

## Concentration Camps in Northeast Brazil 1915-1932



Image 1: Remaining walls from the hospital facilities at Campo do Patú, Senador Pompeu, CE. Photo by Laura Belik



Image 2: Laura Belik inside of former train station at Campo do Patú, in Senador Pompeu, CE. Photo courtesy of the author

The Concentration Camps in Northeast Brazil are an example of what one might call hidden histories. Built between 1915 and 1932, the camps were perceived as a form of aid towards groups of the population from the inlands (Sertões) who were migrating to Fortaleza (Ceará's capital) as refugees from the droughts. These were not zones for forced labor or extermination, but quarantine and isolation. Regardless, living conditions within these guarded spaces were questionable. Highly influenced by the needs and hopes of the elites, who were afraid of the masses of impoverished groups coming to the capital where they lived, these constructions worked as barriers to the city and were masked in humanitarian speech. Out of seven Concentration Camps that were built, today only one remains partially standing, subsequently becoming a symbol of resistance.



Image 3: Former Casa de luz (light/machine house) at the Campo do Patú in Senador Pompeu, CE. Photo by Laura Belik

Supported by the Tinker Summer Research Grant from Berkeley's Center for Latin American studies, I went to Ceará to find out more about this topic. Buried within the ruins of what was once such a significant part of Ceará's (and Brazil's) history are not only the Camps themselves, but their stories, which are little known across the country. Although the subject has previously been touched upon by scholars and researchers, the emphasis on its importance was made clear through Professor Kenia Sousa Rios' (Universidade do Ceará) research and publications "*Isolamento e Poder*"<sup>1</sup>, and "*Engenhos da Memória-narrativas da seca no Ceará*"<sup>2</sup>. Rios's archival research and detective work brought to light the series of contradictions these spaces represent as physical and moral barriers to the access to the city and as an example of the power and dominance of class division in Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> Kênia Sousa Rios, *Isolamento e Poder: Fortaleza e os campos de concentração na Seca de 1932*. (Fortaleza: Imprensa Universitária da Universidade Federal do Ceará /UFC, 2014)

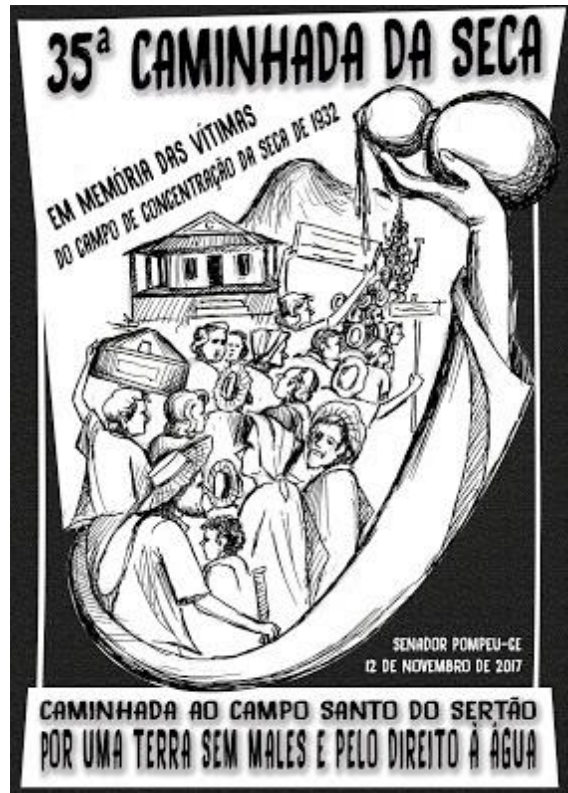
<sup>2</sup> Kênia Sousa Rios, *Engenhos da Memória: narrativas da seca no Ceará*. (Fortaleza: Imprensa Universitária da Universidade Federal do Ceará/UFC, 2014)

Beyond Professor Rio's work, one key question remained unclear for me: What were the spaces of the Concentration Camps like? As an architect, the importance of understanding their physical aspects and organization is essential, and this has been the main challenge of this research. Very little visual documentation has been found on Ceará's camps, and the constructions of these refugee areas have not prevailed through time. On top of that, there is also the issue that each of the seven locations worked differently. Nevertheless, what they all have in common is precisely their ephemerality. The architecture of the camps *per se* was described as fragile, with constructions made with sticks, mud and provisional covers. While the ruins at the Açúde do Patú, in Senador Pompeu are considered to be the only physical evidence of the camps remaining, the constructions standing were actually originally built by a British company for the construction of a local dam in the early 1900's. The *barracos* (shacks) that were used by the *flagelados* (refugees from the droughts) in 1932 are long gone. The uses of the original spaces changed and adapted as they were transformed into facilities of the camp that housed more than 16,000 people over the course of a year<sup>3</sup>, but truly the areas where the refugees would stay were precarious and temporary, thus, they did not survive through time. The ruins we see today represent the palimpsest of those times. Current efforts by the *Secretaria de Cultura do Estado* (Department of Culture of Ceará State) to recognize the remaining spaces as landmarks and cultural heritage sites raises questions around material and immaterial (intangible) importance and preservation. Independently, since 1982 there is an annual pilgrimage in the area praising the "souls of the dam" (*almas da barragem*) called the "drought walk" (*Caminhada da Secas*), which gathers over 10,000 people in an event that mixes political and religious motifs<sup>4</sup>. The popular acceptance of the ruins as a space for memory brings to light discussions of values and representation, as well as emphasizes the historical importance and consequences these spaces have until today in *nordestinos'* lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Kênia Sousa Rios, *Isolamento e Poder: Fortaleza e os campos de concentração na Seca de 1932*. (Fortaleza: Imprensa Universitária da Universidade Federal do Ceará /UFC, 2014). P.91

<sup>4</sup> "Caminhada da Seca promete reunir mais de 10 mil pessoas em Senador Pompeu," *Diário do Nordeste*, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <http://blogs.diariodonordeste.com.br/sertaoentral/religiao/caminhada-da-seca-promete-reunir-mais-de-10-mil-pessoas-em-senador-pompeu/>



Images 4 and 5: Flyers for the 34<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Caminhada da Seca Pilgrimage for the “souls of the dam” in 2016 and 2017. Source: <http://cddhac.blogspot.com/2016/10/34-caminhada-da-seca-em-memoria-das.html>

Considering the scarcity of visual documentation and physical evidence of the camps, different methods and approaches of research have to be considered in order to restore this past. Although there are not that many people focusing on this topic, interdisciplinary collaboration and exchange define the study of these spaces. In this sense, field research has proven to be an essential part of this quest, especially for building community. At the same time that I would ask permission to look into public archives, they would ask in return that I donate part of my photos and findings to update their files, for example. Historians, geographers, architects, filmmakers, local activists, amongst others are on the same path trying to reconstruct and raise awareness of a hidden past and its evident effects in Brazilian society.

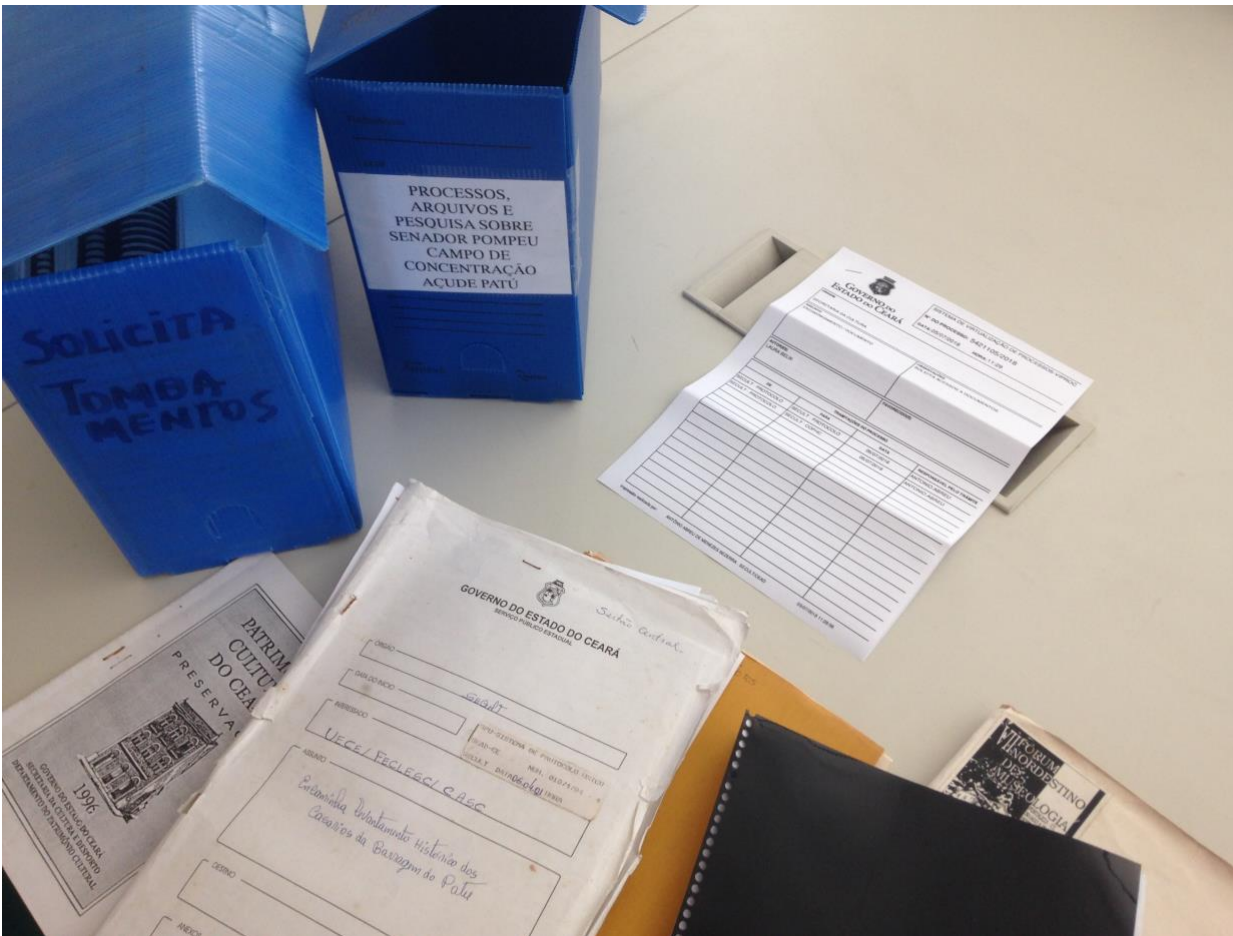


Image 6: Visit to the Archives at *Secretaria de Cultura do Estado* (Department of Culture of Ceará State). Photo by Laura Belik

It is hard not to think about how certain political, social and economic strategies from over one hundred years ago prevail in the country's current governance as well. Are the concentration camps over, or simply masked and transformed? We continue to produce similar spaces of exclusion. The ephemerality of its constructions contrast directly to the stability of social casts.