

Black Women and State-Sanctioned Violence in the Brazilian City

Black women as disposable

On July 17, 2014, in the northeastern city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, a group of women from the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood led a violent protest on the Contorno Avenue, the street located above the black coastal community separating it from the upper part of the city. Bringing traffic in the city-center to a standstill, the women dragged old furniture and any debris they could find to set on fire and block the street. They stood in front of the fire trucks that fought to extinguish the fires, and yelled above the policemen who verbally assaulted and violently beat some of the women leading the activism. Poor black women stood up and demanded an end to the brutal police assaults on their neighborhood.

Prior to the protests, earlier that morning, a young mother sitting on her front porch facing the Bay of All Saints was holding up her six-month-old to bathe her in the morning light. Bullets fired by the military police invading the community in the usual fashion, “chegando atirando” (firing as they arrived; shooting first, aiming to kill), hit a wall on her patio and concrete debris struck her and her child. She subsequently locked herself inside her home, traumatized by her brush with death. Neighborhood activist Ana Cristina da Silva Caminha, whose critiques of the violence of urban re-development I cite throughout my first book *Black Woman against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (Perry 2014), was one of the women the police called “whores” and “wives of drug dealers.” She belongs to one of the oldest families occupying the land, and is also the sister of the young mother. “If that baby had died today,” she later recounted in her hoarse voice tired from the street protests, “we would have all died today. We would have set the city on fire.” The “miracle baby” had been born after the mother’s two previous unexplained stillbirths. The police had threatened to return to complete the job, and the neighborhood residents were on high alert for the necessity of another violent street protest.

Shortly after the morning protests in Gamboa de Baixo, the headliner of the midday news was the death of a one-year-old baby girl in the Catiara neighborhood on the periphery of Amargosa, a municipality located in the interior of Bahia. Claiming to be looking for a “bandit” in the poor black neighborhood, the police officer shot the infant in the head as she sat on her father’s lap. Protests erupted in that city that led to the burning of police headquarters and vehicles, as well as the freeing of prisoners from the local jails. Residents of Gamboa de Baixo watched sympathetically and angrily as they mourned a senseless murder that could have also happened to them.

In both instances, even with the violent incidents still fresh, and many still in disbelief, the young mothers and community members called for justice and an end to the state violence. They fought on the frontlines to end the everyday police war on poor

communities aimed at constructing, maintaining, and disposing of black marginalized urban landscapes and the people who occupy them. We learn from the protests that state actions in black neighborhoods are not just about enacting a politics of containment, but also about implementing a politics of exclusion tied to urban renewal. Black territories are not only dangerous parts of the modernizing city; they simply do not belong there and residents' lives (including young mothers and babies) are disposable.

That summer, neither of these incidents of police violence nor how these young mothers and numerous other women experienced police brutality and death in Bahia and throughout Brazil made the international news. Our collective memory of the summer of 2014 has been primarily marked by the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and the protests that sparked a national #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States. Yet, the above-mentioned acts of gendered antiblack violence show that police questioning of and disregard for black humanity is not only routine, but normative across the diaspora in the Americas. Violence in its various forms (including police torture and killing, and forms of social violence such as unemployment, and lack of adequate housing, education and health care) systematically threatens as well as destroys black life.

Diasporic “zones of non-being”

Black urban neighborhoods such as Gamboa de Baixo and Catiara could be considered “zones of non-being,” in the Fanonian sense, where the collective understanding of black inhumanity predetermines the state's intent to kill through violent police action or denial of social goods and services. Women, children and old people are not exempt from police violence, and the state's capacity to dehumanize blacks in poor neighborhoods stem from established understandings of these men *and* women as gendered racial others undeserving of respect, dignity and the benefits of full citizenship. Black claims to housing, land and life are simultaneously nullified in moments of violent police action in their neighborhoods. As political scientist Maziki Thame states, the black men and women who occupy these “zones of non-being” throughout the Americas are “dispensable for the state, the elites and for the poor people themselves” (2011:79) and their disposability justify the violence. Scholars such as Christen Smith (2016) and Lesley Gill (2004) have also studied the genealogy of the hemispheric reality of violent policing and death squads that have led to mass torture and death, and what black movement activists call “genocide” against black people.

In this vein, I ask in my ongoing research: how do black women routinely experience state violence, and how have they become key political figures in the charge for social justice? I join a group of black feminist scholars who have begun to give more scholarly attention to the militarization of state and local police forces in urban communities (African-American Policy Forum Report 2015; Crenshaw 2016; Ritchie 2017). While the national and international discourses around the effects of the militarization of policing has been framed as primarily torturing and killing black men and boys, these scholars have documented that black women and girls also suffer similar violent consequences (Crenshaw et al. 2015; Angel-Ajani 2010; Richie 2012; Sudbury 2014). However, black women's experiences with state-sanctioned police terror and violence as well as participation and leadership in anti-violence struggles remain invisible and largely understudied. Furthermore, Christen Smith globalizes this erasure

when she writes on the death of Claudia Ferreira in Rio de Janeiro in March 2014, as “not a local, isolated moment of violence, but rather a transnational one,” and asserts that although her “death made headlines for weeks in Brazil, it was barely discussed [here] in the United States.”

Smith (2016) also documents in her recent book, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil*, that long before the Black Lives Matter movement exploded in the United States, a vibrant anti-black genocide movement fighting police killings and other forms of state-sanctioned killing of black people in Brazil had already been taking place on the ground and online. According to a recent report by Amnesty International, every 23 minutes in Brazil, a young black person between the age of 15 and 29 is killed. Between January and November 2016, the police killed 811 people in Rio de Janeiro, and in the months leading up to the Olympic Games, police killings increased 103%. The report also states that, “young people and black men, mainly those living in favelas and other marginalized communities, were disproportionately targeted with the police by law enforcement officials. Human rights defenders, especially those defending land and environmental rights, faced increased threats and attacks. Violence against women and girls remained widespread.” Furthermore, the 2017 Atlas of Violence, illustrate that between 2005 and 2015, 61% of the women murdered by the police were black women even though they represent 24.5% of the Brazilian population (Araújo 2017, Cerqueira, D., et al. 2017).

Beyond Exceptionalism

Hence, after years of focusing on Brazil, what is driving this next phase of my scholarship on the violent struggle for urban land rights is my preoccupation with shifting away from a certain kind of political and geographic exceptionalism that undergirds our understanding of racial violence in urban spaces. The political explosions after moments of police violence reverberated globally have revealed how the gender, racial and class complexity of urban social conditions are interrelated and that a war on poor black people is taking place simultaneously. Access to military grade weapons and equipment, excessive surveillance and abuse of force, as demonstrated in stop and frisk, choke hold and “shoot first, ask later” practices, combined with impunity in the justice system, have defined routine policing in black communities. The explosion of street protests organized by black youth in these countries show that fighting police militarization and brutality is one of the key social justice issues facing African diasporic populations today.

As I continue this research, the analytical and ethnographic focus on evictions and policing requires us to think critically about how black experiences with violence in Brazil are not disconnected from the state violence taking place in North American and Caribbean contexts. This becomes evident when we consider examples such as Rudy Giuliani’s “zero tolerance” approach to fighting crime and a drug war in New York City in the 1990s that routinized and institutionalized violent police practices. So-called “effective policing” led to his firm’s consultation on the militaristic training of police forces in countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, and Brazil. Lesley Gill (2004) has written extensively on the key role of the School of the Americas in providing the space for the circulation of ideas and practices of how to torture and eliminate “enemies within” (the poor, blacks, indigenous peoples, students) who challenge the boundaries of the

democratic distribution of citizenship rights and resources. Water-boarding as it is now called has been a well-documented punishment and torture technique document throughout the Americas (including in US women's prisons on black and brown women at the turn of the 20th century), and stop-and-frisk has always been a part of the daily routine of poor black and brown people in Brazilian cities such that carrying an ID is still obligatory. For Bahian black women, the grassroots movement to demilitarize local police forces in US cities requires political attention to international demilitarization necessary to create an urban culture of social justice and peace in Brazil.

Globalizing and engendering racial justice

To draw from WEB DuBois, the problem of the twenty-first century is the gendered color line mobilized and routinized in state-sanctioned police violence. As a feminist anthropologist of the African Diaspora, I end with a provocation: What would our focus on social justice in the city look like if we engendered and racialized the conversation? I would argue that it requires inverting the geography of reason to move away from US-centered analyses of anti-blackness and police abuse to include places like Brazil. I would then ask, what would our urban research look like if we paid more attention to women - their lives, their thoughts, their ongoing political challenges against gendered racial projects of spatial exclusion and genocide? A significant part of understanding the gendered dimensions of state-sanctioned transnationally, I have suggested here, is to look at the places and spaces where women (black women specifically) are fighting for rights and resources, specifically the human right to housing and to live in their neighborhoods with dignity without violence in cities throughout the Americas.

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