

FORUM

F*ck the Police!

Antiblack statecraft, the myth of cops' fragility, and the fierce urgency of an insurgent anthropology of policing

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In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.

—Martin Luther King, March on Washington, 1963

On the morning of 6 May 2021, the military police invaded the favela of Jacarezinho, one of Rio de Janeiro's slums, and killed 28 people during a military operation tellingly named Operation Exceptis. Photos of dead bodies in the alleys of the favela and denunciations of extrajudicial executions of individuals who had already surrendered circulated widely on the internet. Jacarezinho adds to a troubling record of police killings that includes and goes far beyond the 1992 Massacre of Carandiru, when 111 prisoners were slaughtered by São Paulo's police during a prison riot, and the equally infamous 2006 Crimes of May, when at least six hundred civilians were killed within the span of one week (Mães de Maio 2019). While human rights organizations denounced the Jacarezinho massacre for what it was, the police argued that "the only execution that took place was that of the police, unfortunately. The other deaths that happened were those of traffickers who attacked the lives of policemen and were neutralized" (Betim

2021). On a social media network, President Jair Bolsonaro praised "all the warriors who risk their lives in the daily mission to protect the good people," and lamented that instead of honoring the life of the officer killed during the operation, human rights activists were treating "criminals who steal, kill, and destroy families" (Veja 2021) as innocent victims.

Bolsonaro's Manichaeic narrative of police victimization is old wine in new bottles. Still, it has gained new traction under his conservative, evangelical, and military-political formation. The mythology of police victimization has helped him to galvanize popular support around the fictional image of defenseless and patriotic officers (or soldiers like himself), ready to put their lives on the line to protect citizens and save the country. The "Blue lives matter" mantra of police fragility is indeed a powerful one, mobilized by right-wing politicians and endorsed by police unions, evangelical groups, and even marginalized communities worldwide.



An inevitable parallel can be drawn with France,¹ for instance, where police unions have become counter-protesters in response to the yellow vests' incisive demonstrations against President Emmanuel Macron's neoliberal reforms. The rhetoric of the police as "the symbol and face of France" has been mobilized in attempts to connect the recent killings of two officers to public protests against state delinquency and pro-economic justice. Isolated attacks on police have been reframed as an attack on the core values of the French Republic and instrumentalized as an opportunity to increase police power through newly introduced, all-encompassing home security and anti-terrorism legislation that, among other things, "protects" police against the "psychological and physical harm" of filming police action (BBC 2021). The Alliance police union has even deployed a sociological analysis to understanding violence against cops. It contends that police lethality is lower than ever before, while exaggerating the dangers of being attacked during neighborhood patrols. Violence against cops, it is argued, has evolved into a "general low-level aggression." A spokesman for the police union says that "today, it's not [just] about being killed, it's more that it's a daily thing to be attacked." Police representative Stanislas Gaudon is also quoted in the same BBC interview, lamenting that "when we look at how many weapons we seized [from demonstrators], it's clear that a lot of people didn't really come to protest, but to kill cops" (ibid.).

Whether perceived or actual, the threat of victimization does exist. Still, even in Brazil, where 343 officers were killed in 2018 alone (FBSP 2019)—an extremely high number when compared with the United States, where 181 law enforcement agents died in the same year (NLEOM2020), and France, with an average of 10 deaths yearly (Associated Press 2021)—this is a profession that, contrary to popular belief, has very low lethality rates worldwide. While assaults on and killings of law enforcement officers do occur, this risk is part and parcel of the work they perform. In fact, it is commonsensical and widely accepted among scholars

of policing that their work grants them special protection not enjoyed by any other civilian occupation. To raise a hand against a police officer is an aggravated felony, quite often with lethal consequences to entire communities.

In Brazil, when an officer is killed, dozens of poor and predominantly Black youths are killed in revenge raids. Human rights organizations denounced the bloody operation in Jacarezinho as a vengeful response to the death of the officer whose burial the day after was marked by outbursts of applause and chanting of "it was not in vain" (Campbell 2021). Police even deploy terror to pressure politicians to grant them better labor conditions. Indeed, spreading terror has been an "efficient" police strategy to gain political leverage. For instance, repeating a pattern that has become increasingly common in Brazil, in February 2020, days before carnival, the Military Police of Ceará went on strike. Although the direct involvement of striking officers in the slaughter is the object of an ongoing investigation, there were several denunciations of police-linked death squads and hooded men in police patrols terrorizing the population. Coincidentally or not, at least two hundred individuals were killed within the span of one week (Jucá 2020; Adorno 2020).² To no avail, the leftist governor Camilo Santana denounced these uses of terror as a tactic to bring the government to its knees. Widespread denunciations of human rights violations by on duty and off-duty officers, from torture to assassinations, are consistently met with indifference in a country where nearly thirty thousand individuals were killed by the police within the last six years (2015–2020), of which 99 percent were male favela residents and 75 percent were Black youth (G1 2021).

In the following article, I focus not so much on the paradigmatic victims of police terror in Brazil, but instead on the critical role that urban ethnographers can play in demystifying the "war on police" and advancing an insurgent intellectual movement that pushes toward police abolition in the contemporary world. Brazil is the departure point of analysis for obvious reasons. As the country with the highest rates of civilians

killed by the police, it has seen a proliferation of anthropological studies on police violence and police culture within the last few decades. Not only have anthropologists dedicated increasing attention to the challenges and possibilities of democratic policing, but officers themselves have become ethnographers—or at least relied on some of ethnography’s techniques—in their attempts to provide “privileged” accounts of police praxis (e.g., França 2019; Muniz and Silva 2010; Storani 2008).

This commentary is neither a literature review of the burgeoning field of police studies in Brazil (for an overview, see Muniz et al. 2018; Aquino and Hirata 2018) nor an overview of the incredible international record of critical ethnographies of policing. I also do not intend to single out a particular work or even to suggest that the field of anthropology of policing overlooks the critiques presented below. Less ambitious and pretentious than that, this is a Black-centered call for new directions in the study of policing, amid an ongoing sanitizing tactic of promoting policing as peacemaking—and officers as endangered peacemakers—all while enduring police terror enforces domestic and global coloniality. What is the role of anthropology in this supranational regime of security? Crucially, as a global project, the practice of anthropology—and police fieldwork in particular (Steinberg 2020)—cannot be dissociated from the geopolitics of policing as empire-making. Enduring colonialism is configured and continuously reinforced by a military-university complex entailing army invasion, humanitarian aid and academic extractivism. The massacre of young people for being outside during government-imposed COVID-19 curfew hours in Nairobi (Kimari 2020), the daily harassment of North African migrants in Paris’s banlieues (Beaman 2020), the Zionist colonization, militarization, and erasure of Palestine (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud 2014), the EU’s necropolitical regime of migration in the Mediterranean Sea (Presti 2019), preemptive policing strategies against Arab-origin migrants in Sydney’s southwest (McElhone 2017), or the police’s raids in the shantytowns of São Paulo

(Alves 2014a)—all these “field sites” of military and/or intellectual operation stand as porous and overlapping colonial “zones of nonbeing” (Fanon 1967), enforced by men and women in uniform to protect the global zone of being. Racial apartheid enforced by state terror—in the name of global stability and homeland security—blurs geo-ontological boundaries between Global North and Global South and reasserts the afterlife of colonialism (James and Alves 2018; Keenan 2008; Susser 2020).³

How should anthropologists objectively treat police innocence and victimhood narratives without participating in this ongoing coloniality? What does it mean to write from these zones of death and social suffering? If, as Anna Souhami forcefully argues, “the dynamics of police culture [ethnographers] so powerfully critic[s] are reflected in the construction of the ethnographic process” (2019: 207), how should we ethically write about police victimization without (even if involuntarily) endorsing the trope of cops’ fragility? What does the narrative of victimization engender? Finally, what should be the place of anthropology of policing in the urgent call of Black activists to defend the dead? While studying the police (and any mainstream institution) does not necessarily lead to uncritical alignment to power, the antiblack animus of policing makes it extraordinarily challenging and politically compromising for anthropologists to work with the police and simultaneously engage with social movements’ critiques of policing-as-antiblackness (Charlie Hale, personal communication). That is to say, the anthropology of policing, even when highly critical of policing structures, seems to underscore a liberal reform paradigm that goes against what the Black paradigmatic victims of police terror demand: defunding, dismantling, and abolishing the police state.

The myth of police fragility

There is a scene in Melina Matsoukas and Lena Waithe’s 2019 movie *Queen and Slim* that is

worth recuperating here. The young couple is going on their first date when a white cop pulls them over. The minor traffic violation ends with Slim (Daniel Kaluuya) taking the cop's gun and shooting him dead in self-defense when the officer fires his gun against Queen (Jodie Turner). Slim wants to turn himself in, but Queen (a lawyer) reminds him that their Blackness has already sealed their destiny. The "cop-killers" go on the run through the deep South, hoping to reach Cuba. As the video of the killing goes viral, Queen and Slim's story mobilizes other African Americans, and images of Black Lives Matter protests overlap with their fugitive endeavor. The scene that strikes me features Junior, a Black boy in the foreground, leading a demonstration. With fists in the air, he shouts, "Let them go!" When an officer tries to stop him, he pulls the officer's gun and shoots the officer dead.

One may speculate: What would lead someone to such an act of violence? Perhaps the painful consciousness of one's place in the antiblack regime of law? Perhaps the desperate attempt, within the context of 'fugitive justice,' to stop the "grinding machine of human flesh" that policing represents?⁴ The film and that scene in particular aroused heated debate on the nature and scope of Black resistance against police violence in the Black Lives Matter era. Lena Waithe has called the movie "a meditation on black life in America" (King 2019). However, where the filmmakers gave cinematic representation to an all-too-familiar "state of captivity" (Wilderson 2018: 58), some received the movie as a "war on cops," while others blamed it for "deepening the divide" and "going too far left in its implications in that black people condone, protect and are inspired by reciprocating violence against police as a result of their experiences with law enforcement" (Vaughn 2019).

The "war-on-cops" rhetoric and its attendant practices in the "Blue Lives Matter" movement in the United States, and its parallel (albeit diffuse) pro-cop movement in Brazil, can be read as what legal scholar Frank Rudy Cooper calls, after Robin DiAngelo (2018), "the myth of cop fragility." He contends that such mythology

draws a false equivalence between "blue lives" and "black lives" by "reposition[ing] police officers, and whites in general, as the new victims" of racism (Cooper 2020: 654). In that sense, "white backlash better explains Blue Lives Matter's self-defense perspective than does the vulnerability of police officers to attack" (ibid.: 655). By hijacking the meanings of the Black struggle for life, Cooper contends, the police also cannibalize the terms of the debate.

This, in turn, seems to resonate in academia's ambivalence (unwillingness?) in dealing with the cruelty of police power. Whereas some scholars lay bare the impossibility of freeing justice from its coloniality (e.g., Best and Hartman 2005; Flauzina and Pires 2020; McDowell and Fernandez 2018; Segato 2007), we see a proliferation of works on police reform, or, in the case of global anthropology of policing, an investment in cops as a new subject of inquiry whose violent work must be understood in relation to broad social norms and power dynamics. I have nothing against the selection of cops as ethnographic subjects, and I am not suggesting that such an engagement disregards professional ethics. Indeed, as Vinicius Esperança (2015)'s work with the Brazilian army and police force within the context of 'pacification' of Rio's favela illustrates, such a critical and politically committed selection has been crucial not only to interrogate police ethnography but also to illuminate social processes that otherwise would continue to remain obscure.

In fact, recent groundbreaking ethnographies of policing (I am consciously grouping scholars from distinct disciplines whose work employs ethnography as its primary methodology) have shed light on how officers justify their work as habitus—"just doing their job"—which reflects a socially shared belief in torture and killings as a form of ordering the chaotic social world. In racialized geographies such as Paris's "banlieues," Los Angeles's "ghettos," or Brazil's "favelas," these critical ethnographies show that officers enforce sociospatial imaginaries of belonging, entitlement, and justice (Denyer-Willis 2015; Fassin 2013; Garmany 2014; Roussell and Gascón

2014). Officers also perform a peculiar form of order-making within terrains contested by drug-traffickers, paramilitarism, power-brokers, Evangelical groups, NGOs, and so on (e.g., Arias 2006; Penglase 2014; Larkins 2015; Salem and Bertelsen 2020). Other interventions have accounted for how police negotiate their everyday encounters with institutional violence and public discredit. Officers are forcefully portrayed as political actors whose practices, emotions, and subjectivities echo broader systems of morals (Pauschinger 2020; Bueno and Willis 2019; see also Jauregui 2014). A crucial contribution highlights the role of police and policing in producing modes of “sociability” and rationales of governance (Karpiak 2010; Sclofsky 2016; Muniz and Albernaz 2017). Likewise, a Foucauldian-inspired anthropological inquiry has enabled an understanding of policing as a “productive tool” for securing the territorial boundaries of the polis and the legal boundaries of citizenship (e.g., Alves 2014b; Collins 2014; Garmany 2014).

Jeffrey Martin’s most recent contribution has proposed new directions in the subfield of anthropology of policing by challenging Weberian notions of police as the ultimate expression of sovereign power and instead highlighting its biopolitical dimension. His rather culturalist perspective emphasizes the police’s democratic potential to promote peace through non-repressive, performative power (see Martin 2020; also the debates in the same publication). Finally, there is the call for “publicity, practicality and epistemic solidarity” among anthropologists, law enforcement agencies, and larger publics to respond to the disciplinary invitation for political engagement with pressing problems of corruption and violence (Mutsaers et al. 2015: 788).

These and many other works (too many to be listed in a commentary note) reflect an important anthropological contribution to demystifying this troubling institution and to shedding light on the subjectivity of its agents. In the last decade or so, it has become a consensus in the field—regardless of one’s theoretical perspective—that policing is much more than uniformed personnel patrolling the streets. By making eth-

nographically visible that which policing does and produces, ethnographers have provided insightful understandings of mundane forms of order-making, statecraft, and governance (see Karpiak and Garriott 2018; Martin 2018; and Steinberg 2020 for an overview).

My intervention does not go against these contributions that I loosely locate within the field of “ethnographies of police.” Without disregarding their highly critical approach, my concern here is with what anthropology does and what it produces when giving cops more voice and space in these troubling times, when cities are on fire in response to new surges in antiblack police terror. In their edited volume, *The Anthropology of Police*, editors Kevin Karpiak and William Garriott ask the crucial questions: “What are the ethical and political stakes of trying to humanize the police? Are there any grounds on which one could even justify an approach that took up such a project of humanization over and against one centered on cataloging, critiquing, and decrying police-perpetuated harms?” (2018: 6–7). The authors answer this fundamental question by calling for the study of police as both a way to challenge the discipline’s trend to “study up” and as an attempt to understand contemporary notions of humanness embedded in policing and security practices. To them, one cannot understand the world and what it means to be human without understanding the work of police (*ibid.*: 8).

In this sense, it is usually argued, the risk pays off: when attentive to one’s own positionality, critical ethnographies of policing can shed light on important issues such as the culture of militarism, the corrosion of democracy, and the normalization of violence. I agree. In my work, in São Paulo, Brazil, and Cali, Colombia, fragmented ethnographic encounters with police officers (usually themselves from the lowest social stratum of the society they supposedly serve and protect) have given me a first-hand understanding of how officers negotiate the apparently contradictory approaches of defending the killings of “criminals,” enthusiastically supporting a “new” human rights-oriented commu-

nity police, energetically detaching themselves from the “bad cops,” and embracing a hyper-militaristic crusade to “save” heteropatriarchal family and Christian values (see also Amar 2013).

While doing ethnography with and of police does not necessarily stand in contradiction to the ethics and promises of anthropology aimed at shedding light on human problems—something I have no doubt ethnographers of police embrace as a political project—and while we should suspend assumptions that all anthropologists must adhere to the decolonial, militant, and activist theoretical-methodological orientation that has shifted the grounds of the discipline within the last three decades or so (Hale 2008; Harrison 1992), doing research within the current “crisis” of policing requires one to face even tougher ethical questions on the troubling position of witnessing the perpetration of violence and the dangerous humanization of police work. This challenge is even more pronounced for those “native” anthropologists whose gender or racial identity (or both) grant them privileged access (see Esperança 2015; Kraska 1996) or render them a potential target of policing when doing fieldwork (Medeiros 2019; Souhami 2019).

In my case, my ethnography was politically aligned with activists and empathic with individuals embracing outlawed forms of resistance against police terror. Still, I was constantly asked which side I was on. For instance, not to mince words, a young Black man, who by the time of my research in the favelas of São Paulo was making a living in what he refers to as “the world of crime,” told me I was an asshole for being “too straight, too naïve, too afraid to die.” In Cali, Colombia, although I was considered “not kidnappable”—as a member of a local gang laughed and joked about, perhaps demarking the difference between my physical appearance as a “brown” Black person and those of other foreign researchers usually from the Global North—at times I was, awkwardly enough, associated with the mestizo middle class and its regime of morality, which called for state violence against Black youth seen as the scapegoat of the city’s astonishing levels of violence.

Considering the field of power in which our ethnographies are done (attending or mediating bureaucratic meetings between victims and state officials, riding around in the backseat of a patrol, or witnessing a raid in the shantytown), the critical, humanist, and well-intentioned anthropologist gives stability and normalcy—perhaps mostly, but not only, through safe, flat writing—to the geographic and ontological worlds that police create. If we are to seriously engage with the undeniable fact that we live the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2008), how might the practice of anthropology challenge the logic of plantation beyond self-criticism and the promoting of diversity that has now been incorporated even by mainstream departments worldwide?

Thus, my contention here is not so much that we should stop studying police, but rather that we should disengage from a seductive analysis of power that, while compelling in theoretical terms and “thick” ethnographic description, may involuntarily give voice to unethical power structures personified by the police. Following Frank Wilderson’s assertion that police terror “is an ongoing tactic of human renewal . . . a tactic to secure humanity’s place” (2018: 48),⁵ one should ask what such an anthropological project of humanization entails. If we do not want our work to end up fueling and corroborating the skepticism over a discipline with an ugly history of complicity with oppressive power, then it is about time for an unapologetic “f*ck the police!” in studies of policing.

Maroon anthropology

On 13 May, the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Brazil, thousands gathered in downtown São Paulo to protest against the Jacarezinho massacre that had occurred a few days earlier. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic that had claimed half a million lives, we marched the streets surrounded by a cordon of police, some in military gear, armed with rifles and at some point flanked by the “big skull,” as it is known—the feared armored vehicle used in

police raids. In defiance, we walked the streets shouting at the top of our lungs: “não acabou, tem que acabar, queremos o fim da polícia militar [it is not over, it has to end. We want the end of the military police].” A demonstrator carried a banner remembering Marielle Franco’s question. Days before she was assassinated, she asked: “How many will have to die before this war is over?” Activists turned on a speaker to denounce police terror and to interrogate 13 May as “fake abolition,” while others laid out the current conditions of captivity that have replaced the whip: spatial segregation, hunger, police terror. Turmoil was initiated among demonstrators on the sidewalk. Someone had stopped to give a flower to an officer, generating a flurry of rage from a group of us, who shouted “polícia assassina [murderous cops].” The voice of Bia, a Black trans woman, echoed from the speaker. She denounced the daily killings of Black trans people as part of the concerted and ongoing antiblack genocide in Brazil and the African diaspora. According to her, Jacarezinho and ordinary antiblack terror is a white response to Black people’s refusal to die. “We decided to resist, to stay alive.” She ended her intervention by bursting out “F*ck it” to the reformist approach to police terror and emphasizing the urgency to unapologetically embrace her socio-ontological position—as a Black trans person whose deviant body demarks a permanent position outside the regime of legality—in the asymmetric war between the Black population and the Brazilian state. In an explosion of fury that may be better described as a desperate call for action, she shouted, “they are killing us with clubs in the streets, porra! Is time to cut the crap and embrace disorder, porra [F*ck!], I’m the disorder, goddamn it!” She tore her notes and threw them at the crowd.

Bia’s call, amid astonishing death tolls caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and police and vigilante group killings, is a renewed invitation for an “anthropology of liberation” that takes the deadly and decisive struggle of decolonization seriously. Writing in Faye Harrison’s now-thirty-years-old seminal collection *Decoloniz-*

ing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation, Ted Gordon urged anthropologists to embrace a disciplinary practice that not only refuses to serve the oppressor but also “actively serves [the interests of] the oppressed” (1992: 155). According to Gordon, anthropology’s debt to the oppressed cannot be paid if not through a radical scholarly praxis that weaponizes methods and theories in the service of what he calls “anthropology of liberation.”

Following in the footsteps of this radical tradition, anthropologist Savannah Shange urges anthropologists to apply “the tools of our trade to the pursuit of liberation, and [to enact] the practice of willful defiance in the afterlife of slavery” (2019: 159). Abolitionist anthropology responds to scholars’ law-abiding investment in policing—what she calls carceral progressivism—by refusing the promises of the liberal state and liberal academia (ibid.: 39–42). Although not enough, the imperative “F*ck the Police!” could be another way of engaging with Shange’s invitation to make space for freedom in our writing and our practices. As a first step, it confronts us to turn academic knowledge into insurgent praxis. To get abruptly to the point, individuals strangulated by knee-to-neck asphyxia, skulls broken by police boots, wounded bodies calculatedly left agonizing in the streets or tied to police patrols and dragged through the streets, rapes, disappearances, and continued extortion ask anthropologists to work against the police, not with them. The current “crisis” may be an opportunity to change gears.

Analyzing the violent demonstrations in Ferguson triggered by the killing of Michael Brown, legal scholar Christy Lopez recuperates Dr. Martin Luther King’s prophetic words of 1963 during his march on Washington to argue that the “outraged public response” can be a catalyst for (radical?) change. As she contends, “an acute policing crisis can bring to the forefront the “fierce urgency of now” (2021: 81–82). This forced awakening is what is needed in anthropology. Let’s be honest: as a discipline, we have failed to side with the victims of police terrorism beyond sit-in moments at conferences, open

letters, creatively designed syllabi, or academic journal articles such as this very one. Anthropologists seem to be too invested in the economy of respectability that grants us access to institutional power “to engage anthropology as a practice of abolition” (Shange 2019: 10).

Nothing can be more illustrative of such an abysmal dissonance with this call than the political lexicon we use to describe police terrorism itself—it is telling that the word “terror” is barely articulated in the field of anthropology of police—and people’s call to “burn it down and end the f*cking world.” With one fist in the air and a rocket in the other hand, demonstrators have argued again and again that “Brazil is an open-grave,” that “the US is a plantation,” that “police are the new slave-catcher[s],” and that “they have robbed us [of] everything including our fear.” And while the victims of state terror are dragged into the battlefield—cities turned into a smoking battleground, police stations stormed, and patrols set on fire are responses to the ordinary antiblack wars—what has anthropology got to offer beyond well-crafted texts, sanitized analyses of the moment, and good intentions to decolonize the discipline? We lack rage! Perhaps we do so not only because we consciously or unconsciously believe in saving police from itself, but because *we also benefit from the work police terror does to make the polis, in its ideological and material foundations, a democratic experiment and a viable police spatiality for white civil life* (see Martinot and Sexton 2003; Rodriguez, 2006).

While embracing sanitized rage may grant us tenure and respectability, the fierce urgency of now asks us to do more than sympathy and pity. Anthropologists need to put institutional resources, knowledge, and our bodies on the line. Like police, and unlike workers in general, tenured scholars (including anthropologists) face very low risk in performing their work. Police perform what Micol Seigel (2018) forcefully calls “violence work.” They are professionals that essentially deliver violence represented as a public good. Anthropologists, I would argue, are “violence workers” not only in performing the

enduring colonial project of othering, but also when taking a “reformist,” “neutral,” or distant stance on social movements that demand radical changes. Even worse, in giving voice to police based on a pretentious technicality of “just” collecting data, anthropology ends up helping to quell that struggle.

To be fair, producing low-intensity counterinsurgency knowledge that serves the purpose of domination is a scholarly practice that goes much beyond our discipline; in neoliberal academia, the “professional academic” is a state agent, and the university is a strategic place for the counterinsurgent “war to the commitment to war” (Harney and Moten, 2013: 40). Within the context of Black Lives Matter, for instance, white and nonblack scholars usually (unintentionally) promote vigilante justice that attempts to manage Black anger and to control the scope of radical change in the name of self-preservation (Bedecarré 2018). For the well-intentioned anthropologists, the nature of the violence performed by ethnographers of policing may differ in degree and scope from police terror, but, as Hortense Spillers would remind us in a much broader context, “we might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly kill us” (Spillers 1987: 68).

To be coherent with the discipline’s (incomplete) decolonizing turn, the subfield of anthropology of police should have no ambiguity in regarding police “violence” as terror, have no doubts as to which lives are in peril in these terroristic policing practices, and refuse the false promises of reforming this colonial institution. For ethnographers, refusing to perform “violence work” may require disloyalty to the state—including rejecting the self-policing required by corporate academia—and instead, embracing the position of an insurgent subject whose “coherence [is] shaped by political literacy emanating from communities confronting crisis and conflict” (see James and Gordon 2008: 371).⁶

I am not entirely sure how an insurgent anthropology of police would look. It requires an exercise of political imagination and radical

praxis that this commentary fails to deliver. Still, if the promise of studying the police has been to shade light on its rationales, one hopes that shifting gears will enable us to weaponize this cumulative knowledge in the project of facing the monster. While none of us has illusions about the work to be done toward true abolition, a departure point would be the refusal to legitimize, “humanize,” and promote the reforming of the police, not to mention avoiding the temptation to equate cops’ (real) vulnerability to violence with the (mundane) terror Black people face at their hands. Ultimately, those of us doing ethnography in collaboration with men and women in uniform ought to ask ourselves how to express empathy with and mourn the lives of “violence workers”—since as ethnographers, we develop emotional bonds to our interlocutors even if critical of their behaviors—and remain critical of the regime of law that necessitates and legitimizes the evisceration of Black lives by blue lives. Can one attend to the humanistic demand for all lives’ grievability while also being attentive to the antiblackness that makes humanity possible? Put another way, if cops’ lives—insofar as their identity is attached to the (state) terrorism they structurally perform—are an ultimate expression of state livingness, then how do we grieve blue lives without sanctioning the police state?

It is beyond this commentary note to reflect on the possibilities to disentangle policing from the Westphalian conception of sovereign power (Martin 2020).⁷ Nor is there space for theorizing the multiple ways in which the state comes into being as a mundane practice of domination anthropomorphized and performed by many political agents (Kurtz 2006; Vianna and Freitas 2011). It is enough to say that, at least in the context outlined here, statecraft is antiblackcraft, and even in societies with different colonial trajectories, policeable bodies and places are first and foremost racialized as non-white or (closer to) Black. In my ethnographic context, I quickly learned, for instance, that a white or mestizo person that has fallen into disgrace and lives in the hyper-policed shantytowns of Cali,

Colombia, is someone who “le tocó una vida de negro [ended up living a black life].” What does this normalized (economic and ontological) dispossession reveal and/or cancel about broader police projects?

Statecraft-as-antiblackcraft explains why it is in the terrain of sovereignty that one has to situate the work of policing. As Seigel and others have shown, one of the most important realizations of state violence is the mystification of police work as civilian as opposed to military labor. The police, the myth goes, works under the register of citizenship to protect and serve civil society. Still, both police and the military are one and the same. The field in which police operate is a military one that works effectively and precisely to deploy terror in a sanitized and legitimate way (Seigel 2018; see also James 1996; Kraska 2007).

This is not a peripheral point. One has only to consider the ways that Black people encounter officers in the streets as soldiers and experience policing as terror (again, asphyxiated with the knee on the neck, dragged into the streets, dismembered, and disappeared) in opposition to the contingent violence experienced by white victims of cops’ aggression (Alves and Vargas 2017; Wilderson 2018) or to cops’ vulnerability, inherent to their profession. And yet, if the logic of enmity⁸ is what sustains the enduring anti-black regime of terror enforced by police, from the point of view of its paradigmatic enemy, reforming the police is absurd, and praising blue lives is insane.

How might anthropologists challenge the asymmetric positionality of terrified police lives and always already terrifying Black enemies? When one officer dies, it is a labor accident. When an officer kills, it is part of their labor in performing state sovereignty. The degrees, causality, and likelihood matter here. Even in Brazil, where the number of officers killed is extremely high, police lives are not as in peril as conservative pundits want us to believe. The lives of those cops eventually killed “in service” are weaponized forms of life that predict the death of Black enemies. Thus, police and their victims

belong to two different registers, and if there is an ethical issue in relativizing any death—an approach I firmly refuse—there is equal or even greater risk in lumping together state delinquency and retaliatory violence by its victims. There is no equivalence between blue lives and Black lives, and even if the call for equivalence is the order of the day in the liberal sensibility that “all lives matter,” it is not the job of anthropology to reconcile these two positions. It is in the spirit of anthropology’s moral and political commitment to the oppressed—a commitment that, while empathic with the powerless, is also highly critical of the shortcomings and contradictions of decolonial struggles—that we should insurgе against this false equivalency.

Based on her work with activists in the South African liberation movement, Nancy Scheper-Hughes asks, “what makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?” (1995: 411). The author deals with this question by highlighting the challenges of not relativizing the violence of the oppressed, and yet positioning one’s fieldwork as a site of political struggle against systems of oppression. She compares the anthropologist as a “fearless spectator” (a neutral and objective eye) and a witness (the anthropologist as a “*companheira*”). The latter is positioned “inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being” and is “accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations” (ibid.: 419).

If we consider the fierce urgency of responding to antiblack police terror as a demand to which scholars committed to social and racial justice cannot refuse to attend, how do we respond to this call beyond our writings, and yet without being misunderstood as inciters of violence against the police? Although insurgent anthropology should learn from different historical and ethnographic contexts in which retaliatory violence has been deployed as one

legitimate tool to counteract systems of racial domination (Cobb 2014; Umoja 2013; Abufarha 2009), my critique here is obviously not an argument for embracing violence against cops as the way out of the current crisis of policing. I am also not turning a blind eye to the range of political possibilities that militant and activist anthropologists already embrace as “negative-workers,” public intellectuals, or “outraged” self-ethnographers, to advocate for the powerless (e.g., Mullings 2015; Ralph 2020; Rocha 2018; Scheper-Hughes 1995).⁹ Rather, informed by Black activists’ endless efforts to call attention to the unspeakable horrors of state violence in places like Brazil, I perhaps pretentiously, invite anthropologists to rebel by changing the terms of ethnographic engagement with the police and thus by questioning our (and our discipline’s) loyalty to the antiblack regime of law. If we are “too straight, too naïve, too afraid to die”—as my interlocutors in the world of crime labeled me—to join the streets, then at least our methodological choices and writing techniques should honor the lives lost by state terror.

Thus, f*ck the police! is not a rhetorical device but an invitation to seriously engage with the desperate calls that Dr. King, Bia, and so many others have made: this is a time for vigorous and positive action! Attending to their calls, on their terms, would require deep scrutiny of how anthropology participates in antiblackness as a shared and obliquitous social practice (see Vargas 2018). It also requires us to consider how antiblackness quite often renders legal attempts to redress police terror of little account, and what resisting police terror means to those whose killings resist legal legibility as victims in the first place. What does the anthropological project of humanizing the police mean to those ontologically placed outside humanity? For those like Bia, the Black trans woman in downtown São Paulo, whose marked bodies make Queen and Slim’s subject position—as new runaway slaves—very familiar and intimate, the answer is quite straightforward. Fuck the goddamn police!

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Notes

1. I thank editor Don Kalb for calling my attention to these similarities.
2. Although prohibited in the Brazilian constitution, strikes by the police have been increasingly common within the last couple of years. Its deadly consequences is almost never further investigated although, abound denounces of police deployment of assassination as a tactic of political pressure (see O Globo, 2012) and De Souza's (2016) ethnographic description on police strike in Salvador/Bahia.
3. This may be a dimension of Denise Ferreira da Silva (2015)'s forceful conceptualization of “globality” as a modern politico-epistemological project of racial governance mapping the globe

into zones of subordination and entitlement through hierarchies of the human.

4. In his classic work *The Brazilian People*, anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro describes colonialism as a “grinding machine of human flesh” (Ribeiro 1995: 45).
5. Frank Wilderson continues: “It’s not a tactic in an ongoing strategy to take our land away, or to take our rights away. We never had any rights” (2018: 48). For a related discussion on the unique positionality of the Black nonsubject in other contexts of the African Diaspora, see Vargas (2018).
6. This may well be what Harney and Moten regard as “the undercommons of the university.” They ask: “How do those who exceed the profession—who exceed and by exceeding escape—how do those maroons problematize themselves, problematize the university, force the university to consider them a problem, a danger (2013:30)?”
7. In this regard, see the insightful discussion by Graham Denyer Willis and Beatrice Jauregui (among others) in *Current Anthropology*'s commentary section for Martin's (2020) intervention on “Weak Police, Strong Democracy” in Taiwan.
8. On the “politics of enmity” and how it informs state practices within contemporary (antiblack) worlds, see among others Achille Mbembe (2003).
9. Laurence Ralph's (2020) epistolary work on police torture in Chicago is a powerful example of how anthropologists can use the discipline's tools to mobilize larger audiences against police terror.

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