Racial Cities
Urbanisms, displacements and violence in Latin America and Europe

Georg Simmel Center for Urban Studies - Urban Theory Symposium
organized by Christine Barwick-Gross and Apoena Mano

Race is a highly contested dimension of social inequality. In political, public, but also academic discourse, race is often avoided. While race does not exist in the biological sense, racism is an everyday experience of many, which makes race a social reality. This is particularly visible in cities: from racial profiling and police violence, the local governance of (refugee) migration through housing, welfare, education policies, and urban policies that lead to displacement and evictions. At the same time, cities are also the places where resistance against racism is most visible, including protests against police violence such as Black Lives Matter, resistance against displacement, but also activism for the change of street names and other urban materialities in which racism as colonial continuities are inscribed.

Starting from important theoretical contributions that seek to explain the enduring effects of race, including *Global Blackness* as a structuring feature of migration/mobility, of *racial capitalism*, as well as *necropolitics*, and following calls to make the study of race a central element of urban studies (Beebeejaun and Modarres 2020, Picker et al., 2019), we aim to bring together theoretical and empirical works from two regional contexts in which race is a highly contested and ambivalent category: Europe and Latin America.

In Europe, race is a silenced category as Europe is imagined as a 'post-racial space' (Lentin 2008). Differences are usually constructed with respect to ethnicity, culture, and migration background. This translates directly into how urban problems in European cities are framed and studied. For example, ethnic segregation or labor market segmentation (including 'ethnic economies') have usually been explained through migrants' preferences, not through exclusionary urban policies and anti-Black or anti-Muslim racism. While initiatives by activists, as well as the rising support of right-wing extremist parties across European countries have led to an increased awareness of racism as a form enduring coloniality, urban research has been slow to apply this to its own questions. While there are some examples of race-critical urban research, e.g. on how racialized minorities experience racism by the police (Keitzel 2025), or decolonial remembrance in cities (Barwick-Gross & Kulz 2024; Beebeejaun 2024), many scholars still work with strongly criticized categories such as ethnic or migration background, or with highly ambiguous concepts such as integration. To illustrate, the scholarship on the 'urban integration' of refugees, which has surged in 2015, predominantly uses state-centered categories and rarely frames its research problem in relation to race, racialization, or racism. Moreover, a considerable number of scholars have dived into the field of urban (super-)diversity, often painting a romanticized picture of encounters and conviviality, without paying attention to racialized power hierarchies and ultimately (re)producing an image of 'white urban Europe' (Barwick-Gross 2025).

In Latin America, by contrast, race has long occupied a visible yet ambivalent position in the production of cities. While national and institutional narratives of racial democracy have framed the region as inherently mixed and, therefore, beyond race, scholarship has shown how this ideology informs what Torino (2024) describes as mestizo urbanism: a dominant urban epistemology that renders Latin American cities "raceless" and shapes how they are understood, planned, governed, and represented. These narratives and policy frameworks must be situated within a broader context of structural racism, which organizes unequal distributions of opportunity, vulnerability, belonging and urban rights (Amparo Alves 2018). Therefore, the historical marginalization of Black populations through spatial segregation, restricted housing access, violent coercion and systematic social exclusion has been central to

the formation and governance of low-income settlements. In this sense, we must note how colonial logics continue to inform contemporary urban governance, structuring both the production of socio-spatial inequality and the differential allocation of visibility, legitimacy, and exposure to death, in what has been described as necropolitical logic (Mbembe 2003). At the same time, recent urban research on this subject increasingly highlights how racialized communities are not only subjected to these dynamics but also actively contest them, generating alternative spatial practices, political imaginaries, and existential possibilities.

Bringing these two regional conversations into dialogue allows us to move beyond an apparent opposition between the "silencing" of race in European and its "visibility" in Latin American cities. Instead, we approach both contexts as sites where race is continuously made and unmade through specific historical, political, and epistemic configurations. This comparative and multi-sited perspective opens up space to interrogate how different regimes of racialization operate in urban contexts, how they intersect with other axes of inequality, and how they are challenged through everyday practices and collective mobilizations.

Among analytical possibilities, through racial cities, we must note how urban spaces mostly occupied by certain social groups are framed as sites of danger or disorder, a process through which specific locations are constructed as inherently problematic, illegible, or threatening. Through supposed perceptions of insecurity, this framing actively produces the conditions under which particular spaces become targets of intensified surveillance, exceptional governance, and coercive state practices; thereby, structuring and reproducing uneven access to essential services, resources and rights (Cruz Silva, *forthcoming*).

These processes are also closely entangled with the regulation of mobility. Racial differentiation shapes not only where people are located, but also their legal and symbolic possibilities to move across and within cities and national borders. National and urban displacements are structured through uneven regimes of control, stigma, and surveillance that differentially condition mobility, determining who can circulate, under what conditions, and at what level of exposure to risk, policing, or interruption (Mano 2021). These conditions shape practices of negotiation and adaptation, as residents develop situated strategies to navigate surveillance, manage exposure to violence, and sustain social infrastructures within constrained and stigmatized environments. Far from being purely reactive, these practices also generate political and urban contestation, translated into forms of collective action and claims regarding the right to the city.

Bringing together scholars with expertise on policing, youth, housing, and everyday urban practices, all approached through a race-critical lens, we aim to advance theoretical perspectives on 'racial cities'. Based on the participants' works across two geographic contexts, we will address the following theoretical/conceptual, methodological and empirical questions:

- How is race addressed (or not) in current theorizing on urban problems and inequalities? Where are the blind spots regarding how race operates and manifests in cities?
- Which are some of the concepts you think are central or should be better developed for the study of racism and the reproduction of racialized hierarchies in cities?
- What are the potentials and limits of current methodological approaches and comparative urban research regarding 'racial cities'?
- How are racial cities framed, represented, and governed through competing narratives and practices in urban policy, media, movements, and academic fields?
- How do everyday practices challenge, negotiate, or reconfigure dominant spatial and racial orders?