

Ethnographic Notes from a War Zone: Surviving and Resisting

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"The State cannot fund extermination." Photo by *Correio da Bahia*, June 13, 2013

In Salvador, Bahia, the police's deadly violence inscribes race into space and, in doing so, produces the city's outskirts as a land in which the state's right to kill is given. A recent case helps to illustrate the police's violent, state-sponsored incursions. The Military Police killed at least 12 people and left 3 wounded on February 6, 2015. According to the police, the shooting happened around 4 a.m. when a group of about 30 men opened fire against the Special Police. The officers had received information that the group was planning to break into a bank branch. The Military Police found an abandoned vehicle during a patrol of the area, and to investigate the complaint, noticed that about 30 men were hiding in a marshland. The criminals opened fire against the patrol and the officers retaliated by injuring 15 men during the confrontation. The injured were transported to the Hospital Roberto Santos, where 12 of them died after being

admitted. However, the Cabula Massacre, as it became known, was much more complicated than the official version of the news media and the police would have us believe. Later investigations showed that police officers not only killed the 12 unarmed men but they also planned the attack as retaliation against drug traffickers who had refused to pay bribes to them. Federal investigations showed that the officers participating in the Cabula Massacre were part of a police-linked death squad. They planted evidence to incriminate the poor and predominantly black youth in Cabula. In fact, the Cabula Massacre is just another story of horror embedded in the Military Police's strategies to govern the social geographies of race and crime in Salvador.

The ways the police deal with the issues of race and violence in Salvador is quite explicit, yet it is hard to grasp at first

when we consider the fact that most of those police officers performing statehood daily are poor, and quite often black. To be a police officer in Bahia is an option for black men without options. There is evidence that often, black males are pushed to become part of the state repressive apparatus because the job market does not offer them many other possibilities. In that sense, they become agents of the state, carrying on a genocidal, white hegemonic project; this often makes it difficult for black activists to unmask and denounce the Brazilian police force and its practices as racially motivated. An ethnographic moment illustrates the precarious and complex work of race in informing policing practices in the city. Black police officers are increasingly serving as private guards after their official shift. They work for wealthy businessmen, who worry that poor black beggars will endanger their work. Police officers kill black youth in the favela during their official duty as officers, and they also kill them when off duty as private guards.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that the high rates of black male deaths, often perpetrated by the military police, have become significant enough to regard as genocide. Prisons throughout the country are overcrowded, as the Brazilian state has been investing heavily in the prison industrial complex and the mass incarceration of blacks as a solution to keep the good (read white) citizens of this country safe. Meanwhile, the recent trends of violent mob attacks on men and women (who are judged and lynched, instantly sentenced to death in the streets) have been rationalized by "specialists" as a collective manifestation of the population's frustration with the judicial system, which is supposedly slow and inefficient in punishing criminals. In the last two years, the Military Police killed 597 people in

Bahia, most of these deaths taking place in the extremely poor neighborhoods of Salvador.¹ And killings by the police are not the only factor of victimizations. According to Unesco's Map of Violence, Bahia is one of the leading states in violent death of black young men. In the last ten years, from 2002 to 2012, at least 25,000 people, mostly black young men, were killed in the city. In 2002, the homicide rate among blacks was 12.5 per 100,000 inhabitants. Among whites the rate was 4.5 per 100,000 inhabitants in Bahia, that is, the chances for a black to be a murder victim were 2.7 times higher than for a white.² Among black youth (15–24 years) the murder rate rises to 23 per 100,000. Among young whites the rate is 6.3 per 100,000. Violence is a leading cause of death among adolescents. In Salvador, between 2000 and 2004, of the total of 2,409 people murdered in Salvador, 2,076 were black or brown, 20 were of another color, and 313 were not identified.³ The spatial distribution of violent deaths in Salvador reveals a pattern that strongly correlates poverty, race, and homicidal violence. With no exception, the top five most violent neighborhoods in the last four years are predominantly black and poor districts of the south side of the city.

The population in these areas is an average of 90 percent black, 7 percent white, and 3 percent other or unidentified. What this data suggests is that, although Salvador is portrayed as a violent city in which anyone would be in danger, it is the black body that poses a permanent threat to the harmony of the city. Racial geographies are created and delineated by socioeconomic disparities as much as by racialized police terror, which means the police inscribe racial meanings in the space and by doing so create “black” spaces. After all, “police brutality is the concrete result of how race and urban space are crystallized

in the dominant representation.”⁴ The racialization of urban space is fed by the racialization of fear in the city. In such geographies, state authorities argue that the police deploy a tough approach on crime because in these areas “criminality is more intense.” That is a justification that cancels the fact that the police finds more “crimes” in black spaces because the police “looks for” more crime in black spaces. Police practices are also informed/energized by corporate news. News media is particularly efficient in making a cognitive transaction between blackness, criminality, and violence and some particular geographies of Salvador. For many years I have had the daily habit of standing in front of newspaper stands to read the headlines of all the newspapers and purchase some, but mostly analyze which racial groups are portrayed where, and what their portrayal is associated with.

A quick look at the front-page news and images of Salvador's cheap local tabloids is enough to illustrate the cognitive association between blackness and violence in the news. On that particular day, the cover featured several black women. The headlines read “Contabilidade do mal: Mulherada boa de número” (Evil accounting: A bunch of women [who are] good with numbers). I looked at the faces of those five black middle-aged women whose mug shots were shown as evidence of a drug bust in the low-income community in Camaçari and Dias D'Ávila, in the outskirts of Salvador. The language used to describe their circumstances carried a mocking tone, explaining their roles in the drug gang as those who looked after the weapons and were in charge of the finances. The cover featured a particularly demeaning pun, which stated that after the drug bust they now would “have accounting over the time wasted behind bars.”

In fact, I had already seen a live TV broadcast of the moment these women were arrested along their male counterparts the night before. The TV host was particularly scornful in his narrative of the reasons why those women had been arrested. “What a shame!” he uttered. “Look at them, you could never tell that behind that innocent housewife façade there were drug dealers!” The mockery and condemnation of their “misconduct” continued for a several minutes. Black criminalization has become part of everyday life in Brazilian media. These TV hosts become those who provide a racist and twisted analysis of black poverty in the country, condoning police brutality against the so-called criminals. They even encouraged the populace to take measures in their own hands by punishing with severe beatings those who are caught “red-handed” engaging in illicit activities. Does the opening epigraph still hold any strength at this point? What does the portrayal of Salvador as a racial utopia conceal/reveal about the city's regime of racial domination?

Very often, the local tabloid *Massa, feito do seu jeito* (*Massa, crafted your way*)⁵ features black men and women and their involvement with the underground economy of illegal substances and violence. Black people are portrayed bleeding, handcuffed, and being arrested, and their mug shots abound. The front page is crowded with images and big colorful captions to attract the reader's attention. Racialized narratives about the city's geography are cover stories in these tabloids, in which low-income black communities are always associated with criminality, rampant violence, immorality, unlawfulness, gang warfare, drug dealers, crack heads, and all sorts of condemnable behaviors. Ultimately, these pathologized scripts serve to justify or endorse violent

police incursions that often result in black people, particularly young black males, being summarily executed. For young black males, the stereotypes about black criminality have particularly deadly consequences, and my ethnographic data evinces the anxiety of simply exercising the right to exist while black in the “world of carnival.” Scholar Patricia Hill Collins has shown how black bodies (and particularly black women’s bodies) are caged into a signifying system of representation in which they are always/already criminal. These “controlling images,” she argues, justify political domination at large and help to consolidate the ideas that black women are bad mothers and promiscuous and that black men are natural-born criminals.⁶ In Salvador, this racialized regime of representations feeds and gives justification to the genocidal erasure of black bodies from the city.

Yet, in the face of disheartening state inflicted symbolic and physical violence, we resist. I had the opportunity of participating in a meeting organized by several black organizations that joined forces to demand that the police officers involved in the Cabula Massacre be charged for those cold-blooded executions. A young black woman drew my attention when she provided incisive comments when confronting the police high commander in chief in a room full of police officers and black protesters. Amid the chaos and the tense environment filled by many conflicting voices and interests, Leila shouted at the officers, asking an apparently naïve yet incisive question: “Do you know the names of the dead?” She was referring to the 12 young men assassinated by the police days before. Leila’s question held not only an interpellation of a racist state apparatus and its deadly police forces, but also an assertion that those patterns of rendering blacks nameless, and black

death a mundane occurrence, were too familiar to her and to us black protesters. In other words, it was an excruciatingly painful assertion of black intimacy with death. Leila’s assertiveness brings forth the too familiar face of black suffering and white terror, an urgent matter that is at the core of black protests in Salvador. Her challenging utterance points out to the frustrations of black organizations in efforts to make their voices and demands heard. That means that in order to understand contemporary black social movements in Salvador, one has to understand what kind of forces blacks are responding to and what kind of movement is possible in the face of the constrained terrains of black resistance.

Notes

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¹ Secretaria de Segurança da Bahia, Estatísticas. Available at: http://www.ssp.ba.gov.br/arquivos/File/Estatistica_2015/01ESTADOMU_NICIPIO2015.pdf (accessed March 12, 2017).

² Unesco, *Mapa da Violência*, Brasília, 2003.

³ Secretaria de Segurança da Bahia, Estatísticas. Available at: http://www.ssp.ba.gov.br/arquivos/File/Estatistica_2015/01ESTADOMU_NICIPIO2015.pdf (accessed March 12, 2017).

⁴ João H. Costa Vargas, “Apartheid brasileiro: Raça e segregação residencial no Rio de Janeiro,” *Revista de Antropologia* 48, no. 1 (2005): 35.

⁵ *Massa* – “cool,” also meaning made for the masses.

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004). ■