

“We have to be alive in order to marry”: Black LGBTT Youth and Geographies of Violence in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Introduction

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, black LGBTT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and *travesti*) youth navigate a segregated landscape in which they are at once marginalized, desired, and affronted with various forms of violence—particularly in places that, in theory, are portrayed to be diverse and inclusive. As I elaborate in this paper, these contradictory positions leave black LGBTT youth in a paradoxical situation. Black LGBTT youth must grapple with violence and create spaces of affirmation and opposition in a hostile environment of a city deemed a global gay tourist destination and a bastion of ‘sexual diversity’.

Many black LGBTT youth orient themselves across a geographical and discursive divide between spaces of gay leisure and activism and majority-black peripheral neighborhoods which can both be sites of gendered anti-black violence that target nonnormative black youth. I am particularly interested in black LGBTT youth’s strategies to negotiate gendered anti-black violence—even in places that claim to be inclusive and safe for them. Drawing from Jen Jack Giesecking and as a black queer geographer and youth carrying out this project, I seek to “ask people about their experience of spaces and places that have helped shape not only their identities but the meaning and experiences of justice and oppression in their lives” (2014, p. 15). The main questions that guide my present and future analysis are the following:

1. How and where in Rio de Janeiro do black LGBTT youth negotiate violence in their everyday lives? Where do they create spaces of consciousness, support, pleasure and leisure *because of or despite this violence?*
2. What are the spatial politics that reproduce—or challenge—violence against black LGBTT youth?
3. Where in the city do the dominant political strategies of the local LGBTT movement (e.g. policy and legal reform, gay tourism, mainstream media visibility) *take place?* What insights do we gain by locating these acts within an urban terrain that is also racialized and gendered.

My working **hypothesis** is that black LGBTT youth in Rio must deploy a highly critical *geographical* knowledge, history, and agency *precisely because of* their collective *sense of place* informed by violence and trauma. By centralizing these critical insights from black LGBTT youth—which can

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also be seen as remappings of Rio's racial *and* sexual landscapes—I seek to demonstrate that these youth are not merely marginalized by their respective LGBTTT and black communities. My preliminary research suggests that black LGBTTT youth's practices take into account that gendered anti-black violence is *central* in the production of spaces of gay social life, activism and tourism, peripheral neighborhoods, as well as broader urban development projects.

Literature review

For my work I draw upon feminist, queer and black feminist engagements with human geography, guided by key principles of black studies as an insurgent political-intellectual project. As a black studies project, I seek to analyze the spatial politics that create and rework the conditions of black LGBTTT youth's everyday lives, and to *then center* black LGBTTT youth as *geographical actors* who also have a significant stake in the everyday production of space.

Feminist and queer geographies—rethinking space, scale, identity and power

Feminist political geographers argue that the scales of our studies must shift from the global and national to also include human bodies, the home, and community to discern how global political processes impact everyday practices and are, at once, grounded and produced by them. Through this lens—called the 'global intimate'—feminist geographers conceive of people's everyday experiences of power and identity as material, symbolic, global and intimate (see Pratt and Rosner 2006, Browne 2007, Wright 2008, Massaro and Williams 2013). Global processes like capitalism and patriarchy do not simply penetrate or 'touch down' in local contexts; the global and 'the intimate'—social relations that are embodied and rooted in everyday life—are mutually constitutive. Mountz & Hyndman (2006) contend that people's everyday practices “defy any fixed or given scale: they are at once connected to global and local processes, politics and people”. As such, “each site blurs the global and the intimate into the fold of quotidian life” (Ibid.).

Feminists reclaim the often feminized sites and scales of the intimate—the body, home, borders—as key sites of analysis as well as political intervention. As a result, feminist geographical analysis calls for a grounding of analysis in the intimate, “everyday life of power, identity and place” that begin by “interrogat[ing] the mundane experience of space, place and identity as people navigate the tricky terrain of daily living and illustrate how this living does not fall neatly into either/or

categories” (Wright 2008, see also Pratt 2004). What emerges from these alternative geographies are what Cindi Katz (2001) terms as “counter-topographies”, which span multiple scales and places and “ground, locate, map, and link empirical realities” (Mountz and Hyndman 2006). A transnational—or, in the case of my work, (black) diasporic—feminist politics roots itself in everyday lives while also “about crossing boundaries” and “connecting [people’s realities] across [social and geographical] differences” (Ibid.).

Both feminist and queer engagements with human geography are inextricable due to their common objective to “approach sexuality as a nexus of the global and the intimate” and an increasing focus on the embodiment of space, with “the gendered and sex(ualis)ed body as an important coordinate of subjectivity” (Wright 2010, Gordon-Murray et al. 2008). Thus, in both lines of research sexuality becomes a key site and frame of reference through which people build “meaning, power and politics in the most intimate and public of settings around the world” (Wright 2010). These bodies of literature thus approach space, identity and power as global-intimate processes and call attention to the critical theoretical value of the mundane experiences of space and power in people’s everyday lives.

Queer geographers in particular conceive space as embodied, gendered and (hetero)sexualized, and contend that people’s appropriations of space, in turn, can reinforce or disrupt gender sexual norms in particular sites (Binnie 1997). As such, the social production of space implies that space is constantly reworked—the heteronormative disempowerment of space and place can be reshaped by queer folk themselves through appropriation. However, such queer appropriations of space can be co-opted by city elites, as in the case of Rio de Janeiro, through tourism narratives justified by ideologies that view assimilation as social and economic progress (Rushbrook 2002, Waitt et al. 2008, Oswin 2015).

Despite these contributions to our understanding of sexuality and space, other scholars have critiqued queer geographers for their privileging of sexuality in the Global North while failing to “position sexuality within multifaceted constellations of power” that are informed at once by sexual, racialized, classed and gendered processes (Oswin 2008). As a result, nonnormative queer people of color in both the Global North and South are rendered invisible in such studies, with no distinct sense of place (Cohen 1997, Puar 2002, Livermon 2014).

Sexuality and gender in Brazil

Brazilianist scholars have made attempts to decenter queer and sexuality studies from urban centers of the Global North through ethnographic accounts of sexualities. Specifically in the context of Brazil, Richard Parker (1999)¹ and Don Kulick (1998)² contextualize in historical and cultural terms their analyses of nonnormative genders and sexualities across several Brazilian cities. Both offer readings of such lived experiences largely without assuming a queer politics *as it takes place in North America*. However, works like these are often extremely problematic for dismissing the authors' own positionalities as white, cisgender gay men, initially drawn to Brazil as titillated tourists, as well as the effects of anti-black racism on the lives of the majority-black LGBTTT people that they study. These shortcomings result in a typical white masculinist ethnographic gaze that seems 'colorblind', leaving the authors unmarked and accountable and rendering LGBTTT people as 'incomplete' subjects, only identifiable by sexual and gender identities.

A main reason for the centering of white queer experiences—or elision of those of black queer folks—in the aforementioned literature resembles what Cathy Cohen (1997) calls an “uncomplicated understanding of power” and identity categories in mainstream queer politics. What we should problematize is the tendency of queer theorists and activists to isolate and prioritize sexuality as the “primary frame through which they pursue their politics” (440). What is created as a result of “activating only one characteristic their identity” (ibid.) is a simplistic dichotomy between everything that is queer, assumed to be radical and just, and everything that is heterosexual and thus inherently oppressive and despised (see Oswin 2008). Left to grapple with this divide while caught in the middle of it are black and other non-white, non-normative people.

Black feminist engagements with human geography

Black feminist and queer scholars have long problematized simplistic understandings of power and identity categories and the tendency of queer theorists and activists to isolate and prioritize sexuality as the “primary frame through which they pursue their politics” (Cohen 1997, 440). This has resulted in a simplistic dichotomy between everything that is queer—assumed to be radical and

¹ Parker situates the “emergence” of gay male subcultures and communities as a convergence of historical, political, and economic forces from the global scale to local and individual scale.

² Kulick examines the sociocultural and political context that place *travestis* in precarious situations, and argues that through their everyday practices *travestis* (re)imagine, reinforce and (re)configure Brazilian gender norms.

just—and everything that is heterosexual and thus inherently oppressive and to be despised (see Oswin 2008). Left to grapple with this divide while caught in the middle of it are black and other non-white, non-normative people.

Thus, black feminists across disciplines and fields—including Geography—have advanced forceful critiques that build a broadened, intersectional understanding of queerness, violence, power, and identities. Furthermore, black feminists have called for ‘standpoint epistemologies’, which call for critical knowledge production *situated* and *grounded* in everyday lived experience. This knowledge must be *centered* around the experiential knowledge of nonnormative folks “in attempt to locate authority or expertise with those who experience a circumstance” (Richie 2012, 129-30).

Grounding black feminist thought in more geographic terms, urban space then clearly becomes racialized, gendered, classed *and* sexualized, constituting a hostile landscape that black people must constantly navigate and struggle to make more livable. Black feminist geographers thus understand racism, sexism and homophobia as determinants of people’s sense of place. As Katherine McKittrick states, “black matters are spatial matters”, in that space and place factor centrally in black lives and, in turn, render us geographic actors whose negotiations can result in reformulations of their own subjectivities and space itself (McKittrick 2006, xii). The geographical imaginations and practices of black LGBTT youth should be understood as “social processes that make [space and place] a racial-sexual terrain” (McKittrick 2006, xiv). Black people, as geographical beings, engage in building sites of consciousness, survival, and resistance because of and despite this violence. In this vein, both domination and resistance are *spatial acts* through which black people assert their own place in the world. My research brings to the fore the spatial agency and imaginations of black LGBTT youth, which in turn provide insurgent, reimagined geographies of violence, struggle and pleasure.

Black feminist and queer work across diasporic sites have made productive interventions that view the conditions of black people’s lives as always already ambivalent and in tension. In such ambiguity where trauma, pleasure, exploitation, and survival coexist in daily life, black people exercise their agency by appropriating and refashioning negative representations in hopes of building socio-spatial alternatives *on their own terms*—a ‘remix’, in a way, on the violence that centrally defines our existence (Bailey & Shabazz 2014, Tang 2016).

Black feminist activist-scholars like Keisha-Khan Perry (2013), Erica Williams (2013), and Christen Smith (2016) already offer insights on how black Brazilian subjects—black women in particular—must make strategic choices to fashion themselves, cope, and intervene to secure daily survival and livability. Working with black sex workers, neighborhood activists, and activist performers, all three see blackness and black spatial consciousness *not* as a mere effect of exclusion, but rather as *central* to the constructions of the spaces, places and society that one takes for granted daily—like tourist landscapes, plazas, and even celebratory “gay spaces”. Smith (2016) sees this as a dangerous paradox, which she calls “afro-paradise”. Afro-paradise is a “gendered, sexualized and racialized imaginary” through which Salvador becomes a place of black fantasy and consumption as well as black death (3). Black people in highly exoticized sites like Rio de Janeiro simultaneously become hyper-sexualized, romanticized, consumed, and exterminated objects. However, this paradox is intentional: it is precisely this black fantasy, produced and consumed by tourists, the Brazilian state, and society, that serves as a smokescreen that facilitates the state’s extermination of black bodies. Brazilian society, media, and the state actively choreograph these celebratory performances and routine killings. It is in the midst of this erotic, genocidal landscape that black people—especially black women and youth—must carve out spaces of everyday survival, consciousness, and political intervention. Katherine McKittrick (2013) understands this contradiction as indicative of a “plantation future”. According to McKittrick, the plantation becomes a material and symbolic site of violence and resistance, where the built environment, urban social processes, and blackness become inseparable. Because of and despite the violence that the plantation symbolizes, “painful racial histories hold in them the possibility to organize our collective futures” (Ibid.).

The broader racialized, gendered, and sexualized terrain of Rio de Janeiro

Over the past few decades, Brazil’s LGBTTT movement has steadily gained political rights and protections, including the national anti-homophobia policy program Brasil Sem Homofobia in 2004 and legalization of same-sex marriage in 2013 (de la Dehesa 2010). Rio de Janeiro, in particular, has become a global gay tourist destination and hub for gay leisure and LGBTTT activism, hosts one of the world's largest gay pride parades, and is home to the country’s first openly gay parliament

member, Jean Wyllys. Rio's city government has also pursued economic development by branding itself a gay tourist destination, in tandem with mega-event touristic development.

Carioca LGBTTT activists have long appropriated tourist landscapes for political action and visibility, such as *Posto 9*—known as the “gay beach”—on Ipanema Beach as well as Avenida Atlântica along Copacabana beach, developing key partnerships with city agencies to spearhead gay tourism and anti-homophobia. The majority of gay tourism materials, gay nightlife sites and maps, and word of mouth locate the majority of “gay spaces” (*zonas gay*) in the affluent neighborhoods of Ipanema, Leblon, Botafogo, and Copacabana—the “gayest street in Rio” being Farme de Amoedo street in Ipanema, according to a friend.

However, we must remember that these queer spaces of alleged tolerance and diversity are *embedded* in an urban terrain starkly segregated by race, class, and gender, *not* a simplistic binary between “queer” and “straight” space. Often ‘gayness’, so to speak, in the city becomes mapped or demarcated within the Zona Sul, far from where most black LGBTTT people in Rio live. When black LGBTTT people are in fact present within these spaces, they are also seen as ‘out of place’. Black, working-class people who navigate the streets of Ipanema, for example, are often assumed to be working as vendors, service and domestic workers, sex workers or criminals. Not only do black people—whether LGBTTT or not—have to work within a racial and gender division of labor, but also must commute and find resources daily through a racially segregated city. Although black and mixed (*pretxs* and *pardxs*) people make up nearly 50% of Rio's overall population in the 2010 Brazilian census, they constitute a mere 17% of the population in the Zona Sul (southern zone) of the city (Gusmão 2015; IBGE 2010). With more visual representations like these maps, a segregated landscape emerges and contradicts the long-held myth of ‘racial democracy. Of course, these dimensions all inform a black LGBTTT sense of place. The city becomes a racialized terrain upon which the spatial project of “geographic domination”, which, according to McKittrick, “organizes, names and sees social difference and determines where social order happens” (xv).

The Brazilian state, media and tourism industry all strategically appropriate and resignify Rio's physical and cultural landscape as a site of racial and sexual fantasy where blackness is central, being simultaneously celebrated, commodified, and concealed (see Williams 2014). We see this desire and disgust for blackness in city-sponsored gay tourism campaigns, with an all-white white cast, set in Ipanema, with rainbow flags waving below palm trees on the beach, with Afro-Brazilian samba

music playing in the background to entice the prospective tourist. On one hand, the performative production of touristic and gay leisure spaces relies on the concealment of blackness, but on the other hand also necessitates the economic and sexual exploitation and hypervisibility of black people in order to choreograph the spectacle of afro-paradise.

The violence and “spatial divide” that black LGBTTT youth must navigate

Even when policy and legal gains suggest more ‘sexual diversity’ and tolerance, violence—*gendered, anti-black* violence, I argue—continues to mark black LGBTTT youth’s lives and their collective sense of place in the city. As of 2014, according to Grupo Gay da Bahia, Brazil has the highest reported LGBTTT homicide rate in the Americas, averaging one murder every 28 hours. Violence, however, manifests itself in ways beyond raceless body counts; it is interpersonal, intra-group, and structural in nature, and inflected by race, gender, sexuality, class and other lines of social difference. The local LGBTTT movement is largely dominated by white, middle-class gay men who fail to challenge touristic “gay-friendly” depictions of Rio and its effects that both hypersexualize and racialize black youth as sexual objects and/or criminals. This hypersexualization and criminalization of young black people are reproduced by the state, society, and media—effects of an “afro-paradise”, performed for a white male tourist gaze. These representations are especially significant for black LGBTTT youth when considering that black youth in general make up 77% of all murdered youth in Brazil (Amnesty International Brazil 2014). In other words, black LGBTTT youth are particularly impacted and precariously positioned by violence that is both gendered and anti-black in all its forms.

Many spaces of gay social life, activism, and tourism rely on institutions and ideologies that are invested in the systemic exclusion and killing of black people. The existence of anti-homophobia policies and laws does not fully challenge structural, institutionalized violence, and as many have documented, genocidal law enforcement persists. Peripheral black youth have been racially profiled, verbally and physically assaulted, and/or forcibly removed from public transit, as well as on public beaches—including the ‘gay beach’—assumed to be *bandidos*, or thugs.

On the other hand, majority-black neighborhoods or spaces of anti-racist, pro-black consciousness are also not necessarily safe harbors for black LGBTTT youth. State forces, like the Military Police (Polícia Militar, or PM), carry out routine killings of black *favela* residents in the communities themselves, where conservative evangelical and catholic traditions have taken root

often encouraged homophobic and transphobic violence. Black LGBTTT people are also highly aware dichotomy between what is LGBTTT and have been finding ways to traverse or undo it. Black LGBTTT people also understand this simplistic binary as *spatial*, with serious, even deadly consequences for them.

Gilmara Cunha, a transgender woman, renowned activist, and leader of *favela*-based LGBTTT group Conexão G, contemplates this spatial binary and inequality between those living in the affluent Zona Sul and those living in the predominantly black periphery. Gilmara holds both the LGBTTT movement and peripheral communities accountable, stating that,

“[i]n the *favela* we can neither give each other a kiss or walk holding hands. Whoever is gay, lesbian or transexual [sic] from *favela* territory does not reap the benefits of the advances that [other] LGBT people in this country are experiencing... There [in the Zona Sul] they can denounce prejudice, aggression, and there’s even a chance of punishment [for the hate crime]. Here we have no way to do that. We’re in a lawless land. The reality is another one, the risks are different... We’re not fighting to adopt a child. We’re still struggling to survive.” (Puff 2015).

Ézio Rosa is founder and writer of Bicha Nagô, a prominent black LGBTTT Tumblr blog. Rosa comments on the discrepancy between downtown spaces of gay social life and peripheral neighborhoods (*quebradas*)—two key areas where many black LGBTTT people go to connect with people like them—and how blogging and online activism enable black LGBTTT youth to organize across multiple sites and scales:

“The tumblr emerged from the need to discuss sexuality through the angle of race and class, and to also bring up the issue of appropriation of public space for black LGBTTT people. When we come out as LGBTTT, the idea is that we go hang out with similar LGBTTT people. So, where do we find them, these similar people? ... Why do I have to go so far to be able to exercise this affectivity or affection? Through the tumblr I could get in contact with other poor neighborhoods and other people who are also trying to bring up this issue in their own neighborhoods.” (Viegas 2015, my own translation)

Rosa states that there is a “*não-lugar*”, a transient “non-space/place” that characterizes black LGBTTT youth’s fragmented senses of self and of place between the LGBTTT and anti-racist movements. Last summer at a roundtable event (*roda de conversa*), I asked social worker Joilson Santana—a black gay man from the periphery—what he thought of the LGBTTT movement’s political strategies, and if black LGBTTT people feel ‘split’ between black and LGBTTT identity politics. Joilson denounced the movement’s focus on marriage as political progress and the fact that social services are “being developed only for the gay man”; instead he stressed that black LGBTTT people need policies that

“make our survival possible” and confront the mechanisms of anti-black genocide. Joilson declared that, “temos que estar *vixxs* para casar”—that we have to be *alive* in order to marry first (Santana 2015, emphasis my own).

Spatial knowledge, agency, and strategies of black LGBTTT youth in Rio

This collective sense of place, although informed by violence and trauma, doesn't preclude possibilities of agency and intervention. Many who are young, black, LGBTTT, and ‘*marginal*’ strategically create sites of potential and opposition and, therefore, rework a highly racialized, gendered and sexualized urban terrain. In addition to how black LGBTTT youth deploy their knowledge and agency, *where* this agentive self-making *takes place* is equally important. Afro-paradise, as conceived by Smith, is a relationship between blackness and the state that is not only paradoxical, but also dialectic and thus opens up possibilities of transformation. In other words, constructions of whiteness and Brazilian society itself cannot exist without constructions of blackness—the othered scapegoat—and its supposed inferiority, and blackness cannot be ontologically conceived outside of the realms of colonialism and modernity.

Despite the violence that black LGBTTT youth face, I'd like to end by focusing on their strategic responses to spatial inequalities and violence in the city. Marginalized black youth in Brazil have long appropriated material, digital, institutional and discursive spaces in order to assert their agency and confront a society invested in their silencing and social death. On one hand, black LGBTTT youth deploy *material, performative* tactics to refashion and reaffirm themselves and to respond to violence on their own terms. These tactics include the following:

- black LGBTTT-only dance parties like Batekoo in São Paulo;
- twerking and ‘twerkivism’ in public spaces and on public transit—partly inspired by Batekoo—as affirmations through performance of non-normative black bodies and gender expressions;
- *favela*-based gay pride parades and health fairs carried out *separately*--and intentionally separate--from the annual main parade on Copacabana beach;
- night-long *bailes black* that articulate a diasporic space in which American hip-hop, R&B and Afro-Brazilian music and dance are fused together;
- *Sarans*, or poetry slams, that often occupy an empty street or plaza;
- PreparaNem, an activist effort to provide transgender people free training courses for the national university exam and thus access into the Brazilian academy;

- and lastly, convenings and forums for black LGBTTT people; an example from last year being the first annual seminar of FONATRANS--AKA the Fórum Nacional das Pessoas Trans Negras).

On the other hand, black LGBTTT youth actively engage in self-making through means that are more discursive, representational or virtual-material in nature, such as:

- online activism and organizing, literary forums and zines;
- Instagram photoshoots affirming non-normative black women and LGBTTT folks;
- the newly inaugurated web docu-series “Pretxs” on black LGBTTT lives;
- music figures like the gender-nonconforming Brazilian soul singer Liniker and black feminist rapper Karol Conká, and LGBTTT collaborations with hip-hop groups;
- And lastly, *Tem Local?*, a web-based mapping project documenting LGBT-phobic violence, which relies on the team’s occupations and consciousness-raising in those sites after georeferencing an attack.

Conclusion and broader significance:

To conclude, I argue that black LGBTTT youth in Rio de Janeiro consistently appropriate urban space in order to refashion themselves and create sites of potential through social media, performance, music, and political demonstration. These remappings of the city not only explain how black youth experience exclusion, but also how blackness—made explicit by gendered anti-black violence—is *central* in ordering urban space and the racial-sexual landscape in which these sites are embedded, even when black bodies are not visibly present. Although I hesitate to apply the label “queer” to the youth with whom I work, their assertions of agency, (dis)identifications with negative stereotypes (see Muñoz 1999), and reworkings of the *carioca* landscape nevertheless *do* queer work. These spatial acts do queer work in the sense that they disrupt norms of race, gender, class and sexuality even as they are informed by and somewhat reinforce these norms (Miller-Young 2014, p. 179). If we take seriously Joilson’s call to build spaces, policies and laws that “make our survival possible”, then perhaps we can read this as a demand for coalitional LGBTTT and anti-racist work that views issues like anti-black genocide, mass incarceration, spatial inequality, HIV prevention, same-sex marriage, and anti-violence *all* as equally urgent and intersectional issues.

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