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The Classification of Environmental Racism: A Case Study on Disinformation, Digital Performance, and Ideological Disputes in Brazilian Political Discourse

A Classificação do Racismo Ambiental: Estudo de Caso sobre Desinformação, Performance Digital e Disputas Ideológicas no Discurso Político Brasileiro

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Abstract

This paper examines how environmental racism is classified and contested in Brazilian political discourse through disinformation narratives, focusing on Minister Anielle Franco and Deputy Kim Kataguiri's pronouncements during the January 2024 floods in Rio de Janeiro. Analyzing their Twitter and Instagram performances through Bowker and Star's (1999) classification theory, Bastos and Tuters' (2023) concept of disinformation as affective ritual, and Black and Indigenous thought, I show how rhetorical, visual, and affective strategies work to legitimize or delegitimize the term. Disinformation here is understood not as mere factual distortion, but as undermining the moral and epistemic foundations of structural concepts, shaping whether environmental injustice is made visible or discredited.

Keywords
Classification; Environmental Racism; Narratives; Disinformation; Discourse.

Resumo

Este artigo examina como o racismo ambiental é classificado e contestado no discurso político brasileiro por meio de narrativas de desinformação, com foco nas declarações da ministra Anielle Franco e do deputado Kim Kataguiri durante as enchentes de janeiro de 2024 no Rio de Janeiro. A partir da análise de suas atuações no Twitter e no Instagram, à luz da teoria da classificação de Bowker e Star (1999), do conceito de desinformação como ritual afetivo de Bastos e Tuters (2023) e de reflexões de pensadores negros e indígenas, demonstro como estratégias retóricas, visuais e afetivas são mobilizadas para legitimar ou deslegitimar o termo. Aqui, a desinformação é compreendida não como mera distorção factual, mas como um mecanismo que mina os fundamentos morais e epistêmicos de conceitos estruturais, influenciando se a injustiça ambiental será tornada visível ou desacreditada.

Palavras-chaves
Classificação; Racismo Ambiental; Narrativas; Desinformação; Discurso.

Introduction

In this paper, I examine how the concept of environmental racism becomes a site of discursive dispute in Brazilian political communication. I focus on two contrasting public figures — Minister Anielle Franco and Federal Deputy Kim Kataguiri — who engaged in a classification struggle over the term during the January 2024 floods in Rio de Janeiro. Rather than simply presenting divergent perspectives, I analyze how both figures mobilize narrative, affective, and multimodal strategies — including humor, ideological framing, and digital affordances — to either legitimize or delegitimize environmental racism as a meaningful political category. Drawing on the work of Bowker and Star (1999), I approach this dispute as a classification conflict: a political negotiation over what counts as legitimate knowledge and which voices are authorized to define it.

I also draw on recent work in disinformation studies, particularly Bastos and Tuters' (2023) formulation of disinformation as a narrative and ritual practice. Instead of framing disinformation as the simple spread of falsehoods, I understand it as an affective and participatory process that creates coherence, resonance, and community. Kataguiri's discourse, for instance, does not attempt to disprove the existence of structural inequality through evidence, but instead relies on sarcasm, meme aesthetics, and spectacle to erode the moral and epistemic authority of anti-racist discourse. In contrast, Franco's speech appeals to a shared historical memory of racial and territorial injustice, asserting environmental racism as a legitimate and urgent public issue.

Environmental racism, first conceptualized by Benjamin Franklin Chavis in 1982, has been defined as the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities (Roberts et al., 2022). In Brazil, the term began circulating in academic and activist spaces in the early 2000s, initially to expose how unequal access to environmental resources and infrastructure was systematically erased from public data and discourse (Herculano, 2002). Since then, the notion has grown in relevance, particularly as the intensifying effects of climate change continue to affect marginalized populations in racially and spatially uneven ways (Bouqvar & Coelho, 2022). Given Brazil's colonial past and the persistent entanglement of race and class (Davis, 1983), the classification of environmental racism is far from a neutral or purely semantic issue — it is a terrain of political struggle.

This analysis identifies the visual, verbal, and affective strategies through which Anielle Franco and Kim Kataguiri perform classification in the context of environmental racism. Their digital responses to the 2024 floods in Rio de Janeiro illustrate how the classification of environmental racism becomes a site of ideological struggle. Drawing on Black and Indigenous theories of race, land, and epistemic violence, I interpret Franco's discourse as a historically grounded appeal that foregrounds environmental racism as both material condition and epistemic erasure. In contrast, Kataguiri mobilizes rhetorical inversion, sarcasm, and aesthetic disruption to delegitimize the concept, displacing structural critique with an individualized, market-oriented framing. These competing strategies reflect what Bowker and Star (1999) describe as the political work of classification, wherein systems of naming and ordering are always embedded in power.

The classification dispute also unfolds through platformed performance, shaped by the aesthetics and logics of social media. Kataguiri's reel operates as a hybrid performance that borrows from influencer culture to enact classification denial through humor, irony, and fragmentation — tactics that align with Whitney Phillips's (2015) analysis of trolling as strategic ambiguity designed to destabilize moral discourse. Franco's response, by contrast, enacts what Fiona Rossette-Crake (2025) calls "authentic authority," using the conventions of social media oratory — close framing, direct address, and embodied sincerity — to affirm epistemic legitimacy through community witnessing. These divergent performances do not simply reflect disagreement over terminology, but reveal how digital political communication mediates the struggle over who can speak, what counts as knowledge, and how structural injustice is rendered visible — or made absurd.

By exploring this discursive dispute, I argue that the classification of environmental racism is being redefined through communicative practices that blend political rhetoric, digital aesthetics, ideological polarization (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023), and the use of disinformation narratives. This paper contributes to disinformation studies by shifting attention away from truth/falsity binaries toward the affective, rhetorical, and classificatory struggles that shape public understanding. It also offers insight into how platformized communication reshapes environmental discourse, particularly in contexts marked by deep racial and political inequalities.

The case study method

Solberg Søilen & Huber (2006) emphasize that the primary purpose of case studies is to furnish a contextual background for deliberating concrete problems. Moreover, the authors argue that case studies are particularly suited for situations where precise solutions are elusive. Zainal (2007) suggests that the case study method enables a researcher to examine the data closely within a specific context. From this perspective, researchers normally select a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as study subjects.

Given the nature of my research question — how the concept of environmental racism is classified and contested in digital political discourse — I adopt a single-case explanatory study focused on two contrasting pronouncements by Brazilian political figures. This design aligns with the dual objective of case studies: first, to provide a comprehensive and situated description and second, to advance theoretical understanding across different domains (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gustafsson, 2017). To analyze this discursive dispute, I combine classification theory (Bowker & Star, 1999) with insights from disinformation studies (Bastos & Tuters, 2023; Phillips, 2015), operationalized through a multimodal discourse analysis of audiovisual and textual materials. By focusing on how both actors use visual, auditory, and rhetorical strategies across different platforms (Twitter and Instagram), I examine how disinformation operates as an affective and classificatory practice, not only spreading falsehoods but also reshaping what is considered legitimate knowledge.

Another characteristic of this design is the impossibility of generalizing a result, which sets the boundaries of the research analysis. Being explanatory is the second characteristic of the described case since this offers a way to explore any phenomenon in the data that serves as a point of interest to the researcher (Zainal, 2007; Gustafsson, 2017). The design is also instrumental, as it uses this specific conflict to interrogate broader ideological mechanisms that shape environmental discourse in platformed contexts. Furthermore, I treat this as an interpretive case, since my objective is to uncover how the symbolic, emotional, and technological elements of each post reflect and reproduce competing classification systems.

Finally, while the findings are not generalizable in a statistical sense, this methodological approach enables a conceptually rich account of how environmental racism, as a political and epistemic category, is stabilized or destabilized in public discourse. In what follows, I draw together the theoretical frameworks and case analysis to show how this classification struggle unfolds through digital aesthetics, ideological framing, and disinformation narratives.

Case description

In the last few years, Brazil has been suffering from heat waves, heavy rains, and other extreme conditions caused by climate change intensification. The Rio de Janeiro State and city, specifically, at the beginning of 2024, have been in a stage of displacements, disease, and deaths caused by these events.[1] This can be confirmed by the necessity of the decree Nº 53.912, created at the end of January of the

1 Disponível em: https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2024/01/24/mais-de-100-mil-pessoas-foram-afetadas-pelas-chuvas-no-rj-em-2024-diz-governo.ghtml. Acesso em: 04 dez. 2024.

same year by Rio de Janeiro Mayor Eduardo Paes (Rio de Janeiro, 2024). In this context, when heavy rains cause many losses, different political figures make public pronouncements to solidarize with people who could have lost their houses, and family and friends. Here, I will focus on two of these politicians' pronouncements: Anielle Franco and Kim Kataguiri.

As Minister of Racial Equality, Anielle Franco has occupied this spot since January 2023, a ministry that was destroyed by former president Jair Bolsonaro and recreated by current president Lula. The minister is the sister of Marielle Franco, who served as a city councilor of the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro for the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) from January 2017 until her murder. This is important because her memory and family have been suffering from hateful attacks since her death in 2018, the election year that resulted in Bolsonaro's victory. In this sense, Anielle Franco has frequently been a target of hate speech and threats on social media.[2]

To show solidarity with the Rio de Janeiro people, the minister posted on her Twitter (X) the following content: "I am following the effects of yesterday's rain in the municipalities of Rio and the state of alert with imminent tragedies, also a result of the effects of environmental and climate racism. Some city halls in the state are already mobilized." This post generated high repercussions, with 2,9M views and more than 2K retweets and likes. More than this, her tweet turned out to be the subject of different magazines and was criticized by far-right movements such as the Free Brazilian Movement (MBL), which has representation at the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil and the Legislative Assembly of The State of São Paulo. The range described above is related to the term "environmental racism" in her post.

Kim Kataguiri, the second figure in this case study, is a federal deputy and a founder member of MBL. He was one of the most famous figures in Dilma Rousseff's government fall, and in 2024, he was a pre-candidate for the São Paulo Mayor Elections. Different politicians on the same political spectrum have criticized minister Franco,[3] but Kataguiri was chosen in this study due to his popularity and pivotal position on the new rise of the right-wing movements from 2013 until now (Bastos dos Santos; Chagas, 2018). In the context of Franco's tweet, the deputy posted a reel[4] on Instagram that I transcribed and translated here:

> Environmental racism, the latest insult from leftist activists, came to light thanks to a tweet from minister Anielle Franco. That person who took over the Ministry without having any greater professional qualifications and who, until now, has only done shit. What the hell is environmental racism? [quote]"It's the lack of environmental security in urban territories with a Black majority, impacted by water pollution, extreme weather events, lack of basic sanitation." That's interesting, right? So, all of you on the left were environmental racists when you were against the sanitation law when you created the so-called Shit Bench (Bancada da Bosta) against the basic sanitation law, and precisely its objective is to ensure that the company responsible for basic sanitation has technical capacity, has the budgetary capacity to universalize basic sanitation, and you were absolutely against it, even lying, saying that the law privatized all state-owned companies. The law provided for the privatization of only companies that were unable to provide universal basic sanitation. Now, the big question is, what was in dispute at the time was Embasa, right? The basic sanitation company in Bahia does not have the capacity to universalize sanitation but is in the hands of leftists, who would maintain their commissioned positions and did not want the sanitation law precisely for that reason.

Considering there are different affordances by considering a tweet and a reel (video), it is

2 Disponível em: https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2023/09/28/anielle-franco-aciona-o-ministerio-da-justica-para-apurar-ameacas-e-mensagens-de-odio-contra-ela-nas-redes.ghtml. Acesso em: 04 dez. 2024.

3 Disponível em: https://www.estadao.com.br/politica/rio-de-janeiro-chuvas-desastre-ambiental-anielle-franco-ministra-igualdade-racial-sonia-guajajara-silvio-almeida-marina-silva-governo-lula-nprp/. Acesso em: 04 dez. 2024.

4 Disponível em: https://www.instagram.com/kimkataguiri/reel/C2Ip7-lu2O0/. Acesso em: 04 dez. 2024.

important to analyze other aspects of the latter media that affect how the message is sent. The reel, until now, had 171K views, more than 1,150 shares, and almost 500 comments. Kim Kataguiri's Instagram reel exemplifies what Fiona Rossette-Crake (2025) calls social media oratory — a political genre shaped by direct address, fast-paced edits, and emotionally charged commentary designed for digital circulation. The video begins with a sarcastic narrator stating: "Environmental racism, the latest insult from leftist activists," immediately signaling a tone of ridicule. Kataguiri delivers a frontal attack on Minister Anielle Franco, speaking directly to the camera in a sharp, assertive tone. His speech is intercut with edited inserts designed to visually and affectively discredit Franco: for instance, a clip of her riding on the back of a motorcycle through a favela is used not to signal populist connection but to invoke informality, reinforcing the idea that she is out of place in a ministerial role. The visual works as a class-coded cue to suggest that she lacks institutional decorum or professional legitimacy.

This affective framing intensifies with the insertion of a popular meme where a horse kicks a man in the chest, immediately following Kataguiri's rebuttal, implying that he is metaphorically "knocking her out" with superior logic. The video also uses a comedic soundtrack — a kind commonly associated with people making mistakes or being mocked online — to sonically signal failure and amplify the derision. These audiovisual elements work together to construct Franco not as a public official presenting a serious concern, but as a figure of mockery whose words are not worthy of rational engagement. Her original tweet defining environmental racism is shown onscreen only to be immediately dismissed and reframed as ideological excess.

Kataguiri's reel, then, does not attempt to refute the concept of environmental racism through evidence or debate. Instead, it enacts a form of classification denial, reducing structural critique to performative nonsense through affective performance and ridicule. This aligns with Bastos and Tuters' (2023) concept of affective disinformation, where political narratives circulate less through factual persuasion than through emotional resonance and moral alignment. Through editing tactics rooted in influencer culture — jump cuts, sarcastic tone, and meme timing — Kataguiri constructs a worldview in which systemic injustice is framed as exaggerated grievance and the legitimacy of anti-racist discourse is replaced by mockery. What is discredited is not only Franco's authority, but the very category of "environmental racism" as a valid object of public concern.

Due to the range of the minister's use of "environmental racism" and how she started to be ridiculed by politicians and magazines, Franco decided to post a reel[5] on Instagram explaining the concept, which I transcribed and translated here:

> Hi everyone, everyone must be seeing the desperate images and the latest news about the areas most affected by the rains in Rio de Janeiro. Look, when we look at the neighborhoods and municipalities that were most affected, like Acari, São João de Meriti, Anchieta, Albuquerque, and Nova Iguaçu, we see something they all have in common, which are more vulnerable areas. What is the color of the majority of people living in these places, who once again are losing their homes, their businesses, their jobs, their dreams, their hope, and their lives as a whole, struggles, and struggles being lost? What is the color of most people living in favelas who don't have trees with a rain drainage system, precarious sanitation, and undignified housing? When we stop to think about it, we know it's not a coincidence when they say that favelas are 15 times more affected than other neighborhoods. It's not natural that some municipalities, districts, suburbs, and favelas suffer more severe consequences of the rain than others. This happens because one part of the city or state does not have the same housing conditions, sanitation, or urban structure as the other. It's also not natural that these places have the majority of their population being Black. This is part of what we call and define as environmental racism and its effects in large cities. This term has been used since the 1980s, gaining strength in the United States. Still, many Brazilian activists and others have also spoken about the vulnerabilities of certain people and where these people live. We have been in contact with local authorities since early on, with the

5 Disponível em: https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2GmiPpr_69/. Acesso em: 04 dez. 2024.

> Minister of the City, the Minister of Regional Development, and the Minister of Social Development, to reinforce the importance of the federal government supporting this moment and trying to diminish the pain and suffering of families. President Lula, as always, has already made resources available to help the people of Rio de Janeiro get through this tragedy. And we will continue working together with the commitment to transform this reality. If you can, contribute to helping the families that have been most affected at this time. Let's go.

In this medium, she uses the self-camera, which shows more proximity to the public and confidence. She has a background with artwork representing her sister, Marielle Franco. She speaks with a severe and solid intonation, focusing more on showing images and videos about people affected by the heavy rains than herself. As in the case of right-wing and far-right material characterization, this reflects what research indicates as a pattern of progressist communication (Hong; Hermann, 2020; Soares; Volcan, 2024).

Taking this scenario into consideration, in the following sections, I am exploring how the concept of environmental racism is classified in these two different narratives. Firstly, I do that by describing Black and Indigenous theories that I am using in this paper; secondly, I delimited the classification framework I employ; third, I detail in which way a case study can be validated as a relevant method; lastly, I discuss the results and make a few conclusions, suggesting possible future work.

Race and environment

In *Whiteness as Property* (1993), Cheryl Harris argues there is, in the US context, an evolution of the status from color to race that has the same trajectory as property, as both show a progression historically rooted in white supremacy and economic hegemony over Black and Native American peoples, shaping social structure. In her formulation, she describes a codependence between race and property to justify how and why the common sense about race hierarchies was constructed, maintained, and persistent nowadays. In this regard, whiteness shares the critical characteristics of property, even as the meaning of property has changed over time: whiteness and property pursue the right to exclude. I assume this is the case for the Americas in which slavery trade existed in some cases more than three centuries — Brazil. By extending the author's argument to the Brazilian context, it is possible to affirm that race is not an oppressive conception alone, but the relationship between race and property is responsible for maintaining a subordinate structure in terms of race and economy in the count.

Several ideas described by George Lipsitz in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (2006) can also be added to this frame, arguing that whiteness is not so much a color as a condition but rather a structural advantage sustained by past and present forms of exclusion and subordination. Cultural aspects of domination and the creation of social structures that influence the economic advantages of whiteness since the invasion of the "new world" were critical in its constitution. Therefore, whiteness can be understood as what Cida Bento (2022) calls a tacit pact, an invisible force that shapes economic, cultural, social, and political life. In other words, whiteness needed to be invested in order to become common sense.

Beyond exploitation and expropriation during the colonial period, racial hierarchies constantly remained in society through the hidden segregation imposed in different cycles of capitalism. Besides the consequences for people of color, considering the root causes is crucial. Due to this, it is fundamental to recognize that white people and their culture, economy, and world vision shape laws, power positions, economic force, and the maintenance/perpetuation of this perspective that sees whiteness as a rule (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006).

As we can see, during the colonizing period until now, land has had a pivotal role in the constitution and maintenance of race hierarchy. In this regard, it seems important to draw in its meaning in Black

and Indigenous epistemologies, where land is not just a commodity to be explored but an environment embedded with culture, politics, and social relations. This appears in Vine Deloria Jr's *God is Red* (2003), in which the environment plays a critical function in Indigenous spirituality, inseparable from Indigenous life. He describes how limiting access to environments as a consequence of colonization and governmental policies denies cultural activity. In her doctoral dissertation in 2005 and recently in her book, Sueli Carneiro (2023) reflects on how an "official history" is considered when one perspective, commonly the white one, is seen as universal, leading to the nonconsideration of other histories. She calls it epistemicide. Thus, by combining the authors' ideas, it is possible to argue that invading and/or destroying specific lands represents not only physical damage but also an attack on knowledge and culture.

Vygotsky's (1987) idea of *emotional experience* reinforces this assumption. This is described as a unity of environmental and personal features. A unity represents an inherent piece of the whole object/subject. Since peoples have different emotional experiences according to their social and cultural conditions, it is possible to affirm that different races, ethnicities, genders, and social classes are directly affected in their psychological development by social norms and power relations of their environments/lands. In the Brazilian context, we can see these nuances more clearly when thinking about *quilombos* and Indigenous land, but this also happens beyond ones that involve regulation/demarcation. At this point, environmental racism becomes pivotal to this paper's discussion.

Robert D. Bullard (1993), a reference for his studies in the Environmental Justice field, defines environmental racism as:

> [It] refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color. It also includes exclusionary and restrictive practices that limit participation by people of color in decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (Bullard, 1993, p. 23)

Considering this approach to environmental racism and the case context of this paper, in Rio de Janeiro, it can be considered a reality that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, particularly those residing in favelas or low-income neighborhoods. The lack of adequate infrastructure and governmental support exacerbates the problem, leaving residents vulnerable to health issues such as basic sanitation, waterborne diseases, and other pollution-related illnesses. With extreme weather conditions, such as heavy rains, the losses become about the environment as a physical land and cultural space. Furthermore, the historical neglect and systemic discrimination — structural racism — faced by these communities perpetuates a cycle of environmental injustice, where the burdens of pollution and ecological degradation fall disproportionately on those least able to afford their consequences.

This perspective is present in Franco's framing of the floods not as isolated natural disasters, but as symptoms of historically structured inequalities. This is made especially clear in her Instagram video, where she highlights neighborhoods — Acari, São João de Meriti, Anchieta, Albuquerque, and Nova Iguaçu — as examples of areas most severely impacted by the floods. Rather than describing these events as acts of nature, she asks viewers to consider the shared characteristics of these areas, particularly in terms of the racial identity of residents and the lack of adequate infrastructure. By urging the public to reflect on "the color of the people who live in these places," Franco constructs a narrative that links environmental vulnerability to systemic racial injustice. Through this spatial enumeration and emotive appeal, she renders visible the intersection of racialized urban planning, environmental neglect, and infrastructural abandonment. Her message positions environmental racism not as an abstract theory, but as a lived and observable condition shaped by political decisions and historical exclusions.

Classification and power

To classify things is common and inescapable. For example, in the psychological/psychiatric field, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) lists known mental health conditions and the requirements for diagnosis. This manual is constantly modified to reflect new knowledge in the field. Consider the second version of the DSM: the category homosexual was considered a mental health problem and only passed through demedicalization after social justice movements and LGBTIAP+ people in the field of psychiatric and psychology studies lobbied to advocate for this change (Bowker; Star, 1999). Race is another example of how classification matters, since public policies and social norms are constructed considering it — for good and evil.

In this discussion, I apply Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's (1999) analysis of classification and its consequences to examine how systems of meaning prioritize certain perspectives while obscuring others. Bowker and Star argue that classification systems are never neutral: they reflect moral and ethical agendas by determining what counts as visible or legitimate knowledge. Because classifications selectively emphasize certain viewpoints while silencing others, they can have harmful social and political consequences. A classification can be understood as a "spatial, temporal, or spatiotemporal segmentation of the world" (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 10), a symbolic and material infrastructure composed of categories that organize people, actions, and ideas in service of bureaucratic and epistemic efficiency. Crucially, to understand how classification works, it is necessary to treat these systems as infrastructures. The term "infrastructure" refers to the physical and intangible foundations that support collective life, ranging from roads and buildings to protocols and standards (Bowker et al., 2010). Bowker and Star (1999) propose the concept of infrastructural inversion to help reveal how classification systems, standards, and technical networks are interdependent with knowledge production and political power.

There are four methodological themes for infrastructural inversion: ubiquity, materiality and texture, the indeterminacy of the past, and practical politics (Bowker & Star, 1999). While Bowker and Star developed these ideas to analyze formal standards, I apply them here to the informal, discursive struggle over the legitimacy of the term "environmental racism." In this study, I focus on the theme of practical politics, which refers to the situated processes through which categories are shaped, contested, and stabilized. Legitimacy in this context is not determined in a vacuum, but through what Bowker and Star describe as a combination of institutional uptake, alignment with dominant sense-making schemas, and integration into everyday practices (p. 44). In other words, what gets classified — and how — is the result of ongoing negotiations over what counts as credible, intelligible, or politically useful knowledge.

The dispute between Franco and Kataguiri exemplifies the type of classificatory power struggle Bowker and Star describe. Anielle Franco attempts to stabilize the classification of environmental racism as a structural and historically grounded injustice. She does so by explicitly linking the concept to concrete empirical references in her video, such as the enumeration of racially marked neighborhoods, and by highlighting the disproportionate impact of floods on these areas. Her appeal is grounded in spatial specificity and the visible effects of infrastructure inequality, which she connects directly to race. In this way, Franco enacts a classification strategy that foregrounds structural causes and historical legacies of exclusion, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of "environmental racism" as an explanatory category.

Kataguiri, however, contests this classification by reframing the idea of environmental racism as ideological manipulation. In his Instagram reel, he uses sarcasm, meme aesthetics, and disruptive editing techniques — including comical sound effects and decontextualized quotes — to portray the concept as absurd and politically opportunistic. He claims that environmental racism is a rhetorical strategy employed by the left to obscure past policy decisions, such as opposition to sanitation privatization. In doing so, Kataguiri not only challenges the legitimacy of the term but also casts doubt on Minister Franco's sincerity. Her use of the concept is framed as performative and self-serving, suggesting that appeals to racial justice

are being used strategically rather than substantively. This reframing shifts the classification terrain from structural injustice to partisan blame, repositioning Franco's framing as an exaggeration or fabrication.

This dynamic illustrates what Bowker and Star (1999) call practical politics: the process by which classification systems are negotiated, challenged, and stabilized through power-laden acts of inclusion and exclusion. Kataguiri's reel is not a neutral counterargument but a performative intervention aimed at discrediting the legitimacy of the category "environmental racism." His use of humor, memes, and disruptive editing functions not simply to disagree, but to delegitimize the term by making it appear unserious, exaggerated, or ideologically loaded. By reframing Franco's use of the term as opportunistic and politically motivated, Kataguiri mobilizes discursive tools to shift public perception — not just of the issue itself, but of who is authorized to speak seriously about it. This is practical politics in action: the contest over which categories are seen as valid, and whose voices get recognized in shaping public understanding.

This is why Bowker and Star's methodological lens is useful for analyzing this conflict. Classifications do not emerge organically — they are constructed, negotiated, and often imposed through power. In this case, the struggle over the meaning and legitimacy of "environmental racism" reveals how digital media become sites where classifications are publicly contested, using not only argumentation but affect, aesthetics, and platform affordances to shape what counts as real or politically credible.

Disinformation narratives

In this paper, I consider that the history of race, property, standards, and other concepts and definitions are based on social agreements, and these are consequences of the construction of common sense, so disinformation emerges as a relevant factor. For this paper, I use the idea of disinformation narratives (Bastos; Tuters, 2023), in which the creation of community is fundamental to trusting and sharing, and, consequently, the success of the disinformation attempt. Marco Bastos & Marc Tuters (2023) argue that disinformation studies can benefit from information studies, where *meaning* is fundamental to constructing a network of trust.

This approach differs from disinformation studies that treat disinformation as an object — that is, as problematic or false information circulating on social media and targeted by fact-checkers (Recuero, 2024; Graves, 2017). Instead of focusing solely on veracity and correction, a narrative perspective emphasizes the social and affective dimensions of how disinformation circulates. Kataguiri's reel, for instance, functions less as an argument than as a performance—a ritualized display of irony, ridicule, and affective alignment. Rather than refuting the concept of environmental racism, he invites viewers to laugh, dismiss, and share, transforming disinformation into a form of ideological participation. Bastos and Tuters (2023) describe this as affective disinformation, where emotional resonance and narrative coherence matter more than factual accuracy, and engagement is driven by shared identity rather than deliberation. Through sarcasm and meme aesthetics, Kataguiri offers his followers a sense of superiority and belonging, reinforcing skepticism toward institutional and anti-racist discourse. Whitney Phillips (2015) further illuminates this dynamic, showing how trolling and strategic ambiguity blur the line between sincerity and mockery, weakening the authority of truth-claims in digital culture. Seen this way, disinformation is not merely the spread of falsehoods — it is a cultural strategy for reshaping public relationships to truth, expertise, and justice.

Discussion

The dispute between Minister Anielle Franco and Deputy Kim Kataguiri over the term "environmental racism" illustrates how classification becomes a site of ideological and affective struggle in digital political communication. Franco invokes the term to highlight how racialized spatial segregation,

inadequate infrastructure, and state neglect disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous communities. Her framing positions environmental racism not merely as a descriptive label, but as a demand for historical recognition and policy transformation. By contrast, Kataguiri reframes the term as an ideological weapon, accusing the left of using "racism" opportunistically to evade responsibility for past policy failures — particularly in relation to the privatization of basic sanitation. This opposition is not neutral: it enacts what Bowker and Star (1999) call classification denial, wherein structural injustice is rendered invisible through rhetorical deflection and ideological inversion.

Franco's position is grounded in a long lineage of scholarship that links race and property (Harris, 1993), whiteness and spatial advantage (Lipsitz, 2006), and land as both a material and symbolic site of knowledge (Deloria, 2003). Her narrative not only names environmental racism but locates it in a historical geography of inequality. Through this framing, she performs what Rossette-Crake (2025) calls authentic authority — a digital oratory grounded in moral clarity, experiential legitimacy, and direct address. Her Instagram video, filmed in close frame with a serious tone and references to Marielle Franco, becomes a digital act of witnessing that appeals not only to reason, but to memory and affect.

Kataguiri's reel offers a sharp contrast. His video adopts the visual grammar of social media influencers — fast cuts, sarcastic tone, inserted memes, exaggerated delivery — positioning him as both critic and entertainer. Rather than respond to Franco's claim with evidence or counter-argument, he uses mockery, ambiguity, and class-coded imagery to reposition her as unserious and illegitimate. This shift in tone performs a rejection not only of the concept but of the speaker's right to define it. Kataguiri's strategy reflects what Whitney Phillips (2015) identifies in her work on trolling as strategic ambiguity: a communication style that evades accountability by blurring the line between irony and belief. It functions to delegitimize moral claims through performance, not deliberation.

This performative dynamic is further illuminated by Bastos and Tuters' (2023) concept of affective disinformation. Rather than understanding disinformation solely in terms of factual inaccuracy, they show how it operates as a ritual that fosters emotional identification, community boundaries, and narrative coherence. Kataguiri's video invites his followers to participate not through rational debate, but through affective reactions — likes, shares, laughter, and alignment with the idea that anti-racist discourse is exaggerated or manipulative. These reactions consolidate a shared worldview in which certain concepts, like "environmental racism," are rendered not only false but socially illegitimate.

Bowker and Star's (1999) concept of practical politics offers a framework for understanding how classification is contested in these moments, not through formal policy debates, but through symbolic interventions that shape what categories are seen as credible, and whose knowledge is recognized. On platforms like Instagram, these acts of classification are mediated by algorithmic visibility, platform aesthetics, and the dynamics of virality. The digital infrastructure privileges content that is emotionally charged and easily circulated. In this sense, the medium is not neutral — it reinforces the very logic that enables disinformation to destabilize the authority of structural terms like "racism," "justice," or "colonial legacy."

By analyzing this dispute through classification theory, disinformation studies, and media aesthetics, we can see how environmental racism is not simply contested semantically or ideologically — it is also contested affectively, visually, and infrastructurally. Disinformation here is not only a problem of truth but of epistemic authority — of who gets to define the terms through which injustice is seen and named. Kataguiri does not need to "disprove" Franco's claims to undermine them; he only needs to make them appear absurd, manipulative, or politically self-serving. This shifts the work of classification from reason to resonance, from policy to performance.

In sum, this case exemplifies how classification denial in digital spaces unfolds not only through contradiction but through cultural tactics that destabilize legitimacy itself. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond a binary of true versus false, and instead analyzing how narrative, emotion, and

platform affordances shape the very conditions under which public meaning and political possibility are constructed.

Final considerations

This paper has examined the narrative dispute surrounding the classification of environmental racism through the contrasting perspectives of Anielle Franco and Kim Kataguiri in Brazil. By analyzing their pronouncements in the context of Rio de Janeiro's extreme weather events and their disproportionate impact on historically marginalized communities, I have sought to illuminate the complex interplay between race, power, and environmental justice in digital political discourse.

Franco's narrative frames environmental racism as a structurally embedded injustice and calls for state accountability in redressing its effects. In contrast, Kataguiri seeks to delegitimize the concept entirely, attempting to reclassify it as ideological fiction rather than a meaningful analytical category. His approach reflects a broader effort to reinforce existing power structures by neutralizing racial and environmental critiques.

Disinformation narratives emerge as a key factor in this classificatory struggle. Kataguiri's use of humor, digital affordances, and ideological reframing illustrates how such strategies work not simply to deny facts but to destabilize the legitimacy of the concept itself. These performances rely on aesthetic, emotional, and participatory tactics that produce meaning through affective resonance and political alignment. Rather than aiming to correct or counter arguments, they foster public skepticism, disrupt consensus, and redirect attention away from structural causes of injustice.

To analyze this process, I have drawn on theoretical frameworks from the fields of race studies, environmental justice, media theory, and science and technology studies. Cheryl Harris's (1993) work on the interrelation of race and property, George Lipsitz's (2006) account of whiteness as structural advantage, and Vine Deloria Jr.'s (2003) emphasis on land as cultural and spiritual territory help explain how systemic inequalities are both materially enforced and symbolically maintained. Bowker and Star's (1999) theory of classification and its consequences sheds light on how epistemic authority and visibility are negotiated, particularly through what they term "practical politics." In the dispute between Franco and Kataguiri, these theoretical lenses reveal how classification itself becomes a site of ideological conflict and discursive power.

This paper contributes to the emerging field of disinformation studies by shifting attention from truth/falsity binaries to the narrative, affective, and classificatory work that shapes public discourse. It demonstrates how disinformation operates not only through factual distortion but also through rhetorical and platformed practices that mobilize distrust and polarize conceptual legitimacy. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the role of digital media affordances — such as algorithmic visibility, audiovisual compression, and meme logic — in enabling the circulation and uptake of these narratives. Understanding how disinformation functions as a classificatory and ideological strategy is essential to confronting its role in undermining environmental and racial justice.

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