

Rebellion in the Brazilian Graveyard: Our Dead Have a Voice!

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International and Comparative Perspectives, ed. Federico Lenzerini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); F. Lenzerini, “Reparations for Indigenous Peoples in International and Comparative Law”, en *Reparations for Indigenous Peoples*; Red Latinoamericana de Antropología Jurídica, *Formas de incorporación del tratamiento diferencial a víctimas de pueblos indígenas en procesos de justicia transicional en Latinoamérica: Memoria analítica*, Mesa 16, agosto 5–6 de 2010 (RELAJU, 2010); C. Rodríguez Garavito y Y. Lam, *Etnorreparaciones: La justicia étnica colectiva y la reparación a pueblos indígenas y comunidades afrodescendientes en Colombia* (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, Dejusticia, 2010); L. Viaene, “Voices from the Shadows: The Role of Cultural Contexts in Transitional Justice Processes Maya Q’eqchi’ Perspectives from Post-Conflict Guatemala”, Tesis doctoral, Ghent University, Belgium, 2010.

³ Para leer sobre las historias de vida de los normalistas desaparecidos, asesinados y heridos, y sus familiares, referirse al libro, *Ayotzinapa, la travesía de las tortugas: La vida de los normalistas antes del 26 de septiembre de 2014* (Ciudad de México: Ediciones Proceso, 2015). ■

Although Brazil has not been in a formal war since the military conflict with Paraguay (1864–1870), when the Brazilian Army joined forces with its Argentinean and Uruguayan counterparts in exterminating half of the Paraguayan population, there is a permanent war against the poor and Afro-Brazilian population. Brazil kills more civilians than any other country in “peacetime,” and although the police are not responsible for all “casualties,” they are the main face of a delinquent state that supports, sanctions, and carries on extermination policies against the most vulnerable sector of the population. What can we expect from an institution whose lineage can be traced back to the history of colonialism?

Statistics on police killings become obsolete very quickly in Brazil. Brazilians have become sinisterly used to slaughters by the police, at times broadcasted live on prime time TV. Cases abound: five black teens killed with 111 shots fired when passing through a police checkpoint; an individual kidnapped by the police and forced to dig his own grave before being killed; dismembered bodies given to pigs; denial of rescuing wounded “criminals” to the emergency room; and the too-familiar

disappearance of favela residents who later are found in clandestine cemeteries.

The practices of the Brazilian police force supersede the most macabre imagination and turn Brazil into an open graveyard. From the Argentinean border to the north limit with Guyana and Venezuela, Brazil’s expansive territory is a geography of police terror, nightmares, anguish, and community destruction. Faithful to its founding genocide, the Brazilian state’s preferential victims are the indigenous, black, and nonwhite populations, historically crafted as the threat to social order. The numbers are consistent with the Brazilian racial project: according to the Brazilian Forum of Public Security, police kill an average of nine individuals every day. Between 2008 and 2015 the police killed 19,494 civilians. Approximately 45 percent of these deaths were concentrated in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.¹ Imagine, if you can, a “democratic” society with such normalized levels of violence. What makes police terror so acceptable in Brazil?

Killings by the police are so rampant in Brazil that they account for 15 percent of the already astounding levels of violent deaths that plague the country.



The black movement protest in downtown São Paulo, March 12, 2015. Banner says: “I can’t breathe! Black youth want to live.” Photos by Uneafró-Brasil

In São Paulo, one out of five homicides is committed by the police. In Rio de Janeiro, police are responsible for 15 percent of all murders. Not surprisingly, 79 percent of the victims are poor, *favelado* black youth.² This may explain why the always vibrant and well-articulated Brazilian civil society turns a blind eye to the fate of those perishing in the hands of the police. Who is the subject entitled to police protection anyway? The state is a genocidal machine committed to protecting civil society, and civil society is a predominantly white, bloodthirsty body politic.

A moment in which the bloodthirsty urgings of civil society came into full display was May 2006, when, within the span of one week, approximately 600 individuals were killed by the military police in the periphery of the city and beyond.³ While *Mães de Maio* denounced the slaughter as a deliberate act of state terror, the main narrative in mainstream civil society was that those killed by the police were criminals who did not obey the commander to surrender. Eager to shed blood, state officials, members of the Public Prosecutor's Office, and mass media representatives justified the killings as a "reaction" to terrorist attacks by members of organized crime. The killings of unarmed youth were justified as a preemptive action, and the kidnapping and slaughter of individuals with a criminal record were seen as a final solution to mass incarceration. Anguished parents were prevented from going after the bodies of their children, and their outcries were considered as evidence of their involvement with the PCC, the criminal organization that controls most of São Paulo's periphery. In mainstream society's controlling narrative, the Crimes of May became "The Crimes of PCC," as if the criminal organization's retaliatory violence against



Mães de Maio's protest in downtown São Paulo in the 10th anniversary of the May Massacre, May 2016. Photo by *Mães de Maio*.

the police would authorize and justify state terrorism.

Ten years later, no police officers have been held accountable for the bloody week, and the Crimes of May figure as nothing but yet another massacre faded from the Brazilian national memory, like other similar events. For instance, April 2016 was the twentieth anniversary of the Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre, when the military police of the northern state of Pará killed twenty-one landless farmworkers protesting for agrarian reform. No justice!⁴ In the same vein, no state officials have been held accountable for the 1992 massacre of 111 prisoners in what came to be known as the Carandiru Massacre.⁵ In fact, as we write this piece, violence is once again breaking out in prisons throughout the country, and at least 134 prisoners have been brutally killed (many of them decapitated) since January 2017.⁶

Despite the struggle to stop the machine of death, killings by the police not only continue but also increase in exponential ways. The May Massacre of 2006 seems to have opened a new phase in policing practices in Brazil. While São Paulo's police *modus operandi* has been exported to other Brazilian states and even to other Latin American countries, the Brazilian army has been deployed to "pacify" urban areas with technologies tested in the U.S.-Israel counter-insurgency programs in Palestine

and Afghanistan. Black bodies destroyed from police helicopters, military tanks invading favelas, and prisons filling up faster than ever are the outcomes of the internationally advertised "pacifying" program of which Rio de Janeiro is a case in point.⁷ It is a white peace; a pale peace; a peace of the cemetery. The corpses left behind after each police operation open the way to real estate foreign investors and international events. Samba, carnival, and *feijoada* seal the spectacle of police terror in this "new" era of massacres.

What pedagogies of resistance are needed to face the persistent and increasing levels of death by the police in impoverished urban communities?⁸ There are multiple strategies and several agendas converging in the urgent matter of stopping mass incarceration and the political assassination of black and poor youth in Brazil. There is also an awareness that police terror is connected to broad practices of racial domination in the Americas, as seen in the exchanging of military technologies among nation-states, and as such the struggle must be politically plural and geographically transnational. From the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, to the outcries of black women in the peripheries of Santiago de Cali (Colombia), to the protest of parents and teachers demanding the return of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa, to the black movement in São Paulo, there is a shared belief that a solution to our

shared vulnerability to police terror will come from our shared (collective) struggle beyond national boundaries. Because the state will not protect us against the state, traditional pedagogy relying on the system is destined to fail. Our field of struggle is the streets.

In this process, mothers are the main political actors to transform the Americas' zone of death into a demilitarized territory of peace. As in many parts of the continent, in Brazil mothers are the ones going after the disappeared, piecing together scattered bodies, collecting evidences to bring the killers to justice, and mobilizing terrorized communities to honor the dead. Black women's activist labor is what makes life possible in the Brazilian graveyard. To counteract the terrorist state, "fed with the blood of our children," mothering politics emerges as a pedagogical strategy to organize the collective struggle to rescue black and brown lives from the shadows of death.⁹

Unintelligible to white civil society, when demanding that the state bring back the dead—"we want our children back!" "They were taken alive!"—mothers are fighting with the womb (*lutando com o útero*) for an ethics of life that extends the reach of political protest beyond grieving and much beyond legal and financial compensation. That Mães de Maio adopts the motto "*Nossos mortos têm voz*" (Our dead have a voice) indicates the desperate attempt to break civil society's wall of silence, unveil the genocidal structure of the Brazilian state, and "let the dead speak" through their (our) collective praxis.¹⁰ In protests for racial justice, the mothers of the dead, the prisoners coming home, the survivors of police terror, and the terrorized periphery leave a resounding message: If the delinquent state turns Brazil (and the Americas) into a graveyard, we have no

other option but to turn Brazil (and the Americas) into a field of political struggle. Our dead have a voice!

Notes

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¹ Fórum Brasileiro da Segurança Pública, *Anuário brasileiro de Segurança Pública*, São Paulo, 2016.

² Anistia Internacional, "Você matou meu filho!" Relatório anual. Available at <https://anistia.org.br/direitos-humanos/publicacoes/voce-matou-meu-filho/> (accessed November 19, 2016).

³ Condepe, *Crimes de maio* (São Paulo: Conselho Estadual de Defesa dos Direitos da Pessoa Humana da Secretaria da Justiça e da Cidadania de São Paulo, 2006).

⁴ Anistia Internacional, *20 anos do massacre Eldorado dos Carajás*. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/04/the-eldorado-dos-carajas-massacre-20-years-of-impunity-and-violence-in-brazil/> (accessed March 4, 2017).

⁵ Conectas Brasil, *Carandiru Massacre*. Available at <http://www.conectas.org/en/news/46875-carandiru-massacre> (accessed March 2, 2017).

⁶ See BBC, "Brazil Prison Violence: Gangs Clash at Jail Where 26 Died," January 19, 2017. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-38675696>.

⁷ For an analysis of the relation between domestic and international antiblack security regimes, see Jaime Alves and Joy James, "Imperial Affinities," *Souls* (forthcoming). Rio's pacifying program has been analyzed by João Costa Vargas, "Taking Back the Land: Police Operations and Sport Megaevents

in Rio de Janeiro," *Souls* 15, no. 4 (2013): 275–303; Vera Malaguti Batista, "O Alemão é muito mais complex," *Revista Justiça e Sistema Criminal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 103–125; João Rafael Fabrés, "Pacifying the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro," *Time Magazine*, January 29, 2013.

⁸ This was the main question activists from Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Central America, the United States and Canada engaged with in the First International Workshop on "Pedagogies of Resistance against Police Violence in the Americas." The meeting (and the network generated from there) was possible thanks to a 2016 LASA/Ford Special Project Award. We thank also the participants in the workshop for their insights and critical perspective on the pedagogies presented in the meeting.

⁹ The pedagogies of mothering as politics has been analyzed by, among others, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Adriana Vianna and Juliana Farias, "A guerra das mães: Dor e política em situações de violência institucional," *Cadernos Pagu* 37 (2016): 79–116; Vilma Reis, "Atuacaiados pelo Estado: As políticas de segurança pública implementadas nos bairros populares de Salvador e suas representações (1991–2001)" (unpublished master's thesis, Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2013).

¹⁰ The Mães de Maio are incisive in regarding their lost as the liminal moment of a "new consciousness" not only in terms of questioning heteronormative and white civil society's constructions of "good" motherhood, but also in relation to their gendered racial alterity as favelada black women in Brazilian politics. For Mães de Maio's "luta do útero" see Jaime A. Alves, "Blackpolis: Police Terror and the Struggle for Black Urban Life in Brazil" (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming). Mourning and pain as political resources for black subject formations have been explored by Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), among others. ■