smartly pressed uniforms; and young men pause to place elderly women on their rear racks to take them to the market. In streets where the desire for stasis can hold its own against the demand for headway, life moves slowly enough for meaningful exchanges to materialize, and as such, Paquetá is a rare remnant of the pre-automotive street, a present that holds the possibility of nostalgia for the kind of public spaces that most of us have never experienced.

In the rest of the city of Rio de Janeiro, the private automobile, already in the second quarter of the century, came to occupy and dominate the city's public spaces: all the streets, most of the squares, and, often, many of its sidewalks. The car even took to some of the city's beaches to race at full speed. Only those streets and pathways leading into the *favelas*, too steep or too narrow for the car to pass, or those in the most distant suburbs, remained unaffected. The streets' mechanical occupation had profound impacts on the life and community of the city. In previous centuries, the street as urban commons had embraced an almost limitless number of human activities, individuals of every category engaged in intimate gossip and popular festivities, petty crime and gross acts of state repression. A common space that had been available for child's play and impassioned protest, carnival parades and funeral processions, honest peddling and artful pickpocketing, civic celebrations and public executions, the street saw many of its habitual activities progressively diminished and sometimes altogether displaced by the linear function of mechanical movement.[7] There are a number of factors that explain the changes in the use of public spaces, but the automobile's collective presence directly occupied the common ground on which residents had lived and worked. Over the course of the twentieth century, we ask: What role did the automobile play in the street's transformation from a meaningful place for sociality, commerce, and leisure to a space of darting and daily death? How did a place formerly perceived as architecture become a space largely experienced as engineering? And how did a place to be become increasingly a space between? The street was not a void that the automobile, after millennia, finally came to fill; the car displaced cultural practices that were old, new, and in continuous formation. The private automobile's presence

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[7] Angela Jain and Massimo Moraglio, "Struggling for the Use of Urban Streets: Preliminary (Historical) Comparison between European and Indian Cities." *International Journal of the Commons* 8, no. 2 (Aug. 2014): 525, argue for this transformation in both Europe and India, although at different times. In fact, the transformation is common to most modern cities where the car has multiplied. In a sense, we argue that for Brazil, the timing, while behind that of the US and Europe, was closer to them than to India.

on public spaces has been so ubiquitous for so long that we find it difficult
to conceive of the street without it; we have become acclimatized to its
presence and power. Peter Norton, referring to the car's historical role in
North American streets, asserts that "only when we can see the prevailing
social construction of the street from the perspective of its own time can
we also see the car as the intruder. Until we do, not only will we fail to
understand the violent revolution in street use ..., we will not even see
it."[8] Hence, only after defining Rio's streets before the car can we begin to
comprehend the automobile as both a violent revolution and a revolution
in the use of violence. The car's impact fell broadly on the city; however,
for the sake of brevity and due to the nature of the sources, we largely limit
our attentions and specific claims to the city's historic center, which took
the brunt of the car's impact.[9]

Urban public space has held a place of prominence in Brazil's culture.
The Portuguese had a special designation for it, *logradouro*, a singular (as

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[8] Peter Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*
(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 2.

[9] The literature on automobiles and their influence on urban highways and expanding
suburbs is extensive. The car's impact on existing city streets and street life has received
less attention. Andrew Brown-May, *Melbourne Street Life: The Itinerary of Our Days*
(Kew, Australia: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1998), which was among the first
studies, noted (xix) that the street has "rarely been observed in a scholarly way as
a special element of urban space." That has begun to change in the last decade.
Norton's *Fighting Traffic* and Clay McShane's *Down the Asphalt Path:
The Automobile and the American City* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press,
1994), both make excellent, in-depth analyses of the early stages in US cities; Brian Ladd's
Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago
Press, 2008), chapter 3, offers some useful views from Europe; as does Kurt Möser,
"The Dark Side of 'Automobilism,' 1900–30: Violence, War and the Motor Car."
Journal of Transport History 24, no. 2 (2003): 238–58, who argues, as do I, that the
automobile was a tool of class violence. Most recently, Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country:
An Environmental History* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012) provides
a comprehensive survey of the environmental impact of the car in the US across a century, in
both cities and the countryside, and Gijs Mom, *Atlantic Automobilism: Emergence and
Persistence of the Car, 1895–1940* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), takes the most global
and comprehensive view to date with a noted technical sophistication. For a comparison of
the process between an early change in Europe and more recent developments in India's
cities, see Jain and Moraglio. "Struggling for the Use of Urban Streets," 513–30. For the
declared lack of work done on Latin America's city streets, see Anton Rosenthal, "Spectacle,
Fear, and Protest: A Guide to the History of Urban Public Space in Latin America," *Social
Science History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 49. Since then, Marco Antônio Cornacioni Sávio's
two histories of transit and automobiles in São Paulo, *A modernidade sobre rodas : tecno-
logia automotiva, cultura e sociedade* (São Paulo: EDUC, 2002) and *A cidade e as máquinas:
Bondes e automóveis nos promórdios do metrópole pualista, 1900–1930* (São Paulo:
Annablume, 2010), make some insightful inroads for Brazil.

opposed to plural[10]) term that encompassed altogether every street (*rua*), square (*praça*), alley (*beco*), lane (*viela* or *ruela*), wharf (*cais*), public garden (*jardin*), and beach (*praia*). All were understood as one, contiguous space. The *logradouro* was large and diverse, encompassing spaces whose labels have no direct English translation: *largo* – a small, irregular square; *ladeira* – a steep street often with steps carved into living rock; *campo* and *rocio* – undeveloped squares or spaces sometimes used as common pastures; *travessa* – a narrow street connecting two others; and *boqueirão* – a street running down to a river or port.[11] The sheer multiplicity of categories evidences public space's cultural significance. The *logradouro*, then, embraced essentially all of the city's unbuilt spaces. And the utility of one was rather similar to another as far as spatial dimensions allowed. Some recent studies of the plaza in Latin America have established its cultural, historical importance,[12] but before the arrival of wheeled vehicles in any numbers, the entire *logradouro,* the streets, beaches, and wharves, were understood and used very much like squares. As it was for the Romans, a square was just a broader street.

Above all, public spaces were understood as commons, spaces that residents could, within limits, put to their preferred use. *Logradouro* is a compound of the verb "*lograr*," which means to enjoy or take a benefit from, and "*douro*," which is the suffix for place, the same as "-tory" in say "laboratory" in English. The *logradouro*, by its very definition, was a common space to enjoy. Citizens were protected in their rights to access public spaces, to buy and sell, work and play, sing and protest. The spaces that today most resemble the spirit of the former *logradouro* are the city's famed beaches, whose continuity as commons form the last refuge of an authentic, although rather limited, form of outdoor public life. Certainly, the street was a space notorious for illegal and violent activities as well; the *logradouro* was simply too large to effectively patrol; hence gambling, prostitution, theft, brawling, and drunkenness were common ways of taking the best advantage of the street, too.

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[10] The term is also used in the plural, but this usage was less common in the nineteenth century, when public spaces were typically referred to in the collective, than in the twentieth century, when they are fragmented by the automobile's impositions.

[11] In Portugal, the term *calçada* (or more typically its diminutive, *calçadinha*) referred to any paved street, a term picked up in Brazil to designate the paved sidewalks.

[12] James R. Curtis, "Praças, Place, and Public Life in Urban Brazil," *Geographical Review*, 90 (2000):477–84. Setha M. Low, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), 31.

Physically, the *logradouro* was a public space bounded by buildings. Modern dictionaries define the street as a thoroughfare, but the earliest Portuguese dictionaries defined "street" first as "a space between the houses of cities."[13] The street (*rua*) was strongly distinguished from the road (*estrada*) whose main purpose was movement and which was always, by definition, located outside city walls. More than in any physical description, however, the street's meaning is best expressed in how people have used and represented it, what sociologist and theorist Henri Lefebvre refers to as spatial practice. Just as sitting gives meaning to a chair, what citizens did in the street reveals their conceptions of the city's public spaces. And changing uses implied changing meanings, even among those who resisted the changes.

Moreover, Lefebvre argues for a capitalist evolution of human spaces, a process in which spaces are transformed, by their use, from a state of nature to an expression of culture. For Lefebvre, raw space is nature's domain, the absolute volume that exists before civilization makes its presence felt. When humans arrive on nature's raw ground, they begin to produce their spaces by constructing various kinds of containers, be they fences, walls, or rooms. Humans convert a raw natural resource into cultural space by hemming it inside manmade lines. A street is a street for no other reason than its being limited by human bounds. Initially, many human spaces, such as streets, do not have private owners. They resist becoming part of a capitalist order, thus forming a commons in which private rights and exclusions cannot be claimed. Many such spaces, including forests, waters, pastures, and even tilled farms, survived in a condition of community ownership for centuries. Lefebvre argues, however, that most such spaces eventually become dominated – that is, they come to be owned or controlled by particular individuals or classes, often with profit or spatial separation between classes as primary goals. This spells the end of any remaining commons. Technologies can empower groups with the tools for spatial domination – cheap barbed wire enclosing grazing lands, pumps draining common fens, or guns displacing the indigenous – but Lefebvre limits himself to one example, naming the car as the technology and the limited access motorway as the characteristic example of a modern dominated space.[14]

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[13] António de Morais Silva, *Diccionário de lingua portuguesa* (1813); Raphael Bluteau, *Vocabulário Portuguez & Latino* (1728); both these works have become available online at the Universidade de São Paulo digital library, "Brasiliana USP": www.brasiliana.usp.br.

[14] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 26, 38–40, 164–65.

Rio's streets follow Lefebvre's evolutions, but in a delayed, overlapping, and fractured process. Rio's citizens, while they built blocks and walls, did not build streets. Nor did they perceive their streets as special, cultural productions. The street, despite its heavy use, was understood as a remnant of nature, an unimproved space of raw soil, rank vegetation, and unregulated animal life. This was the street's historical character. City officials did not begin to produce (nor even officially name, for that matter) the city's streets until after about 1850. Thereafter, however, they commenced increasingly ambitious campaigns to pave, drain, curb, and beautify the city's public spaces. Only with asphalt's advance was nature expelled from the street, to paraphrase Lewis Mumford.[15] Still, the street remained an open commons and continued to be used largely as it had before its modernizing upgrades. With or without mud on citizens' feet, street life continued to evolve and diversify in remarkable ways. Finally, however, by the second decade of the twentieth century, elites, employing the technology of the automobile, came to dominate public spaces, effectively enclosing much of the street against many of its former uses, a conquest that only intensified in succeeding decades.

My interest in the street is largely environmental, by which I mean I see the street as a natural resource, a common public good over which users compete. Most of the historical commons have today been transformed into the private property systems preferred by modern states. In a recent historical synthesis of the commons, Derek Wall observes that "across continents, colonialism and marketization helped to eliminate usufruct rights and exclude people." The story, he asserts, "is near universal." He demonstrates that through multiple forms of enclosure, commons, whose spaces and resources had been available to the many, became exclusive private property. Rural commons in particular have largely disappeared.[16]

The common street, on the other hand, has resisted privatization. In fact, urban streets have significantly expanded in the last couple centuries. Hence, as Brazil's former slaves and rural workers migrated to cities, away from the increasingly enclosed forests, mangroves, fields, and fisheries that had provided livelihoods and represented a certain economic and spatial freedom,[17] rural commons were replaced in their function by

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[15] Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 253.

[16] Derek Wall, *The Commons in History* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014), 84.

[17] For the specific case of the mangroves, which served as commons for tanners, fisherman, firewood gatherers, lime producers, and potters, see Shawn W. Miller, "Stilt-root

urban commons that provided similar livelihoods and offered similar freedoms. João do Rio, the newspaper reporter who took the city's name as his own, described Rio's streets as "the most egalitarian, the most socialist, and the most leveling of all the works of man."[18]

However, commons can become enclosed selectively against certain groups and activities even while they legally remain public spaces. Amy Chazkel has insightfully examined this process in Rio in the context of the official repression of a popular form of gambling, the lottery known as the *jogo do bicho* (animal game). She asserts that the "idea of enclosure relates to the shifting balance of control over shared resources between the state, private industry, and different sectors of the population." Enclosure and its consequences for the poor, under this definition, did not require privatization. Rather than a simple land grab, enclosure is more broadly the attempt to exclude – from common resources and spaces – those individuals who are deemed wasteful, ineffective, immoral, or low-priority users of said resources and spaces. Under such bans, the excluded become "trespassers," as Chazkel describes them, even on spaces that remain common.[19] Lottery ticket sellers have survived enclosure, Chazkel points out, by continuing to trespass on both the commons and the laws, by finding space in which to continue their now illegal street employment. This, in fact, has been the common response to attempts to enclose the street against certain groups, activities, and occupations. For much of the nineteenth century, the city tried to abolish and regulate – through laws, exclusive concessions, and police enforcement – peddling, carnival dancing, religious processions, prostitution, pasturing animals, singing and drumming, keeping dogs, setting up markets, washing horses, and laundering clothing, among many other activities, but by most accounts officials saw little or temporary success, at best.[20] If space remained on the city's hundreds of streets, individuals found ways to subvert, sidestep, and adapt to the city's ever-changing regulations and police actions. Law was not without consequences, but it was often aspirational, evidenced by the very frequency of its repetition to solve the same old problems. Due to the

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Subsistence: Colonial Mangrove Conservation and Brazil's Free Poor." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (May 2003): 223–53.

[18] João do Rio, *A alma encantadora das ruas*, 4.

[19] Amy Chazkel, *Laws of Chance: Brazil's Clandestine Lottery and the Making of Urban Public Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 167, 268.

[20] Maria Odila Leite da Silva Dias, *Quotidiano e poder em São Paulo no século XIX – Ana Gertrudes de Jesus* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1984), 48–51, 57–58, examines these failures in the city of São Paulo.

streets' abundance and extent, and often due to police ambivalence and complicity, enforcement of street regulations could be fitful and fickle, as it would be for motorists later.

Chazkel sees urban public spaces as a "metaphorical commons" in which different groups struggle for the political and economic space to move and make a living, and she correctly characterizes this space as something abstract.[21] Even when street activities were deemed undesirable and outlawed, these prohibited abstract "spaces" had the chance of being filled if the physical space in which one might engage in them remained. Abstract political and social spaces are related to actual spaces, but my main interest is in the physical space itself, something that can be measured in cubic units. The automobile introduced to the street a more strictly environmental form of spatial competition, a direct and formidable occupier of physical spaces that more than most competitors had the power to exclude. While motorists and their backers did not initially target any particular street activity, the car's very physical reality threatened many existing street users. In fact, it began to challenge, diminish, and sometimes displace traditional street activities well before officials passed the legislation that gave official priority to the car's presence. In time, officials would find in the automobile a potent ally in enclosing the street against undesirable users, but it had shown an aptitude for pushiness even before its official promotion began.

The street has been unique as a common because rather than contributing specific extractable resources, its primary offering has been physical space, one that permits and facilitates human presence, activities, and production. Hence, the street offered a resource of manifold utility, one that in its unpaved, potholed, and poorly drained examples was often as raw and undeveloped as nature itself, although by definition heavily trampled. But even well trampled, space was eminently and instantly renewable, which also makes it unique among natural resources. Fish can be fished out of fisheries, and minerals depleted from mines, but unbuilt space, while consumed, remained fully intact for the next user. The urban commons were difficult to exhaust, and in some situations, like annual carnival celebrations or more ordinary street life such as the daily afternoon promenades, the more completely the street's space was being consumed, the merrier.

We have come to comprehend how the automobile's need for motion has reshaped urban, suburban, and even wild landscapes, but we have yet

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[21] Chazkel, *Laws of Chance*, 9–10.