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Borba Gato Statue



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São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

The *Estátua de Borba Gato* (Statue of Borba Gato) was erected on January 27, 1963, as part of an initiative by the São Paulo government to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the city. Since then, the statue has been disputed in society, as many people question its aesthetics and the person being commemorated. Weighing over forty thousand kilos and reaching thirteen metres in height, the statue is an important part of the city's landscape. However, the presence of the statue in public space generates divisive opinions among the citizens of São Paulo. Over the last two decades, grassroots movements have frequently used the site as a forum to launch protests and demand for rights. This case study explores possible options for dealing with this disputed heritage of Brazilian history.

Introduction

The Statue of Borba Gato was commissioned by the government of the city of São Paulo during the 1950s to celebrate the city's 400th anniversary in 1963. The sculpture was created by the local artist Júlio Guerra and selected via a public artistic contest promoted by the municipal government of Santo Amaro, São Paulo.¹ The statue depicts Borba Gato, a *Bandeirante* (Portuguese-Brazilian conquistador), deemed as one of the city's founders. Gato has been heralded for his expeditions into the hinterlands of Brazil, which brought great wealth to São Paulo.

Since its unveiling in 1963, the sculpture has been the target of intense debate and contestation. Many people criticise its aesthetics, claiming it is an ugly and oversized statue, while others are more critical towards the history it represents. The latter criticism is related to a contested event of Brazilian colonial history, namely the *Bandeiras* expeditions, which are known for their exploitative character. Since 2008, the statue's site has been used for grassroots movements to point at the oppressive past Borba Gato represents. Interventions on the sculpture have varied from spraying it with red graffiti to setting it on fire. These actions have generated divisive opinions in society as some see them as acts of vandalism and others as legitimate forms of contestation.² The debate over the statue has intensified in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. As of the writing of this study, the government has not yet taken measures to deal with the statue itself.



Figure 1: Image by Gustavo Vivancos via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

¹ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 145.

² Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, and Alzira L. A. Campos, "A Estátua de Borba Gato: Memória e Identidade de Santo Amaro." *Veredas – Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades* 2, no.3 (2019): 34-54.

History of Borba Gato

The Legacy of Borba Gato and the 'Bandeiras' in Brazilian History

Manoel de Borba Gato was born in 1649 in Santo Amaro, a village in the state of São Paulo in colonial Brazil. Borba Gato was married to Maria Leite, who was the daughter of the notorious *Bandeirante* governor Fernão Dias Paes.³ In 1674, Borba Gato joined his father-in-law, Dias Paes, for the first time in a *Bandeira*, an expedition into the hinterlands of Brazil in pursuit of gold and gemstones. The expedition left from São Paulo with the objective of finding and extracting gemstones to send to the king in Portugal. In order to secure the passage of the gemstones to Portugal, the king sent a representative from Lisbon, Rodrigo de Castelo Branco, to oversee the expedition.⁴

When Castelo Branco arrived, Dias Paes was on his way back to São Paulo as he had already found gemstones and sent them to the king in Portugal.⁵ This vacuum of power generated a dispute over the command of the expedition between Borba Gato and Castelo Branco, which ended with the death of Castelo Branco by Borba Gato's crew.⁶ Consequently, Borba Gato fled deep into the hinterlands to avoid prosecution for murder by the Court of Royal Justice. Reports claim that Borba Gato spent years hiding and living with Indigenous people, whom he had captured and enslaved, in the hinterlands of the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil.⁷ During that time, he conducted his own *Bandeiras* and found several gold mines from which he could profit.⁸

Borba Gato delayed reporting the mines to the Royal Portuguese authorities. Instead, he used them as leverage to ask for forgiveness from the king in exchange for the location of the mines.⁹ Borba Gato's plan not only succeeded but rendered him the King's Guardian of the district where the mines were situated. Subsequently, Borba Gato occupied different privileged bureaucratic positions for the Portuguese Crown in Brazil, notably as Head of the Royal Mining Company. Under that title, Borba Gato was praised for his work in avoiding tax evasion and the smuggling of the gold extracted in Brazil.¹⁰ He died at age 69 in 1718 in the town of Sabará, Minas Gerais.¹¹

³ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵ Afonso d'Escagnolle Taunay, *Relatos Sertanistas* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora S.A., 1976), 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁸ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 159-160.

⁹ Afonso d'Escagnolle Taunay, *Relatos Sertanistas* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora S.A., 1976), 52.

¹⁰ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 160-161.

¹¹ Lara Ferreira Lorenzoni and Raoni Vieira Gomes, "Destruindo estátuas: o incêndio no monumento a Borba Gato e a relevância da memória pelo olhar do oprimido." *Revista Brasileira de História do Direito* 7, no. 2 (2021): 52.

Besides the polemic past between Borba Gato and the Crown, the *Bandeiras* expeditions were also a target of controversy. According to several scholars, namely John Monteiro (1994), Márcia Costa and Alzira Campos (2019), and Lara Lorenzoni and Raoni Gomes (2021), the *Bandeirantes* did not have a positive colonising role in Brazil's disintegrated hinterlands. Rather, their expeditions were responsible for decimating Indigenous peoples that inhabited these lands, leaving them even more sparsely populated. The claims are that the *Bandeirantes* waged war against the Indigenous people they found during their explorations, killing, raping, and enslaving thousands, either to work in their own *Bandeiras* or to sell for profit.¹² In fact, the *Bandeirantes* expeditions were already condemned by Jesuits in the seventeenth century for the violence waged against Indigenous peoples.¹³

The Unveiling of the Statue of Borba Gato

In the 1930s, regional political elites felt the need to promote national cohesion in Brazil through the sharing of common national heroes that would constitute and represent Brazilian identity. The political elite of São Paulo was the first to employ the *Bandeirantes* figure for this objective, as many were originally from the state. Nevertheless, celebrating these explorers was also a way to situate São Paulo's inhabitants as the direct descendants of the *Bandeirantes* and, hence, the heirs of the wealth achieved through the *Bandeiras*.¹⁴ Furthermore, the myth around the bravery and entrepreneurship of the *Bandeirantes* was instrumentalised by the elite of São Paulo to situate them as the founders of Brazilian national identity.¹⁵

In this context, Borba Gato was portrayed as one of the founders of the Brazilian nation, responsible for connecting the scattered lands of the country, expanding its territory, and generating wealth. His participation in the enslavement and murder of thousands of Indigenous and African people, however, was relegated to oblivion.¹⁶ In the 1950s, the government of São Paulo decided to construct several monuments to celebrate the city's 400th anniversary, including ones paying homage to the *Bandeirantes*.¹⁷

The artist responsible for creating the statue of Borba Gato, Júlio Guerra, was selected through a public contest for artists held by the government. The idea to pay homage to Borba Gato came

¹² Ibid., 51-52.

¹³ Helga da Cunha Gahvya. "Kátia Maria Abud. O sangue intemorato e as nobilíssimas tradições: a construção de um símbolo paulista, o Bandeirante," *Tempo Social Revista de Sociologia da USP* 34, no. 1 (2022): 182.

¹⁴ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 136-137.

¹⁵ George Leonardo Seabra Coelho, "Monumento às Bandeiras: processo de construção e ressignificação simbólica," *Tempo* 28, no. 1 (2022): 78.

¹⁶ Rodrigo Ramos Hospodar Felipe Valverde, "O sentido político do Monumento às Bandeiras, São Paulo: condições e oportunidades para a multiplicação de narrativas a partir da transformação do espaço público," *PatryTer – Revista Latinoamericana e Caribenha de Geografia e Humanidades* 1, no. 2 (2018): 32.

¹⁷ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 145.

from the artist himself, who was a native of Santo Amaro, São Paulo, home of the *Bandeirante*.¹⁸ Construction on the statue of Borba Gato began in 1957 and was unveiled to the public on January 27, 1963.¹⁹ On inauguration day, authorities held speeches and dance performances, and the local population accompanied the event dressed in costumes portraying *Bandeirantes*, Indigenous peoples, and people of the seventeenth century. In addition, there was a wagon pulled by bulls and a canoe simulating the means of transport used by the explorers. The celebration concluded with concerts performed by artists from radio and television.²⁰

Guerra positioned the statue to stand as the guardian of the neighbourhood of Santo Amaro, making it a marker for its citizens. Commonly, the inhabitants of Santo Amaro use the statue as a reference point to explain how to locate places around the neighbourhood, which is often an argument for maintaining the statue's location.²¹

Next to the statue, Guerra assembled a cubic panel with each one of its sides representing historical figures from the Santo Amaro's neighbourhood. Among them are religious figures deemed as co-founders of the neighbourhood's identity, such as José de Anchieta and Belchior de Pontes, besides the local poet Paulo Eiró and the Indigenous leader Caiubi, who is considered one of the first native Brazilian figures to have converted to Christianity and, therefore, originated the mixing of cultures between the Portuguese settlers and the Indigenous people of São Paulo. Finally, the panel also mentions some of the first residents of the neighbourhood, the first German settlers who immigrated to the region and the first iron factory built in the city.²² The panel was



Figure 2 & 3: Images by Gustavo Vivancos via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

¹⁸ Ibid., 161-162.

¹⁹ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa and Alzira L. A. Campos, "A Estátua de Borba Gato: Memória e Identidade de Santo Amaro." *Veredas – Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades* 2, no.3 (2019): 37.

²⁰ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 169.

²¹ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 167.

²² Ibid, 165-169.

placed on the grass bed, just a couple of metres behind Borba Gato's statue. and can be seen in Images 2 and 3.

History of the Contestation

Historiographic Contestations

Scholars such as Silvia Raimundo (2004) have claimed that the statue is not a realistic representation of how the *Bandeirantes* dressed at the time. According to Raimundo, the way in which the artist portrayed Borba Gato, dressed in boots, a hat, and a doublet, armed with a cutlass and a musket, was not well-suited for the harsh conditions of the *Bandeiras*, as they were laborious expeditions into unexplored areas of Brazil.²³ Moreover, historians claim that Guerra represented Borba Gato in a romanticised way that attempted to dissociate his image from the poverty of Brazil's hinterlands and provide a heroic image of the *Bandeirante*.²⁴ This critique is directly associated with the appropriation of the *Bandeirantes'* image by the elite and state authorities of São Paulo to situate themselves as the main contributors to the country's identity and economy.²⁵ Nonetheless, this dispute did not generate a wider public debate nor a governmental response at the time.

2008 Contestations

In July 2008, the Centre for the Defence of Children's and Adolescent Rights of the neighbourhood of Interlagos, São Paulo, performed an intervention on the statue of Borba Gato. The action was part of a campaign to demand that the statute guaranteeing the rights of children and adolescents be respected. The Centre invited the visual artist Everaldo Costa to coordinate a group of ten youngsters through an artistic intervention at the site of the statue. As a final product, the group erected three temporary statues of Indigenous people facing Borba Gato's statue, almost in confrontation with it. According to the Centre, the site was selected because the statue of Borba Gato represented the decimation of Indigenous people and their culture and the violation of human rights in Brazil for more than 500 years.²⁶

In the same year, the visual artist Eduardo Srur performed another intervention on the statue. This time, the intention was to raise awareness of the problems faced in São Paulo and shed light on the role of monuments in the city. The artist dressed the statue in a life vest, which was meant to

²³ Ibid., 165.

²⁴ Manuel Pacheco Neto. *Heróis nos livros didáticos: bandeirantes paulistas*. (Dourados: Editora UFGD, 2011), 12.

²⁵ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 136-137.

²⁶ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa, *Lugares de Memória do Bairro Santo Amaro: A estátua de Borba Gato* (MA Thesis, Universidade de Santo Amaro, 2017), 176-177.

denote the flooding problems the city historically faced and to serve as a symbol of a 'request for help.'²⁷ Despite the engagement with the monument, neither intervention captured enough societal attention to generate a governmental response. However, they were examples of how the geographical site of monuments can serve as a space for citizens to engage in reinterpreting the city's historical landscape.

2015-16 Contestations

At the end of 2015, the statue of Borba Gato was spray-painted red, symbolising blood, and marked with the words '*Bandeirante ruralista assassino*' and '*Guarani Kaiowá resiste*.' The latter means 'The Guarani Kaiowá People resist' in Portuguese, and the former means 'murderous ruralist *Bandeirante*,' pointing at the ongoing conflict for land between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the country, which dates to the colonial era of Brazil. Nevertheless, no actors publicly assumed authorship for the intervention.²⁸

In September 2016, a group of urban artists spray-painted the sculpture with pink, green and yellow paint and threw eggshells over it. The intervention was part of a larger campaign by the artists, who also spray-painted other monuments related to the *Bandeirantes* in the city in order to draw attention to the presence of these monuments in the public space.²⁹ The artists were subsequently detained and fined for vandalism, according to Article 65 of the Brazilian Law No 9.605/1998.³⁰ However, the government did not discuss the presence of Borba Gato's statue in public space, leaving the matter unaddressed.

2020-2021 Contestations

In October 2020, the movement *Grupo de Ação* (Action Group) decided to take action with monuments dedicated to *Bandeirantes*—including the statue of Borba Gato—in an effort to contextualise and re-signify their history to the public. The action consisted of placing dummy skulls in front of the statue and adding a plaque informing citizens of Borba Gato's occupation during the colonial regime as well as an accusation of his crimes. The plaque framed the *Bandeirante* as an 'Indigenous people hunter, explorer of gold and silver mines' and accused him of 'aggravated murder of Black, Indigenous and White people, promoting slave-work of Indigenous and Black people, raping Indigenous and Black women...' among other crimes.³¹ Additionally, it also invited the citizens to interact and engage with the statue as it is situated in a

²⁷ Márcia Maria da Graça Costa and Alzira L. A. Campos, "A Estátua de Borba Gato: Memória e Identidade de Santo Amaro." *Veredas – Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades* 2, no.3 (2019): 41-42.

²⁸ Maurício Xavier, "Estátua de Borba Gato é pichada por manifestantes." *VEJA São Paulo*, November 6, 2015.

²⁹ "Monumentos amanhecem pichados com tinta colorida em SP." *G1 São Paulo*, September 30, 2016.

³⁰ Fernanda Tubamoto. "'Olhai por Nós': artista que pichou o Pateo do Collegio lança exposição." June 6, 2022.

³¹ Translation by the author.

public space for everyone to see.³²

In July 2021, the contestation over the statue reached its peak when the grassroots movement *Revolução Periférica* (Peripheric Revolution) set it on fire. The intervention consisted of placing tires around the statue, spreading flammable liquid on it, and then setting it on fire. The movement also spread brochures around the city of São Paulo with the question ‘*Você sabe quem foi Borba Gato?*’ (‘Do you know who Borba Gato was?’) and a QR Code for people to obtain more information on his background.³³ The fire caused some damage to the exterior of the statue, but there was no structural damage and no injuries reported during the action.³⁴

The mayor of São Paulo condemned the action and announced that an anonymous local businessperson offered to pay for the repair of the statue.³⁵ The incident was also condemned by several people in society, who saw it as an act of vandalism and as an attempt to erase history.³⁶ The journalist Laurentino Gomes, the author of three books on slavery in Brazil, said, ‘I am against it (burning the statue). Statues, buildings, palaces, and other monuments are a part of the historical patrimony. They must be preserved as objects of study and reflection.’³⁷³⁸

One of *Revolução Periférica* movement’s leaders, Paulo Galo, voluntarily assumed responsibility for the intervention and presented himself at a police station on July 28, 2021. At the door of the station, Galo was interviewed by multiple journalists and stated that: ‘The act on Borba Gato was meant to start a debate, not to hurt anyone or cause panic in society. The debate has started. Now, people can decide if they want a 13-metre-tall statue of a genocidal and women abuser.’³⁹⁴⁰

Nonetheless, Paulo Galo and his partner, Géssica Barbosa, were arrested, who went with him to the police station but had not participated in the intervention. The Justice Court of São Paulo accused them of conspiring in criminal organisation, which is understood in Brazilian Law as the act of uniting three or more people to commit a crime. Despite the Brazilian Supreme Court ruling in 2018 that pregnant women and mothers of children up to twelve years old should receive a house-arrest warrant, Barbosa, who has a five-year-old daughter with Paulo Galo,⁴¹ was incarcerated and only released from jail on July 30, 2021.⁴²

³² Bárbara Vieira. “Crânios são colocados ao lado de monumento de bandeirantes para ressignificar história de SP.” *G1*, October 27, 2020.

³³ Daniela Mercier. “Estátua de Borba Gato, símbolo da escravidão em São Paulo, é incendiada por ativistas.” *El País*, July 24, 2021.

³⁴ “Estátua de Borba Gato é incendiada em São Paulo.” *G1 São Paulo*, July 24, 2021.

³⁵ “Prefeito de SP lamenta incêndio em estátua do Borba Gato e diz que empresário irá doar valor para restaurar monumento.” *G1 São Paulo*, July 27, 2021.

³⁶ Lorenzoni and Gomes, “Destroying statues: The fire at the Borba Gato Monument and the relevance of memory through the eyes of the oppressed.” 2021: 53.

³⁷ Daniela Mercier. “Estátua de Borba Gato, símbolo da escravidão em São Paulo, é incendiada por ativistas.” *El País*, July 24, 2021.

³⁸ Translation by author.

³⁹ Regiane Oliveira. “Prisão de ativista que queimou Borba Gato provoca debate sobre a memória de São Paulo.” *El País*, July 29, 2021.

⁴⁰ Translation by the author.

⁴¹ Regiane Oliveira. “Prisão de ativista que queimou Borba Gato provoca debate sobre a memória de São Paulo.” *El País*, July 29, 2021.

⁴² Victor Ohana. “STJ concede liberdade a ‘Galo’ após prisão por incêndio a estátua, diz defesa.” *Carta Capital*, August 5, 2021.

Civil society reacted to Galo's arrest in the comment section of one of Brazil's largest newspapers, G1. The posts varied from 'Pure vandalism from the defeated left-wing, imprison them!' and 'These are the black blocks that claim to be antifascist but do exactly the same as the fascists did. Segregation, vandalism and terrorism' to 'They should have put it down. It would be less work for the firefighters' and 'We want to see the circus on fire. Keep on going.'⁴³⁴⁴ These were only a few of the fifty-seven comments on the page, but they exemplify how society has divisive opinions over the presence of the statue in public space.

On August 5, 2021, the Supreme Justice Court revoked the preventive arrest warrant of Paulo Galo, allowing him to await the trial in freedom.⁴⁵ In November 2021, São Paulo's Public Prosecutor's Office requested the state's Justice Court to condemn Galo for three years of prison time for setting the statue on fire.⁴⁶ In December 2021, São Paulo's Justice Court condemned Galo for three years of open-ended imprisonment, which were then converted into community service penalties. According to the justice responsible for the case, the act endangered not only the public patrimony but also citizens' lives.⁴⁷

The intervention had a reverberating effect on the debate over *Bandeirantes* heritage in public spaces in society. Food delivery motorbikers, who usually work around the site of the statue, were interviewed by the newspaper *El País Brasil* shortly after the event. The first worker argued, 'He did not deserve this statue, he murdered people. Raped Indigenous children.' The second said, 'As far as I know, he was evil.' A third interviewee claimed, 'If it was up to me, they could remove the statue from there.' And a fourth commented, 'I did not even know who he was, I never learned about him at school. I learned about him when they set it (the statue) on fire.'⁴⁸ Only one worker interviewed claimed that, in his opinion, the statue could stay there.⁴⁹

Decision-Making Processes

Mayor of São Paulo's Response

Despite the intense contestation over the statue, there was little, if any, governmental action on re-evaluating the presence of the statue in the public space. The intervention performed by *Revolução Periférica* was interpreted and considered by the state government as a criminal act. The mayor of São Paulo, Ricardo Nunes of the centrist MDB (*Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*) Party, manifested his frustration after the statue was set on fire, 'Vandalism is not the way to go to

⁴³ "Homem é preso após grupo colocar fogo na estátua de Borba Gato em SP; vídeo mostra ação." *G1 São Paulo*, July 25, 2022.

⁴⁴ Translations by the author.

⁴⁵ Victor Ohana. "STJ concede liberdade a 'Galo' após prisão por incêndio a estátua, diz defesa." *Carta Capital*, August 5, 2021.

⁴⁶ "MP defende 3 anos de prisão para Paulo Galo por incêndio em estátua de Borba Gato." *CartaCapital*, November 24, 2021.

⁴⁷ "Justiça condena Paulo Galo por incêndio em estátua de Borba Gato, em São Paulo." *CartaCapital*, December 19, 2021.

⁴⁸ Translations by the author.

⁴⁹ Regiane Oliveira. "Prisão de ativista que queimou Borba Gato provoca debate sobre a memória de São Paulo." *El País*, July 29, 2021.

discuss such matters, even if it is about a historical debt. It is necessary to have tranquillity, to respect democracy, tolerance.⁵⁰⁵¹ On his Instagram account, the mayor wrote, 'Deplorable vandalism act on the statue of Borba Gato today. Nothing justifies this type of behaviour. We need more unity and tolerance.'⁵²⁵³ Nonetheless, the mayor did not indicate how the government would promote unity and tolerance nor address the debate over the statue, which is only one among the contested *Bandeirantes* heritage symbols in the city's public spaces.⁵⁴

Initiatives by State Representatives

Already in early 2020, São Paulo state representatives were attempting to rename streets, avenues, and highways named in homage to the *Bandeirantes*. Mônica Seixas, who is a human rights activist from the PSOL (*Partido Socialismo e Liberdade*) Party, proposed *Draft Bill 116/2020*, which renames the highway 'Rodovia dos Bandeirantes' to highway 'Rodovia dos Guarani'.⁵⁵ According to her, the intention is to repair the historical damage caused to the Guarani Indigenous People, who did not have the opportunity to represent their side of history due to the massacre promoted by the *Bandeirantes*.⁵⁶ In addition, Seixas presented the *Draft Bill 422/2020*, which foresees the substitution of the *Monumento Anhanguera* (Anhanguera Monument), in homage to a *Bandeirante*, to a monument to Luiz Gama, a notorious abolitionist Black lawyer of the 19th century.⁵⁷ Finally, she presented *Draft Bill 423/2020* to rename the highway 'Rodovia Anhanguera' to highway 'Rodovia Luiz Gama'.⁵⁸ However, the representative did not include the statue of Borba Gato among her propositions.

Subsequently, São Paulo's state representative Erica Malunguinho, who is an antiracist activist from the PSOL (*Partido Socialismo e Liberdade*), party proposed *Draft Bill 404/2020*, which



Figure 3: @prefeitorcardonunes on Instagram: 'Deplorable vandalism act on the statue of Borba Gato today. Nothing justifies this type of behaviour. We need more unity and tolerance.' <https://www.instagram.com/prefeitorcardonunes/>

⁵⁰ "Prefeito de SP lamenta incêndio em estátua do Borba Gato e diz que empresário irá doar valor para restaura monumento." G1 São Paulo, July 26, 2021.

⁵¹ Translation by the author.

⁵² "Prefeito de SP lamenta 'ato de vandalismo' em estátua de Borba Gato." *Poder360*, July 25, 2021.

⁵³ Translation by the author.

⁵⁴ "Prefeito de SP lamenta 'ato de vandalismo' em estátua de Borba Gato." *Poder360*, July 25, 2021.

⁵⁵ Bill 116/2020, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Bill 422/2020, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

⁵⁸ Bill 423/2020, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

addresses colonial heritage in public spaces.⁵⁹ According to the Bill, homages to slavocrats and historical events linked to slavery should be forbidden. The proposal extends the understanding of 'slavocrat' not only to owners of enslaved people but also to those who were compromised with the maintenance of slavery in Brazil, which would ensure the inclusion of the statue of Borba Gato under the Bill's scope.⁶⁰ Moreover, it states that the existing monuments in homage to slavocrats should be removed from public spaces and stored in state-owned museums, where they would be properly addressed with historical information on slavery in Brazil. Finally, it also foresees the creation of a permanent Committee in São Paulo's state General Assembly to analyse and manage this type of public property.⁶¹

City Councillors' Initiatives

In February 2021, a group of council members presented *Draft Bill 47/2021*, which also addressed the colonial heritage in public spaces of São Paulo.⁶² The proposal argued that monuments, statues, plaques, or any homage to slavocrats and/or hygienists should be substituted by homages to historically important Black and Indigenous personalities.⁶³ The Bill is part of a project to recontextualise the urban landscape of São Paulo, called "SP é solo Preto e Indígena" (São Paulo is Black and Indigenous Land). The objective is to promote historical consciousness and education over Indigenous and Black personalities that were important to the social formation of São Paulo and to produce a counternarrative to the one adopted by the State, in which the *Bandeirantes* are glorified.⁶⁴

In June 2022, Luana Alves, one of the main advocates of the *Bill 47/2021*, who is an antiracist activist and member of the PSOL, managed to approve two bill amendments based on the project 'São Paulo is Black and Indigenous Land' to the city's Annual Budgetary Law for 2023.⁶⁵ One of the amendments foresees the creation of a National Park in homage to Black and Indigenous Memory of São Paulo, and the other foresees the execution of a Cultural Festival in 2023 named 'São Paulo sem racismo' (São Paulo with no racism).⁶⁶ According to councilmember Luana Alves:

It is fundamental for the city of São Paulo to have reserved spaces for the preservation of the Black and Indigenous Memory and that that may be guaranteed through public policies. Our references

⁵⁹ Bill 404/2020, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bill 47/2021, Câmara Municipal de São Paulo.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Luana Alves. "SP é Solo Preto e Indígena." *Solo Preto e Indígena*.

⁶⁵ Luana Alves. "Câmara aprova construção de Parque da Memória Negra e Indígena em São Paulo, para 2023." *LuanaPSOL*, June 29, 2022.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

have always been historically erased through a racist process and to revert that must be one of the public power's priorities.⁶⁷⁶⁸

The effects of the approval of these two amendments are still to be felt, as there have been no developments on the projects. However, in 2022, representative Luana Alves announced an online course on her website, named 'Black Land: Memory and Racial Justice in the City of São Paulo,'⁶⁹ in partnership with São Paulo's City Council Parliamentary School, which could demonstrate some willingness from the government to take the necessary steps to address the *Bandeirantes* history in front of so much societal debate and contestation.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the course has not had its first class yet, and the initiative to provide an answer to society's contestations still relies heavily on a few representatives willing to fight for a more diverse representation and teaching of history.

Progress of the Draft Bills

In the Brazilian legislative houses, all draft bills must go through an evaluation process before approval. First, there is the evaluation of a rapporteur who then sends the proposal to the Constitution, Justice, and Drafting Committee, responsible for analysing the Bill's constitutionality. In case it is approved, the draft bill can be evaluated by other pertinent Committees related to the subject. The members of the Committees are entitled to take the time to personally evaluate the proposal, which can delay their approval. In this sense, the *Draft Bill 422/2020*, presented by representative Seixas, went through a long appraisal process until the case was closed in May 2022, meaning it did not go to voting.⁷¹ Similarly, *Draft Bills 116/2020* and *423/2020* were archived on May 2023, as representatives from the Committees ruled against the proposals.⁷² In addition, *Draft Bill 404/2020*, presented by representative Malunguinho, also had its last update on May 2023, when it was archived together with the other propositions to alter São Paulo's cultural heritage and, especially, the heritage related to the *Bandeirantes*.⁷³

Nonetheless, the Draft Bill 47/2021 evaluation process has been completed in São Paulo's city council. The proposal was approved by the absolute majority of the council members in the first voting session in September 2021.⁷⁴ Moreover, a total of 7 other council members asked to be formally included as co-authors of the proposal, ranging from leftist parties to centre-right parties.⁷⁵ It then needs to go through a second voting session so that it can be sent to the Mayor, who needs to sanction it.⁷⁶ The debate on the *Bandeirantes* heritage has received increased attention from society, which is reflected by the recurrent contestations performed at the statue of

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Translation by the author.

⁶⁹ Translation by the author.

⁷⁰ Luana Alves. "SP é Solo Preto e Indígena." *Solo Preto e Indígena*.

⁷¹ Bill 422/2020, *Tramitação*, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

⁷² Bill 116/2020, Bill 423/2020, *Tramitação*, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

⁷³ Bill 404/2020, *Tramitação*, Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo.

⁷⁴ Bill 47/2021, *Processo Digital*, Câmara Municipal de São Paulo.

⁷⁵ Bill 47/2021, *Processo Digital*, Câmara Municipal de São Paulo.

⁷⁶ Luana Alves, interview by Vinícius Borges Garcia Fonseca. Recorded on April 7th, 2023. Excerpt from 31:12 to 32:28. Full transcription at Annex X.

Borba Gato and by the number of draft bills on the subject. However, the state of São Paulo has not prioritised the matter. In fact, there has been little active pursuit of the remedies to the contestations, meaning that the debate and the attempts to alter legislation on *Bandeirantes'* heritage will remain divisive and heated. This is corroborated by the fact that the state's government has not sought to mediate the debate in society and illuminate citizens on the issue at stake. Moreover, the delay in the process of evaluating the bills could point to the unwillingness to act or simply reflect a lack of interest in the matter by representatives who are not negatively affected by the history represented through the *Bandeirantes* monuments in the public spaces of the city.

São Paulo's Mayorship's Unilateral Initiatives

Despite the state government's inability to promote dialogue around the historical landscape of the city and, more specifically, Borba Gato's statue, and the obstruction of the bills presented by local parliament members in São Paulo, there have been unilateral movements from the mayorship to diversify the historical landscape of the city. In an interview granted to this author on April 7th, 2023, councilmember Luana Alves stated that the tension caused by the protests at Borba Gato's statue and the creation of the project '*SP é solo Preto e Indígena*', resulted in São Paulo's city government installing five statues related to historical Black Brazilian personalities in April 2022. Nevertheless, the unilateral movement from the mayorship reflects the lack of communication between the authorities responsible for the decision-making and social movements, politicians, and private individuals engaging in the discussion over São Paulo's historical landscape and the presence of homages to *Bandeirantes*, such as Borba Gato, in public spaces.⁷⁷

One of the statues built by the mayorship represents Deolinda Madre, popularly known as *Madrinha Eunice*, who was the founder of the first *Samba* School in São Paulo's city, named *Lavapés*, which was based on the *Liberdade* (Freedom) neighbourhood.⁷⁸ Next to the statue, a plaque was added with a brief description of Madrinha Eunice's history in the city, being the first woman to be president of a *Samba School*, as well as her date of birth and date of death. Additionally, there is a QR Code for obtaining more information on her life. The referred statue and plaque can be seen in Images 4 and 5 below. This statue was placed in the historical site related to the *Lavapés Samba School*. However, unlike Borba Gato's statue, Madrinha Eunice's statue was not erected with the intention to highlight the figure represented, lacking a pedestal or a demarcated area and, therefore, being absorbed by the environment around it.

⁷⁷ Luana Alves, interview by Vinícius Borges Garcia Fonseca. Recorded on April 7th, 2023. Excerpt from 31:12 to 32:28. Full transcription at Annex X.

⁷⁸ Bruno Pereira. "Cartografias cruzadas: os caminhos do samba e os traçados do Plano de Avenidas em São Paulo (1938-1945)" (MA Thesis, Universidade de São Paulo 2018), 107.



Figure 4: Image by Eugenio Hansen via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).



Figure 5: Image by Jcornelius via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

Nonetheless, at the inauguration of Madrinha Eunice's statue, the current president of the *Lavapés Samba School*, Ailton Graça, was present, together with the president of the *Samba School's League*, Alexandre Magno, besides São Paulo's mayor, Ricardo Nunes. Furthermore, the granddaughter of Madrinha Eunice, Rosemeire Marcondes, was also invited to the ceremony, as well as the artist who made the statue, Lúcia Lisboa. The event ended with concerts from several musicians, such as Bernadette, Raquel Tobias, Rixa, Quesito Melodia, and the drummers from the *Lavapés Samba School*.⁷⁹ The other personalities who were celebrated with a statue were the musicians Geraldo Filme and Itamar Assumpção, the Olympic athlete Adhemar da Silva, all from the state of São Paulo, and the author Carolina Maria de Jesus, who was originally born in the neighbouring state of Minas Gerais but lived in São Paulo for most of her life.⁸⁰

According to Alves, despite the positive initiative to erect such statues, they were small and made in a rush. Additionally, she claims none of the wishes of the communities she represents were communicated to the government in their directives to have these statues built. Members of the groups were not consulted, nor were their opinions taken into consideration. Thus, it shows the mayorship's will to control the debate on how to manage the historical landscape of São Paulo in the face of the increasing protests on historical sites, such as Borba Gato's statue. An interesting fact pointed out by the councilwoman is that there was no law approval needed for erecting the

⁷⁹ Prefeitura da Cidade de São Paulo. Cultura. "Esculturas de Madrinha Eunice e Geraldo Filme são inauguradas em abril." March 30, 2022.

⁸⁰ Prefeitura da Cidade de São Paulo. Cultura. "Prefeitura de São Paulo anuncia cinco novas estátuas de personalidades negras na cidade." August 17, 2021.

referred statues. To her, this exposes the lack of compromise from the mayorship to her approved Bill 47/2021, which would become law if sanctioned by the mayor and, thus, would require statues and monuments in honour of Black and Indigenous peoples to be built, as well as the reassessment of the homages to figures involved in atrocities committed during Brazil's colonial era.⁸¹ Thereby, this reveals that the mayorship has the power to unilaterally alter the city's historical landscape, establishing historical markers if it wishes to do so, and has been using it to keep a tight grip on the alterations to the city's narrative.

Nevertheless, the initiative shows that the government understands the need to diversify São Paulo's landscape, encompassing historical figures beyond the *Bandeirantes*, seeking to materialise and include other characters representing other societal groups, which are currently either unrepresented or underrepresented in the landscape. Still, historical sites, statues, and monuments in homage to Indigenous peoples are still absent from the city's and state's landscape, which demonstrates that there are societal groups who are still struggling to have their voices heard, even when managing to get proposals to be drafted and presented inside legislative houses.

Civil Society's Initiatives

State representative Mônica Seixas was elected representing a collective mandate composed of six other Black women, being the designated spokesperson for the mandate in São Paulo's state Legislative Assembly. One of the other women integrating this collective is Ana Laura Oliveira, who is a popular educator in the '*Rede Emancipa*', a social movement for popular education whose mission is to democratise access to universities in Brazil, promoting critical teaching and quality education for free.⁸² In May 2023, Oliveira granted an interview to this researcher in which she spoke about her critical history teaching for *Emancipa* and how it has been attempting to promote societal awareness over the problems involving *Bandeirantes*' figures, such as Borba Gato.

Oliveira claims that symbols such as Borba Gato's statue hurt a lot because 'when you start understanding our history, you understand that those symbolise the ones who killed your own, who killed our own.'⁸³ Furthermore, she explained that statues play an important role as part of the state's established memory, which is what will remain in people's consciences. In this sense, to her, critically thinking about history is urgent, as the memory frequently displayed in the historical landscape of Brazil is of 'genocide, with symbols representing the bad things we've had in our history.' The final result, in her view, is that 'We are displaying memories for the future of society

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸² Rede Emancipa. "Rede Emancipa Movimento de Educação Popular." Accessed on September 20th, 2023. Available at: <https://inscricoes.redeemancipa.org.br/>.

⁸³ Ana Laura. Interview by Vinícius Borges Garcia Fonseca. Recorded on May 7th, 2023. Excerpt from 07:29 to 09:51.

and, moreover, a perspective that what we have for the future is also bad.’ Thus, the *Emancipa* movement wishes to change the perspective for the future by displaying a memory rooted in historical events and figures from Brazilian history who participated in the fight for abolition and against the slavery regime.⁸⁴

To do that, Oliveira wishes to transform the memory of cities like São Paulo by teaching about what she regards as the ‘real heroes’ of Brazilian history, focusing on personalities that were and are important for Black and Indigenous people. The idea is that teaching can be used as a way to pay homage to these personalities and reflect on how to tackle the structural racism represented by the established *Bandeirantes*’ memory in Brazil’s landscape, which often celebrates figures involved in the slavery regime and even genocide. The educator understands that historical markers such as Borba Gato’s statue are inappropriate and should not be displayed in public spaces. Instead, they should remain as a memory told in history books and critically taught in schools.⁸⁵

However, to achieve practical changes regarding public policy on historical culture and heritage, such as approving the draft bills referred to in this paper, Oliveira says it is necessary to ‘have a movement pushing the agenda, connecting political organisations and engaging civil society.’ To push the agenda, she claims it is imperative to occupy spaces and promote dialogue on under-discussed historical events and personalities, disputing the established narrative. According to her, that is what is being done ‘when we take these themes to the media, or when we manage to develop activities, to go to school spaces and present our project, (then) we manage to dispute this (narrative) as well.’⁸⁶

When asked about the unilateral initiative from São Paulo’s mayorship, the educator said that historical, social, and civil society activists for Black and Indigenous rights were not consulted on the matter and that points to the importance of having a solid political organisation. To her, without a political agenda and mobilisation, the government will continue to use these strategies to give superfluous answers to the social protests and demonstrations without deepening the debate. In this context, the *Emancipa* movement works to nurture the debate on Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous history, taking students to historical sites related to these peoples’ history and culture connecting them to underrepresented parts of Brazilian history.⁸⁷

Summary and Conclusions

⁸⁴ Ibid. Excerpt from 11:00 to 13:15.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Excerpt from 18:43 to 20:07.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Excerpt from 42:00 to 43:45.

Despite the several contestations performed on Borba Gato's statue over the last two decades, the government of São Paulo has not treated the matter as a priority. It was only in 2020 that state representatives and councilmembers engaged in drafting Bills to address colonial heritage related to slavery, genocide, and racism, much due to the momentum generated by the Black Lives Matter Movement's protests in the United States. However, the proposals have not received enough support inside the legislative houses, with some being rejected and others going through a long and inefficient evaluation process. The exception was *Bill 47/2021*, which was approved in the first voting but has not gone to a second voting, which would enable it to be sanctioned by the mayor. Hence, it has not brought about any concrete remedies for the demonstrations and protests at Borba Gato's statue and other *Bandeirantes* related heritage.

The only practical remedies taken arose either from unilateral public initiatives and São Paulo's mayorship, such as the temporary addition of the plaque providing historical information on Borba Gato's life by the 'Action Group', the *Rede Emancipa* critical history teaching initiative and the statues built unilaterally by the mayor. Nonetheless, Borba Gato's statue is likely to remain a focal point for protestors to gather, demand their rights, and voice their opinions. In this context, the government of São Paulo's city has aimed to slow the debate over Borba Gato's statue presence in public space by promoting its own unilateral initiatives.

Moreover, the mayorship has continuously sided with a status quo that glorifies and takes pride in the *Bandeirantes'* legacy of São Paulo. There has been no direct or indirect plan of action on the *Bandeirantes* heritage, and no steps have been taken to ensure the democratisation of the decision-making process nor the engagement of the community on the topic. On the other hand, there has been an observable criminalisation of the contestations by the governing parties, often associating the interventions with the crime of vandalism and the rejection of Bills attempting to diversify the city's historical landscape.

Democratising information on Borba Gato's history could help insert citizens in the debate and illuminate the controversies around his legacy to avoid gridlocks on how to address the statue. In addition, the different interventions on the statue and the interviews with council members and popular educators have highlighted that the inclusion of the public in the decision-making process is key for advancing possible remedies to the contestations. Nonetheless, the Draft Bills mentioned in this case study present pertinent alternatives on how to engage in creating a historical landscape that is more representative of the diversity of the city of São Paulo, especially for Black and Indigenous people.

The proposals can intensify the public debate and increase societal awareness over the problematic *Bandeirantes* heritage and the absence of Black and Indigenous cultural references in the city's landscape. Ultimately, it can generate societal pressure to diversify the city's landscape,

which can lead to practical action from the government, as seen in April 2022 when the mayorship erected statues in homage to Black Brazilian personalities. Hence, further research on the claims activists and protestors hold on Borba Gato and the *Bandeirantes* could help elucidate the best remedies to address the contestations. Additionally, learning from ongoing civil society's practices and fostering the work from educational movements, such as *Emancipa*, to promote critical history teaching and shedding light on understudied and under-discussed parts of Brazilian history could serve as tools for increasing societal engagement on the debate and, therefore, including more views into the decision-making arena.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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