

Spectacle of Violence: Racial Imaginary and the Constructing of Black Masculinity in *City of God*

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The article analyzes the narratives of violence in the movie City of God. The point of departure is the analysis of racial stereotypes produced/disseminated against the favela as site of criminality and Black men as violent and hyper-sexual. The mass cultural production appears as an important element that produces, reinforces, and disseminates meanings over Black masculinity in the context of death in urban Brazil. Based in a critical race perspective, the author suggests that the narratives of violence and urban criminality sustain a white racial hegemony that perpetuates racial subjugation of Blacks. In Brazil, the article suggests, the nation is ambiguously imagined: at the same time that Black is consumed as exotic, this category represents the antithesis of the national ideal. What kind of social and urban social geographies are created in these narratives of criminality? In an attempt to develop such ideas, provisional conclusions are that 1) City of God exemplifies common-sense understandings of the public image of Black men as criminals; 2) the media's pathologization of communities of color (the favela/shantytown) as places of criminality, danger, and fear are discursive/ideological apparatus by which racial domination effectively takes place in urban Brazil.

Keywords: *Black Masculinity, Race, Stereotypes, Nation, Urban Violence*

Introduction

This essay examines fictional representations of young Black men in the urban areas of Brazil. The analysis is mainly situated within the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, which understands race beyond the social constructivist perspective, stressing its material dimension in the re-making of subjectivities; moreover, this paper is situated within the broad perspective of postcolonial theory, which emphasizes the necessity for a critical approach to the political dimensions of the colonial/postcolonial discourse in the constitution of the 'other.'

I maintain that the film *City of God*'s controlling images of Black men need to be contextualized within the system of beliefs and practices in which Black manhood is constructed as synonymous with violence, virility, and savagery. In other words, the social construction of Black men as such informs and is informed by a racial imaginary that treat them as natural criminals. In this stigmatizing regime of representation, I suggest that mass media's discursive dehumanization of Black males should be read as symbolic violence against them that legitimates and informs practices of explicit and implicit physical domination. Also, as I shall elaborate below, in the process of controlling images of predominantly Black urban areas, mass media also create pathologized social geographies. That the urban geography of Brazilian metropolitan cities are generated in such racialized narratives of violence is evidenced in the statistics of deadly violence provided below.

By putting the Black male at the center of this analysis, this paper does not claim the centrality of Black men's experiences as the quintessential racial condition of Black people. My aim is to discuss why violence is

constantly invoked to construct young Black male identity. I am interested in understanding what kind of social and urban geographies are created in these narratives of criminality. In an attempt to develop such ideas, my provisional conclusions are that i) *City of God* exemplifies common-sense understandings of the public image of Black men as criminals; ii) the media's pathologization of communities of color (the favela/shantytown) as places of criminality, danger, and fear are discursive ideological apparatus by which racial domination effectively takes place in urban Brazil.

The Black body, I would argue, is the site where systematic practices of violence are produced and reproduced. It is also on the Black body that the nation is defined. For being the essentialized 'other,' the Black body is both the anti-national—the one that disturbs the harmony of the national project—and the folkloric symbol that makes possible the idea of national harmony. In that sense, the apparent contradiction in this paper is not a slippage. The position that Black Brazilians occupy in this nation is marked by an ambivalent process: at the same time that the nation consumes Blackness as culture, it perpetrates systemic violence against Black people. In that sense, I shall use Homi Bhabha's earlier formulation on the pedagogical and performative nature of the nation to contend that some (bodies) are inherently seen as out of place; some bodies need to be normalized by the pedagogical technologies of docility, in this case a film.

The nation is, then, performed by the politics of terror: police violence, state neglect of public services, pathologized popular representations of Black people. Put simply, my argument is that the postcolonial representation of the Black 'other' in popular culture updates the colonial regime of representation. Now that race as a biological category has been put under deep scrutiny, the cultural industry needs to reshape its rhetoric with a more aggressive yet less explicit control over the image of racial 'others.' Our very present now is marked by a racial hegemony that, at the same time it denies the existence of race, organizes social life through what Brazilian scholar Lélia Gonzalez has appropriately called 'Brazilian cultural neurosis' (1983) and Judith Butler has called "white paranoia" (1993). It is to this point I turn now.

The Making of the Black Masculinity in City of God

City of God is based on an ethnographic work done by Paulo Lins. The movie, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund in 2002, is a story about the favela *Cidade de Deus* (in English 'City of God') in the western zone of Rio de Janeiro. The story is told from the viewpoint of a young Black teenager called Rocket (Luis Otavio), who is portrayed as an honest, innocent, sweet boy who dreams of being a famous photographer. A narrative flash back invites the viewer into the '60s when the favela was occupied by poor inhabitants of the city. The main agent of violence in *City of God* is Dadinho (Douglas Firmino), who becomes Little Zé (Leandro Firmino) as a gang name, the

most feared drug dealer in the favela and one of the most wanted criminal by Rio de Janeiro's police. Little Zé and Rocket's childhoods are situated in a hyper-violent, dirty, ugly favela where everybody is potentially criminal. The first scene of the film is a metaphor for this, in which a group of men pursue a chicken. The scene prepares the viewer for what is coming next: the violent performance of young Black males who terrorize the favela.

In the movie, social suffering, criminality and access of citizenship are a matter of individual choice. Rocket and Little Zé are the two symbolic figures through which implicitly racist stereotypes of the favela and its residents are organized. Rocket is the one who becomes a good person, a docile, domesticated boy in spite of his 'natural' tendency to criminality; it is Rocket who tells the story of violence and disparation in the endless dispute among the gangs in the area. Little Zé, the feared head of the gang, is depicted as a hyper-violent drug dealer. Rocket and Little Zé's lives intersect in their childhood, but contrary to the former, Zé "chooses" the wrong way.

In fact, Zé is portrayed as a beyond-repair natural-born-criminal. The film-makers make no concession about his life. Little Zé's pathological behavior is the center piece through which the movie narrative is organized. In a remarkable scene, the viewer is invited to engage in Little Zé's life history: he is a 12-year-old Black boy who develops a plan to rob a motel in Rio's downtown. Leading a group of Black youth, Little Zé shows all his criminal instincts in the bloodshed in Rio's rich/white area. The disturbing scene shows white clients being murdered by the Black child. White desperation and horror are contrasted with the Black pleasure and insatiable will to kill. The scene is closed with the narrator's voice: "On that night, Little Zé satisfied his thirst to kill." And to reinforce his criminal instinct, the narrator continues that "at eighteen, Little Zé was the most feared and most respected hood in *City of God*."

The scene of the massacre depicts a perverse child who embodies evil; he kills his victims while laughing and playing with his gun. More disturbing than that is the savagery of the child and the impotence of his victims. The catharsis created in this scene is the sympathetic relation of the viewer with the victims and the predicable disapproval of Zé's evilness.

Rape, crime, and drugs are the elements around which the narrative of masculinity is structured in the movie. Contrary to Benny (the "coolest" gangster in *City of God*), a light skinned partner in the drug business, Little Zé is portrayed as the dangerous and ugly man in the favela. Zé's hypersexuality is explored in his possessiveness of women in the hood. It is in a rape scene that the film most explores his sexuality. Zé and his gang invade the house of Mané Galinha, a cool and hard-working guy that refused to be part of the drug business in the favela. Mané Galinha's fiancé (Sabrina Rosa)—that the character has no name in the movie is telling on the place reserved to Black women in the work—is raped and members of Galinha's family

are killed. Left alive, Galinha joins the rival gang led by Sandro Cenoura (Matheus Machtergale), a white easy-going dealer who refuses to ‘employ’ him for his decency and honesty.

The depiction of the male figures in *City of God* suggests some hegemonic understanding regarding Black masculinity in urban Brazil. The masculinity of Black men becomes hegemonic in the representations of violence the movie portrays. In the same vein, the hegemonic masculinity of White manhood is made peripheral: the role played by the white consumer of drugs Thiago (Daniel Zettel) or by the white drug dealer Sandro Cenoura are defined in opposition to the aggressive masculinity of Black men in the movie.

Black masculinity is defined not only in the aggressiveness and madness of Little Zé and his gang, but also in the docility and passivity of Rocket. This narrator-personage is able to transit between the two physical and symbolic worlds – the crudity of the favela and the upscale areas of downtown Rio – transforming himself in the process. His docility is the “green card” to the world of civility and order suggested by his acceptance into the newsroom of a mainstream newspaper. Although he ‘becomes’ a man by having sex with a white journalist and by joining the white male colleagues in the newsroom, approval of his masculinity is given conditionally. Little Zé and Rocket are not too far from each other, as the movie seems to suggest. They are the two sides of the same coin: a pathologized script of Black masculinity.

The literature on masculinities has stressed the existence of different levels of access to the privileges of masculinity. Most important, scholars have criticized the paradigm of masculinity studies for not interrogating power maintained by hegemonic masculinities, that is, white heterosexual manhood (see Gardiner 2002). In an ethnographic account of baile funk, gangs of jiu-jitsu practitioners, and charm Black club frequenters in Rio de Janeiro, Cecchetto (2004) discusses the different styles of masculinity developed by young men in the context of violence in the city. She found an honor code to live masculinity through virility, consumption of drugs, and explicit violence among Black favela residents young men, and the jiu-jitsu gangs. Among Black frequenters of class clubs she noticed an investment in a style of masculinity that emphasizes the conquest of women. The author suggests that there is no correlation between masculinity, violence, and poverty.

It is this correlation that the film attempts to prove: that violence is a *masculinized* characteristic that informs Black manhood; manhood, on its turn, is informed by race, heterosexuality, virility, and aggressiveness. By putting guns in the hands of Black children, *City of God* shows the perpetuation of crime and violence through different generations in the favela. Most important, the movie shows the degrading environment of the favela as the ideal-type of manhood. The 10-year-old Steak, the newest member of Zé’s gang, has his gang baptism by shooting dead another child in the favela. It is by his performance as a “man” that he becomes recognized by the other

members of the gang as one of them. Later on, when a rival gangster chastises him, he gives the following answer:

Knockout Ned – *Go out of this life boy, you are just a kid.*

Steak – *A kid? Are you kidding? I smoke, snort, I've killed and I've robbed. I'm a man.*

The narrative of violence in *City of God* is dehistoricized, depoliticized, and decontextualized. The movie invests in the community rhetoric of civil war and over-emphasizes the power of drug dealers to explain that *Cidade de Deus* is an outlaw land. Here again, the Black male's body is the center of a spectacle of horror where death is banalized and homicidal violence becomes the only way to solve conflicts. Portrayed as cold-blooded criminals that kill anyone who cross their way, Black males are no more than voracious animals. In this context, the construction of Black masculinity is organized around the idea of wickedness. The aggressive performance and disposition of the bodies on the screen is strategically used through technological sophistication to harmoniously integrate the geography of the favela with the cartography of the Black body. Violence is thus the key organizer of Black manhood in the movie. The message stated in the images are that to be a Black male is to be a source of constant danger and crime; it is to be irrational, marginal, cruel.

An important set of literature on Black men has discussed not only Black male complicity with patriarchy, but has moved beyond universalist critiques that do not recognize or question the politics of representation of Black masculinity. According to this literature, the ways Black men are interpolated as subaltern masculinities must be understood within the context of a racial script in which the Black body is economized as the deviant Other (see Jackson 2006, hooks 1992). This literature, mainly composed by Black scholars, has proposed different ways Black men have lived their gender identity. As bell hooks points out,

[This universalist critique] does not interrogate the conventional construction of patriarchal masculinity or question the extent to which Black men have internalized this norm. It never assumes the existence of Black men whose creative agency has enabled them to subvert norms and develop ways of thinking about masculinity that challenges patriarchy (1992:89).

In the same way, bell hooks (2004) has also stressed that patriarchal masculinity is pervasive. As she notes, “[t]he mainstream society has invested in pushing the notion that all that Black men need to do to survive is to become better patriarchs” (hooks, 2004:xiv). She argues that in order to deconstruct this culture of domination, Black males must refuse to take part in white patriarchy; “they need to know that their ambivalent position as males in a white patriarchal world will never be fulfilled” (idem, 2004:66).

Thus, in conversations regarding the social construction Black masculinity it is important to ask to which forces Black young men are responding to when they engage in supposedly deviant behaviors (see Gordon 1997). In that sense, Edmond Gordon (1997) urges us to see Black male practices as more than the social problem that traditional literature has suggested. On the contrary, “[t]he ‘problem’ of Black males, generally couched in psychological and sociological terms (eg, hypersexuality, deviance, immorality, delinquency, and criminality) must be thought of in political terms” (see Gordon 1997:47).

The Politics of Representation

How is the narrative of violence constructed and structured in *City of God*? How does popular culture produce meanings over Black youth masculinity? Drawing on Bourdieu’s formulations on *symbolic violence*, I suggest that the mass media is a privileged place where hegemonic pathologized discourse on Black masculinity is symbolically constructed.

According to Bourdieu (1995), symbolic violence is a set of beliefs and practices imposed by the dominant class to reproduce the social structure of a given society. The institutionalized discourses about the world are, in Bourdieu’s view, a dialectic process marked by both the “incorporation of structures” and by the “ritualization of practices.” The author argues that the maintenance and reproduction of the symbolic order is exercised through inculcation and appropriation; it is when this system of dispositions becomes a taken-for granted, commonsense social order that this set of practices and beliefs becomes what Bourdieu names as *habitus*, that is, it becomes internalized as subjective ritualization of the “objective social structure” (Bourdieu, 1995:166). As a coercive power, in its symbolic form, violence is a tool of social classification and dehumanization of individuals.

The category ‘*habitus*’ is important here because it allows us to unveil the mechanisms by which ideology sustains relations of domination grounded on the uses and productions of myths, thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions, language, and so on (Bourdieu, 1995:85). At this point, I would suggest that as a shared *habitus*, the systematic dehumanization of Black youth in popular culture can be understood as institutionalized modes of domination. Because this set of practices and beliefs are articulated in everyday life as naturally given, symbolic violence becomes pervasive within the whole society, and legitimates physical forms of violence applied to the Black body within and against the ghetto/favela.

In *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Thompson (1995) argued that to study ideology in the mass media is to study the ways meanings are employed to establish and sustain relations of domination. According to him, stigma is a symbolic construction of domination based on race, class, gender, nation, sexuality, and so on. The very categories on which stigmas and stereotypes

rely on are expressions of symbolic forms of domination whereby physical violence is built. In effect, the controlled image of the Black body as source of constant impurity, danger, and fears, has legitimized what I would call the *dehumanizing process*. In that sense, if the Black male body is constructed as synonymous with violence, killing is not only expected but also necessary in an environment where everybody seems to incorporate evil, as the film *City of God* suggests.

It seems so invested in the rhetoric of war and in portraying Black-on-Black violence that it fails to address the role of the State in the victimization of Black youth in the favela. There is no sense of social solidarity in the *City of God*. Indeed, there is no way out of the pathological cycle of violence that organizes the social life in the favela. Only through the elimination of the Black body will the society be protected from the horror that Black presence inconveniently represents. Violence is, then, de-historicized, depoliticized, and de-contextualized.

Authors such as Maria Damasceno (2000), Mariza Correa (1996), Patricia Collins (2005), and others have highlighted the role played by the popular culture industry in perpetuating stereotypes based on sexuality, gender, and race. Common to these authors is the opinion that the media's repertoire of images is a symbolic form of domination that regulates, commodifies, and de-politicizes the Black image. From the Brazilian invention of both the *mulata* and the sanguinary Black criminal to the US racist constructions of Black women as jezebels and mummies, the Black body is historically tied to a stigmatized regime of representation used to spread the ideology of this "new racism", as Collins calls it, that consume images of the Black body as deviant and/or exceptional.

Ronald Jackson (2006) has called this system representation by 'polysemous hegemonic inscriptions of Black bodies' (Jackson, p.123). According to him, pathological depictions of the Black male body is an inscriptive surface where polysemic texts are written: the Black male body is racially scripted as are uneducated, violent, exotic, sexual, exploitable, incapacitated (see Jackson, 2006:46).

The representation of Black people has been organized under the logic of the master and enslaved: it is in that sense that it is correct to affirm that a movie like *City of God* just updates the racial hierarchy inscribed in the racial structure of domination from the colonial era, that is, the mass media representations of Blackness updates the colonial order in our (post) colonial moment. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1990) has argued that "the colonial discourse produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (idem, 1990:41). It is from this 'field of enunciation' that stereotypes are created to construct a repertoire of signifying practices in the exercise of power. As the author points out:

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference- racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, and power (Bhabha, 1990:38).

In that sense, the media's totalizing narratives of violence in the urban landscape is based on a web of meanings over the Black body that marks it as the Other. The culture of spectatorship over otherness in Brazilian mass media is based on a 'racialized regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997) whereby the Other is suspended in a system of signifying practices mobilized around fear and anxieties. As Stuart Hall (1997) is able to show in another context, within such regimes of representation racialized bodies became the discursive site performing the making of difference:

Typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the culture of Black people to Nature, or *naturalizing* difference. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If 'differences' between Black and white people are cultural, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are 'natural', - as the slave-holders believed - then they are beyond history, permanent, and fixed. 'Naturalization' is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference' and thus secure it forever. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning to secure discursive or ideological 'closure' (1997:245).

Thus, race and sexuality are two important fields of intervention through which dehumanization of racial Others are discursively and physically enacted in the context of everyday life. As I have explored so far, the hegemonic discourse on heterosexuality, violence, and fear to construct Black male's masculinity narrative in *City of God* can provide us a good example of how 'racial hegemony' (see Hanchard 1998) works to maintain structural domination based on sex, race, class, and gender.

In the following section, I shall contextualize *City of God's* narratives of violence among Black men in Brazil. It is not the case that Black men experience defines the racial condition of Blacks in Brazil. The point I want to make here is to make explicit that the dehumanization of Black males in the mass media is one of the set of practices of domination Black people are subjected to in Brazilian society. Thus, I suggest, we must read the dehumanizing set of practices and discourses in the mass media as symbolic violence that enforces and makes possible the killing of the Black body.

Who Belongs to the Brazilian Nation?

The traditional literature on violence in Brazil (see for instance Chauí 2000, Da Matta 1991, Zaluar 1985, Kant de Lima 1994, Cano 1997, and others) has been compromised by not situating urban violence within the anti-Black character of the nation. Is it not the case that there is something inherently

anti-Black in the Brazilian national imaginary that makes Black bodies out of place in our *Brazilianidade*, at the same time that Black culture becomes a currency? The project of nation never included Blacks for such a group was an obstacle to the ideal-type of modernity and civilization celebrated by the white elites. Republic was thought to be built under the ideology *embranquecimento*: as the phenotype's profile of its population turn into a closer appearance with the Europeans, Brazil would achieve status of civilized nation of (see Skidmore 1995, Munanga 1999).

In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy (1987) demonstrates that ideas on race, class, and nation produce narratives of belonging and nationhood across the political spectrum of the British nation. Arguing against Benedict Anderson (2006)'s earlier formulation that racism was not a component of nationalism and that the nation was built upon *print capitalism* rather than on biological bases, Gilroy shows that national membership in the British case is grounded in the racial discourse that constitutes national boundaries at the same time that denies its very existence. The process of making Britain as a pure a homogenous nationality, he suggests, is an ambivalent process for it is also a process of making 'otherness'. Cultural and biological ties are articulated to create boundaries, what he names as the 'new racism'. New racism, according to him,

is primarily concerned with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. It specifies who may legitimately belong to the national community and simultaneously advances reasons for the segregation or banishment of those whose 'origin, sentiment or citizenship' assigns them elsewhere (1987:250).

Regardless of Britain's specificity and racial formation, Gilroy's argument is useful to the understanding of Brazilian nation-building as well. While the notion of citizenship and national belonging in Brazil has a deeply racialized root since not every one can be a citizen in that country, Blacks appear in the popular representation of the nation as exotic objects of white consumption. Carnival, samba, football, sexual tourism, and so on are incorporated in the narratives of the nation in a culturalist perspective that depoliticize the meanings of race while at the same time creating this very category. Is not that ambivalence, however, precisely what makes the re-production of the nation so powerful in the Brazilian case? It is within this framework that I pose the following question: How is the historical reality of colonialism updated and re-actualized in contemporary narratives of violence? How is violence deployed to write and to sustain the project of the Brazilian nation?

Brazil – Who Lives and Who Dies in this Racial Paradise?

These questions are important for us to think about urban violence in contemporary Brazil, and particularly the culture of death against Black young males, as a web of events and practices informed by constructed meanings

over gender, race, class, and the nation. Post colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1990) contend that nation-building is the result of a creative work of 'cultural elaboration'. Bhabha's insightful reflections on the ways the colonized disturbed the hegemonic codes of the colonizer by the process of 'productive ambivalence' (Bhabha, 1990:67), in which the body of the colonized were both the object of the colonial abuse but also a vehicle of power, are well known. What interests us in Bhabha's reflection by now is his formulation on the 'other question', that is, how the other is constructed by a web of discourses, as well as his formulation on the way differences (sexuality, race, class, gender) fit in the narration of the nation.

Bhabha invites us to read the nation as a performative work. According to him, the nation is produced and lived by two processes: a pedagogical and a performative. The pedagogical process would be the one learned from what Althusser (1979) had previously called Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The school, the church, the national media, and so on is example of the living narratives 'told' to us. The process of performing the nation, he suggests, would be one in constant making and becoming. We write the nation by performing the nation. And by performing the nation we contest, negotiate, rewrite it. In that sense, the "good" citizens would be the ones that perform the nation with docility. It is the pedagogical process that normalizes and disciplines the body, producing 'good' citizens. It makes docile subjects, produced by the technologies of power, as Foucault (1979) has reminded us.

Bhabha's argument is critical for offering routes to think about the ways the nation is written not only in the geographical, but also in the biological body. Yet, the questions that rise from his reading are: What happens then with some(bodies) that are inherently unfitted in the nation? Here, I would argue, lies the Black condition within the Brazilian nation: Blacks will never fulfill the ideal citizen in the Brazilian racial imaginary for writing the nation in Brazil has historically meant to erase the Black subject.

Elsewhere Jacqui Alexander (1994) has argued that the very process of nation-building requires the discipline and regulation of 'deviant' bodies by a technology of state control aiming to reassure the reproduction of the heterosexual family. According to her, an intertwined and historical process of masculinization and heterosexualization of the state colonized notions of citizenship. Thus,

Not just (any) body can be a citizen any more, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-productive, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation (1994:06).

The movie *City of God*, I propose, needs to be understood within such larger context I have tried to outline so far. The racist imagination of its film-

makers—depicting young Black men as natural-born criminals and the favela as the privileged place of evilness and moral degradation—needs to be read as part of the net of racial dominance that subjugates and kills Blacks in Brazilian urban setting.

The movie would have done better had it contextualized the widespread violence in Brazil. According to official data from DATASUS/Brazilian Bureau Census, from 1996 to 2006 homicide among youth 15-24 years old have increased 31.3% in Brazil. The homicide rate among youth is 170% higher than among the overall population. Even worse, 92.1% of the victims are young males. Indeed, the homicide rate among the Black population is 73.1% higher than among whites. In states like Paraíba and Alagoas, the victimization rate of Blacks account for 700% (Waiselfisz, 2006:24). Drug trafficking, organized crime, and street gangs are some of the factors in the victimization of Black youth, but they are not the only ones. A case in point is the fact that even today, police reports have the telling description '*the suspect element is of standard color*' to refer to Black individuals. Researchers Ignacio Cano (1997) and Jorge Silva (2002) have shown that regarding homicides, Black males are the main victims not only of the criminals but also of the police. While police lethality data on race is vague in Brazil, human rights organizations and state databases show that between 1995 and June of 2006, military police in São Paulo killed 5,473. Just in one year (2008), 2189 people were killed by military and civil police in Bahia. And in the state of Rio de Janeiro the police killed 900 people between January and August of 2003 (Vargas and Amparo-Alves, forthcoming).

Instead of discussing the causes of deadly violence in urban Brazil, *City of God* silences its structural dimension. In the context of the militarization of public security and the culture of fear manufactured by the press, the *favela* is portrayed as a place of disorder and its inhabitants as potential criminals. Thus, the massacre of young Black men becomes normal in everyday discourse and justified as a collateral effect of a legitimate war against criminals. Here, the language of racial democracy miraculously erases the color of dead bodies and the structural causes of violence.

Conclusion

By looking into the politics of representation of Black men in the popular culture, I suggested that the controlling image of them as criminal, ugly, polluted, and evil is one of the strategies by which racial meanings are produced paving the way to the killing of young Black men in Brazilian favelas. Brazilian Black male experience is not, by any means, the quintessential kind of oppression Black people have been subjected to throughout the African Diaspora. In this paper I privileged Black male encounters with a specific kind of violence (urban violence) and its representation in popular culture.

In that context, I suggested, the narrative of Black masculinity in *City of God* is organized around three foundations: violence, hypersexuality, and race. Rocket [Buscapé] is the exception among the Black youth that fail in disgrace in the favela. Only by becoming a hard worker could he be able to resist the pathological fatality of living in the favela. Little Zé, on the other hand, is the one who embodies the violence in its most cruel form. In the white racist mind of *City of God's* filmmakers, Zé represents the natural born, out of control criminal. Since he does not fulfill the requirements to fully participate in the white civilized world, to be recognized as male he must be feared, must have outstanding sexual performance, must prove his manhood at any cost. Are not these the characteristics used in the popular culture to feed the web of stereotypes that legitimizes terror in the favela?

NOTES

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