Counting the Mucambópolis: Representation and Absence in Recife’s Informal Cityscapes

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In the early twentieth century, Recife, Brazil was the cultural and political capital of a region that would come for many to symbolize Brazilian “underdevelopment.” The mocambos, or shacks, that comprised the majority of Recife’s housing stock became a potent symbol of the city’s perceived backwardness. By the 1930s their eradication had become the goal of the city’s modernizing elite, who coordinated a landmark corporatist crusade, “A liga social contra o mocambo.” In transforming the mocambos from a normalized feature of the urban landscape to a “cancer” in need of radical intervention, Recife’s governors made use of an increasingly diverse array for quantitative and visual tools. This paper will examine the ways in which the counting, mapping, and photography of Recife’s mocambos delimited the “problem” of the informal city and shaped successive attempts to reform the city’s urban geography in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.