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Working paper[1]

Living in the Necropolis: *Homo Sacer* and the Black Inhuman Condition in São Paulo/Brazil

My original plan was to make a critique of Giorgio Agamben's well-known concept of state of exception and homo sacer. I could go over the numbers of blacks killed by the police in Brazil, those who have died from untreated diseases, battered at home, bodies left on the streets, and so on to show that the paradigmatic "state of exception" (Agamben, 2005) that has become an aberration and source of so much anxiety in western politics, has been the norm for those the law as protection is in a permanent suspension. I could even ask: How does one account for those under a permanent state of exception, as the Afro-Brazilian urban condition in particular, and the African diasporic condition at large, suggest? If modern sovereign power constitutes itself through exception, since when, and where exactly is the "zone of indistinction"—between the normal juridical order and its suspension—located when considering those populations outside European boundaries? How can this be translated into people's racialized deadly encounters with the state? Instead of spending time with Agamben, I propose to look into the personal narrative of Dona Maria, a 54-year-old black woman favela resident in São Paulo, Brazil.

"They took my son from me. Took? No. They stole him from me. Now YOU tell me, how am I gonna live?" Her emphasis of the pronoun "you" was an exact interpellation, exacerbated by her strong voice and an intense anxiety about her economic and social condition while also mourning her son.

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During the following days after Betinho's death, Dona Maria looked for him in the emergency room, in the three Police Stations surrounding the district, again in the hospital, in the Medical Florence Institute, and again in the Police Station. She mapped all of the state facilities he could have been in the southside of the city. She even mobilized neighbors to look for him wherever they thought he could be. He was killed by the Highlanders, the death squad police group in southside São Paulo. The main sign left by the Highlanders is the dismembering of their victims' bodies. The heads and hands are separated from the mutilated bodies and left in different places throughout the territory. The "Highlanders" borrows its name from Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery's 1986 Hollywood production. The suggestive movie portrays the battle among immortal warriors. In the endless battlefield, the hero learns that the only way to kill another immortal is to take off his head.

The captive body, divided into parts and distributed throughout the territory becomes a political signal of state territoriality. By dismembering the bodies and abandoning them in different parts of the favelas, the message left is not only the one usually understood as a demonstration of exemplar punishment. It is more than that. In that case, the state is reassuring its sovereign body by annihilating some specific bodies taken as unconditional threat and liable to be killed. Maria Vitoria Uribes (1978) has noticed that, in the Colombian context, the mutilation of the body aims to transform it into a "macabre allegory" and to constitute the very alterity of the killers: They make themselves by unmaking the Other. The dismembering of the body is a form of imposing death (*to kill*), reassuring its effects (*re-kill*), and destroying it in parts (*counter-kill*). This ritual structure of massacre represents a real and symbolic rupture with the real; at the same time it is also an extreme form of domination integrated within everyday life: "Las victims generalmente se las **mataba** de un tiro, el qual producia la muerte biologica por anemia aguda. Acto seguido se las **contramataba** decapitandolas, para terminar **rematandolas**, efectuandole al cadaver una serie de cortes 'postt-mortem' que terminaban por desmembrar el cuerpo" (168).

While there are some specificities in the Colombian case, Uribe's account offers some insights into the ways that some particular bodies are subjected to a ritual of repeated violation. In the Brazilian case, these constant violations amplify state power, extending its effects beyond the mutilated body. When we take police violence as a historical continuity of a racial inscription of violence, rather than an aberration in the normalcy of state practices, it becomes clear that police killing is much more than taking someone's life. The police need to kill, re-kill and counter-kill because—as the Highlanders' cutting of their enemies head suggest—to some bodies pain and death have become totally irrelevant. Said in other words, how can one inflict pain and death on a body when pain and death have become an integrated part of everyday life?

In that context, death appears as a ritual of domination. If there is any political purpose encapsulated by the pained/dismembered body in the Brazilian racial economy of violence, this purpose is to ensure the racial order in the body and in the topography that makes up the city. Thus, police killing in the favela takes a peculiar ritual of power, inscribing state terror and creating the very geography that makes those spaces specially targets of police strategies. The governance of this territory, insofar as the state is concerned, is made possible through *death.* It is to say that the state produces the very macabre geographies it aims to erase by annihilating the black body.

In that sense, the disappearing of the bodies works as a political weapon to potentialize state power because it de-territorializes and reassures the pervasiveness of state bodily terror in a prevailing way. By appropriating the body and destroying it, the state suspends life and produces a terror without end. This endless terror creates an intimate space where state-sanctioned psychological and emotional abuse finds its way. This brings to light the particular experience of those black women trying to come to terms with the endless agony of having their loved ones left in the vacuum, the bareness of uncertainty, grieving and pain. Would they come home anytime soon? How did they face their deaths? How can they reach an end in a cycle kept open exactly by the suspension of life in a web of terror that

is fed by a state of uncertainty? These questions, put to me in different moments by those mothers lost in desperation and fear, helps us to unveil the intimacy of state terror. In its most intimate relation with its victims, the state comes as an omnipresent haunting ghost that occupies every aspect of their existence. My early field notes reveal their desperation in these words:

> ***Maria****: They killed me twice. In the day that they captured him and in the day I discovered that his body was totally mutilated, with smoke scars, a cut over his belly and his head separated from his body. When they found him and somebody told me that he was found without head, it was like a second death. It was like I was dying with him. I thought, my God, how can a person do that with other human being and then go home and watch television as [if] nothing happened? How did my son react? What he thought in this moment? While I don't bury him, neither he nor I can rest. I felt like as a ghost, you know? Someone that died and was forgot to bury.*

Black feminist radical interventions have taken black women's encounters with everyday forms of state power as the liminal space of death. They have urged us to engage a different view of conceptualizing and facing state-sanctioned violence—from the cargo to modern-day prison and police killing – not as contingent, but as a fundamental dimension of black experience. Hortense Spillers (1984) calls this space the "interstices" because it enables speaking the unspeakable and to making legible the historical continuities of terror inscribed in black women bodies:

> She became…the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant male decided the distinction between humanity and other (1984, p. 76).

They have theorized "the theft of the body" (Spillers, 1987, p. 206), vindicating the unspeakable place of death not only as a space of desperation and terror, but also as a space for self-making (See Spillers ,1987; Holland, 2000; James, 1996, 2000; Alexander 2005). Maria's reclaiming of her son's mutilated

body is also a space through which she has made her voices heard and defeated power through what I am calling the politics of grieving. One way to read her narratives of state violence is to situate the particular experience of losing a son within the larger heteropatriarchal system of domination that elected the "mutilated female body" as the critical point through which any racial violence becomes normalized (Spillers, 1984; Hartman, 1997). It is important to stress this here because violence on black men is "just" part of this larger configuration of power in which the black female body becomes the site *to undo black gender difference* (see Spiller 1987). As Saidiya Hartman has pointedly interrogated, "What happens if we assume that the [black] female subject serves as a general case for explicating social death, property relations, and the pained and punitive construction of blackness" (Hartman, p. 100)? In other words, if the black female body is the site where violence is made possible, black male death should be read as part of this larger historical and continuum process that elects the black female body as the "interstice" through which life and death are defined.

Can the dead speak?

Sharon Holland has argued that "*perhaps the most revolutionary intervention into conversations in the margins of race, gender, and sexuality is to let the dead—those already denied a sustainable subjectivity—speak from the place that is most familiar to them"* (2000, p. 4). As this panel engages in an attempt to hear those voices that inhabit the space of death, a telling contradiction endures. Can the dead speak through our voices? Can a conference like this (or academia in general) provide a space to confront power and make those voices legible? Theorizing on death and suffering requires more then vindicating membership in the victimized group one belongs to. If it is true that our personal experiences are also deeply marked by violent encounters with the state—and the nightmares they continuously produce in those of us honestly engaged in forging an alternative to the poverty of our current political imagination—in order to let the dead speak we need to call into question the very purpose of a panel like this one. Violence and death perpetrated against some bodies resist translation

into words (see Holland, 2000; Scarry, 1985; Das, 2001), and for those of us resisting as more than scholars in the academic industrial complex, it is impossible to be mere spectators of somebody else's pain.

Perhaps we need to be more curious about silence than hearing the dead voices. The spaces of silence inhabited by those outside these walls open up a different way to understand how *necropower* (Mbembe, 2003) operates and how resistance is forged in such context. Likewise, it may be the case that if the black body is the site for absolute terror, it is in these "bodies made flesh" or in this "zero degree of human existence" (Spillers,1987, p. 67) that we may find the room for radical intervention; those who have nothing to lose—who are in a permanent state of exception—are the ones who can help us to intensify crisis to the point that power becomes naked.

In "searching for the beloved community," a place to call home, we will have to pass trough the space of death. It is death, not life, that is the potentiality to forge a political community toward life. As Joy James reminds us, "What is black death but a political phenomenon" (2010, p. 215)? The question then becomes, if we are still scared as hell about death, how can we hold the dead and make her death meaningful? How can we claim the space of black death as a space of subjectivity? How can we bring back the dead? While my obsession with death may reveal something else—for instance, a Christian paranoia with post-death—it is paradoxically through our encounters with death that blacks have forged strategies of survival.

In the Christian tradition, we sacrifice the most honorable object to God. To be sacrificed is to be honored with a high recognition. You may know that Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice Isaac, his son, as a signal of his faith and love. In Agamben's words, the homo sacer is the one that can be killed but not sacrificed for his [sic] precarious position between the law and the divine order. Fine that Agamben wants to recreate the world from a European perspective! Who are the ones structurally liable to be killed? What is the place for politicizing the death of those in a permanent placeless condition? Sacrifice is not for everyone. We are left with the placeless space of death, meaningless

death….. The black body is so disposable that it cannot be seen even through the bare life of homo sacer. Here we are: A permanent limbo!

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