

Policing Race in Two Cities: From Necropolitical Governance to Imagined Communities

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Why do non-white residents of South L.A. and São Paulo's periphery share similar experiences regarding their interactions with the police? How do these shared experiences influence the formation of racial identities? While the experiences of non-white residents in each city are not identical, they present similar features. Based on extensive fieldwork conducted in South L.A. and São Paulo's southern and western periphery, this paper argues that non-white victimization by the police is a central component of the necropolitical governance that renders certain bodies as disposable. These experiences have become a central component in the formation of racial and communal identities. As such they have become part of the rituals that create the imagined community of South L.A. and São Paulo's periphery. In this sense, this article contends that by understanding the commonalities of these experiences we can expand the limits of the imagined community and as a consequence the limits of resistance to state violence. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2016 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

“*Os homens*² came in the middle of the night,” Marcelo³ recalls. “They were looking for a suspect in the area and thought he may be at my house. It was around midnight and we were all sleeping. My wife was pregnant at that time with our second child, and my four-years old son was sleeping in the next room. They broke in with full force, kicking and pushing everything in their way. They pointed their machine guns at me and shoved me out of my bed, slapping and kicking me. My son came running to our room. My wife hugged him tight, both crying. At the beginning the officers thought I was the suspect they were looking for. When they realized I wasn’t him, they kept slapping me and asking where that person was. At gun point, they ordered me out of the house. When the neighbors heard all the confusion, they came out too. They shouted at the officers that I was a ‘worker’ and not a ‘bandit’⁴ and asked them to let me go. The commotion was such that the officers decided to let me go.” “If you were not the suspect and the officers knew you didn’t know anything about the suspect, why did they keep beating you?” I asked. “Because for them I was just another black bastard,” Marcelo answered (Sclofsky, field notes, São Paulo, October 6th, 2015).

This story, which exemplifies part of the daily life of residents of São Paulo’s periphery, may not present anything novel, except for the fact that from a phenotypical perspective Marcelo is not black. From an outsider’s perspective, such as mine, Marcelo could easily be categorized as white. However, his experiences with the police as a favela-born man living in São Paulo’s periphery leads him to identify himself as black and to interpret his civic status as a second-class citizen at best. While the

² “*Os homens*,” “the men” in English, is the way in which periphery residents in São Paulo generally refer to the police, especially the Military Police. ©2016 Transformative Studies Institute

³ All the interviewees’ names have been changed in order to protect their identity. Demographic details will also be omitted when possible for the same reason, with the exception of those demographic details that are central to the arguments of the paper.

⁴ The distinction between “worker” and “bandit” or “*trabalhador*” and “*bandido*” indicates on the one hand, a person’s involvement in the criminal world, and yet, on the other hand, the way in which the police treat that person will also define his status as worker or bandit. Given that many residents of São Paulo’s periphery engage in both formal and informal activities, the difference has more to do with the perception the community has of a person. Often times, this perception is built around encounters with the police.

construction of Marcelo's racial identity is in many ways shaped by these violent encounters, the content of his blackness is not imposed upon him by the state. His self-identification as "*pobre, preto, periferico*"⁵ has become a symbol of pride in that he is a member of a community that shares similar experiences and searches for common grounds of resistance. And these experiences with state violence,⁶ as we will see, cross geographical boundaries.

As Jaime Alves (2014) correctly points out, black victimization by the police is a central dimension of the racial state and part of a necropolitical governance that renders certain bodies as disposable. This governance is not specific to São Paulo or even Los Angeles. This fact begs the question of why non-white residents of these communities share similar experiences of segregation, exploitation and violence. This paper will argue that this is due to the way the concept of "police" as well as their practices evolved in Western liberal thought. The police, in charge of the well-being of society and the fabrication of order (Neocleous, 2000), became, with time, the institution through which the "dangerous classes" were to be controlled. The concept of "dangerous classes" was racialized since the times of colonialism and slavery and still has components linked to both class and race.

At the same time, this paper will show how these shared experiences are a central element of the communal identities developed both in São Paulo and Los Angeles. They are part of the necessary rituals for the formation of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). In this sense, the destructive power of the state has the potential of being transformed into a constructive power of communal bonds that may even transcend borders. Indeed, the development of a transnational imagined community implies not only shared experiences of state repression, but also shared experiences of resistance.

Several authors have studied how encounters with the police, most of them violent, shape and give content to racial identities. Epp et al. show how "racial minorities are disproportionately subjected to suspicious inquiries without any basis or justification" (2014, p. 5), and this gives

⁵ This translates as: black, poor, and from the periphery.

⁶ For the purpose of this work, I define state violence as illegitimate violent acts committed by state agents against specific groups of the populations, which remain unpunished. The most extreme form of state violence are the extrajudicial killings committed by police officers.

content to their sense of citizenship.⁷ Neil Websdale (2001), in his ethnographic study of community policing in Nashville, argues that this new form of policing has become the latest technique of social control against poor communities, targeting minorities and reinforcing the images of black criminality. This connection between blacks and crime has deep historical roots, as documented by Khalil Muhammad (2010), who demonstrates how statistics have been used to strengthen the association of blackness with criminality. Other scholars have also analyzed how police in the United States have constantly targeted African-Americans and how these encounters influence minorities' self-images and their sense of citizenship (Cashmore and McLaughlin, 1991; Hawkins and Thomas, 1991; Bowling, 1998; Bass, 2001; Russell-Brown, 2004, 2009).

Similar studies have been conducted beyond the United States. Didier Fassin (2011), in his work on policing in Paris' banlieues,⁸ shows how the humiliating and unjust encounters that young, non-white residents of these communities have with the police reflect what they represent in the eyes of society and in many cases produce a sense of shame and guilt among the victims that is hard to repress (Fassin, 2011, p. 8). Ben Penglase (2014), in his ethnographic work in Rio de Janeiro, explains how, in a context of racial diversity, encounters with the police define the way residents of favelas see themselves and others; the more violent the encounter the greater the chance of being seen as black. Alves (2014) has also illustrated the ways in which blacks are being surveilled, controlled, and killed in the city of São Paulo, and how these experiences define part of the content of being black in the city.

Fassin argues that as a result of the worldwide convergence of a dominant model of urban policing and the global networking of law enforcement, policing practices have become more similar across countries (Fassin, 2011, pp. xvi-xvii). Yet, little comparative research has been done in support of this association. By juxtaposing São Paulo and Los Angeles, I attempt to show how, despite the geographic distance and the particularities of each place, non-white residents of low-income communities in both cities share fundamentally similar experiences.

WHY LOS ANGELES AND SÃO PAULO MATTER?

Saskia Sassen (2014) argues that the increase of displaced people in

⁷ Citizenship, according to T.H. Marshall (1964), is a status granted to those who are full members of the community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed.

⁸ Paris' version of slums or ghettos.

Sub-Saharan Africa and the growth of unemployment and incarceration in the United States are local expressions of systemic dynamics that connect what may in the surface seem unconnected. While oppressed and oppressors may be separated by great distances, there are places, according to Sassen, where all comes together and where the oppressed are part of “the social infrastructure for power” (2014, p. 11). These places are what she calls global cities, which, São Paulo and Los Angeles are examples of. The globalization of economic activity has led major cities to fulfill a new strategic role, Sassen (2001) argues. These cities have become command points in the organization of the world economy; and at the same time, they have become places in which the contradictions of the system and the way these are managed can be fully appreciated.

São Paulo and Los Angeles not only share a status of global cities, concentrating financial, managerial, coordination and servicing operations of international firms (Sá, 2007, pp. 3-4; Soja, 2000, p. 114; 2014),⁹ they also share a series of characteristics that make their comparison interesting. While being small, almost irrelevant towns, during the colonial period, both cities grew to become centers of economic power nationally and internationally. Los Angeles and São Paulo have and still portray the image of the city of the future, where the dream of economic and social success is possible, attracting a diverse array of racial, ethnic, and national groups (Caldeira, 2000; Sá, 2007; Soja, 2014; Weinstein, 2015). Soja (2014) argues that Los Angeles is one of the most economically and culturally heterogeneous urban regions in the world, and the same can be said about São Paulo.¹⁰ Despite their economic boom, poverty and

⁹ According to the Brookings Institute, São Paulo ranks 6th in the world in GDP, while Los Angeles ranks 3rd. Following the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Los Angeles has the second largest GDP in the country and the second largest GDP in the finance industry behind New York. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) indicates that São Paulo has the largest GDP in Brazil. Companies ranking in Fortune 500 such as AECOM, CBRE Group, and Reliance Steel and Aluminum, have their headquarters in Los Angeles, as well as consumer products and services provider Loot Crate, which generated, according to Inc. 5000, a \$116.2m in revenues the last year (Inc.5000, 2016). According to Forbes, São Paulo ranked 6th in Forbes top 10 billionaire cities and has approximately 50% of the participation in Brazilian banking system and Latin America’s largest Stock Exchange (Geromel, 2013).

¹⁰ The U.S. Census Bureau indicates that more than 70% of Los Angeles population is nonwhite (53% Latino, 7% African-American, and 16% Asian); 35% of Los Angeles population was born outside of the United States. The 2010 Census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), shows that 35% of São Paulo’s populations self-identifies as nonwhite. São Paulo has attracted immigrants from all over the world, being people of Italian descent the majority; São Paulo has one of the largest

unemployment deepened, and ethnic and racial segregation intensified in both cities, making the comparison even more relevant.

A BRIEF NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on fieldwork research that I conducted during 2015 in South L.A. and in Jardim Angela, Capão Redondo, Osasco, and Jandira in São Paulo. These areas have been historically considered dangerous regions,¹¹ in which intensive policing has taken place and where recently attempts of new forms of policing, such as community policing, have been deployed (Alves, 2014, Davis, 1990, Feltran, 2010, 2011, Vargas, 2006); henceforth, I concentrated my work there. I spend almost six months in each city. My initial research question was how residents of these areas experience policing and what are the implications for their civic, racial and spatial identities.

In Los Angeles, I began my fieldwork by attending community-police meetings as well as Neighborhood Council meetings.¹² In these meetings, I recruited the first participants for my research and through them I was introduced to other residents of these communities. Furthermore, I interviewed random people participating in events in the different communities. Finally, I contacted the different police stations and interviewed officers working in the area, as well as neighborhood prosecutors. In São Paulo, I conducted a similar approach. I attended community meetings and contacted community organizations, such as Santos Mártires from the Catholic Church, in which I recruited participants and through them I was introduced to other residents.

As a qualitative study I do not claim to have a perfect sample of the community, but the interviews reflect the racial and ethnic distribution of

concentration of Japanese population outside of Japan, as well as an important number of people of Middle Eastern descent.

¹¹ Jardim Ângela, for instance, was considered one of the most violent regions in the world in the 1990s (Ponciano, 2004). The other regions in São Paulo have also been documented by different authors as being sites of high levels of violence including police violence (Feltran, 2010; Telles, 2010). The same can be said about the different areas of South L.A. (Schiesl, 1990; Vargas, 2006).

¹² Neighborhood Councils are city-certified local groups made up of people who live, work, own property or have some other connection to a neighborhood. They receive \$37,000 annually from public funds to support their activities, which include events and programs that respond to the needs of each specific community. The Neighborhood Council needs to have at least 20,000 residents inside its boundaries and to be created it needs to have between 200 to 500 residents' signatures (<http://empowerla.org/about-neighborhood-councils/>).

the population in these areas.¹³ Nonwhite victimization by the police has been a central element in the way policing has been conducted historically in these areas (Alves, 2014; Bastide & Fernandes, 2008 [1954]; Davis 1990; Feltran, 2010; Herbert 1997; Roussell, 2015; Vargas, 2006); henceforth, the way nonwhite residents experience policing today allow us to evaluate if policing has improved and ask if this sector of the population, who has been historically victimized, still suffers from police abuse.

Participants' Demographic Characteristics by City					
	Los Angeles (Total: 108)*			São Paulo (Total: 122)**	
	African-American	Latino	White-Other	Afro-Brazilian Brown	White-Other
Male (Under 35)	9 (11.8%)	12 (15.8%)	1 (1.3%)	17 (21.3%)	9 (11.3%)
Male (Above 35)	6 (7.9%)	10 (13.2%)	2 (2.6%)	8 (10%)	4 (5%)
Female (Under 35)	10 (13.2%)	14 (18.4%)	1 (1.3%)	19 (23.8%)	10 (12.5%)
Female (Above 35)	5 (6.6%)	5 (6.6%)	1 (1.3%)	7 (8.8%)	6 (7.5%)
Total	30 (39.5%)	41 (53.9%)	5 (6.6%)	51 (63.8%)	29 (36.3%)
*This number includes 11 police officers and 5 state officials.					
** This number includes 12 police officers and 9 state officials.					

Neither in the interviews nor in the meetings I participated, did I merely “collected data.”¹⁴ Rather, I treated my interlocutors as sources of

¹³ According to The Los Angeles Times, Mapping L.A. Project, 56.7% of South L.A.’s population is Latino, 38% African-American, 1.6% Asian, and 2.2% white. Unfortunately, in the case of São Paulo’s periphery there is no official data regarding racial/ethnic distribution.

¹⁴ The interviews were unstructured and open-ended. I asked them to tell me about their lives and about living in these communities. I asked them about their experiences with the police and how they saw community-police relations. There was no time limit for the interviews, most them took between an hour or two. Some of the interviews were group conversations, with no more than four participants. The interviews took place in different locations, from the interviewees home, a bar or coffee shop in the area, or in the street. I let the participants choose the place of the interview to make them feel as comfortable as possible. In this way, they could express their views openly and freely. The interviews with police officers in Los Angeles took place in the police station or during ride along.

knowledge; they taught me about their world and their experiences, and I was never a “fly on the wall”, and I am aware that the fact of being a white, Latin American male, affected the interactions and conversations that I had during my fieldwork. It is extremely difficult to determine the extent to which my presence influenced the content of these stories, but it is something the reader should take into consideration.¹⁵

Following the spirit of Joy James (1996) and as João Costa Vargas (2006) points out regarding his ethnographic work on blackness in South Central L.A., my research does not have a detached view toward the society, people, and institutions under study. Vargas’s approach is to have a critical view of the protagonists of his work and contextualize their stories within a greater historical framework. Rather than demonstrating theories, Vargas develops an argument that is intrinsically open-ended and reflects its “partial, localized, historically determined, and dialogical nature” (Vargas, 2006, p. 19). I attempt to follow in James and Vargas’s footsteps and contribute to the dialogue regarding the ways state violence takes place and how the state is experienced by the residents of these different communities.

SHARED EXPERIENCES: ENCOUNTERING THE POLICE

As we have seen in the aforementioned case of Marcelo, with which I open this article, encounters with the police not only can give content to racial identities, but can even define it. According to Brazil’s ambivalent definition of race, this may seem as natural. As Alves’s interlocutors told him, “If you want to know who is black and who is not in Brazil, just ask the police” (Alves, 2014, p. 328). In some instances, this is also the case in Los Angeles. Adelle is a middle-class, African-American woman in her early 50s. She has two sons, one in his late teens, and the other in his early twenties. Their father is white. And while the older son, according to Adelle, has assumed a white identity, the younger one has recently begun adopting an African-American identity. I asked Adelle why she thinks her younger son has adopted what she sees as a black identity:

In São Paulo, interviewing police officers in the community could endanger my well-being, as some residents could interpret this as if I was informing the police; henceforth, the interviews took place in coffee shops outside the areas I was studying.

¹⁵ I am confident the participants in this research shared their views and experiences openly and freely. Nonetheless, in the context of complex racial and ethnic dynamics, I feel compelled to inform the reader of my racial and ethnic identity.

I do not know exactly, but I believe it has to do with my family and also his experiences with the police. My brother, his uncle, has had too many bad experiences with the police. When we were young, living in South Central L.A., my father all the time used to send me to see why my brother was taking so long in running an errand. I would go to see and I would find him spread-eagle on the floor or against the wall being searched by the police. My sister was harshly beaten in the mid-90s at Leimert Park by police officers, who knocked her out, leaving her unconscious to the point she lost her sense of taste. My nephews are constantly being harassed and pulled over. My youngest has long curly hair, that makes him look black if you see him behind the windows of his car. He already got pulled over by the police several times. The funny thing is that when they ask him out of the car, they don't really know how to 'classify' him. He has friends who have been beaten, even shot by the police. I think all of this has had a strong effect on his racial identity. Of course, it is not only this. He is proud of all his heritage, and I think defining himself as black gives him a sense of empowerment, as if he is saying 'now I know what to expect and how to cope with it' (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, May 20, 2015).

As Epp et al. (2014) show, even what seem to be regular encounters with the police, such as a traffic stop, can affect the way you define the content of your identity. Being brown or black, both in Los Angeles and São Paulo, means living under the constant threat of being pulled over.

Both, in São Paulo and Los Angeles, Afro-Brazilians and African-Americans feel that they are being targeted by the police. In the former, residents are stopped, generally on their way to work, and are asked out of their cars while officers request to search their cars. Most of my interviewees told me they comply with the request; when I asked them why, their answer generally was that if they refused, the police will find a way to keep them waiting for hours, while if not, in less than thirty minutes they are back on their way. In the latter, similar situations occur during the "blitzes";¹⁶ although my interviewees claim the police are less polite or respectful. One Afro-Brazilian informant, told me he prefers to commute to work by bus. Even if it takes him double the time, it allows him to avoid being stopped by the police.

¹⁶ These checkpoints or "blitz" are regular police operations in which cars are "randomly" stopped and searched. The reasons for the operation may be a recent criminal event or just routine checks for illegal activity. Many of the residents interviewed feel it is just a show of force by the police.

Driving while black or brown is not the only suspicious activity. Biking and walking while black or brown also qualify. As a result of a series of bike thefts on the campus of the University of Southern California (USC), located in the heart of South L.A., police officers have increased the already existing repressive measures against the residents of the area. In one of the Community Police Advisory Board (CPAB) meetings,¹⁷ the Senior Lead Officer of the area, when asked what the police is doing regarding bike thefts, answered that they have been encouraging students to register their bikes with the police. The reason provided was that when “someone is riding a bike and the person doesn’t look like the owner, we can stop them and check that.” After the meeting, I asked the officer what she meant by “doesn’t look like the owner.” Her evasive response made it clear, at least for me, that she was referring to young residents of the area (Sclofsky, field notes Los Angeles, May 5, 2015). Young Latino and African-American residents of the area have complained about the harassment they face from the police and how they are constantly stopped while riding their bikes.¹⁸ In São Paulo too, young residents from the periphery are constantly being stopped, harassed, and even violently beaten by the police just for walking the streets. “I’m more afraid of the police than the gang members,” was one of the most common phrases uttered by young residents of Capão Redondo.

Young black and brown residents of South L.A. and São Paulo’s periphery feel threatened and targeted by the police. At the same time, the police often see young residents as a potential threat. In conversations with police officers in São Paulo, they constantly echoed this sense of threat. “It’s a war out here,” one officer said. The accompanying officer, trying to minimize his partner’s words, told me that, “it’s not a war, but there is a lot of crime here, and criminals have no age.” (Sclofsky, field notes, São Paulo October 2, 2015). I asked Capt. Rodriguez from Newton Station in

¹⁷ In the context of the current trend of community policing, Community Police Advisory Boards have been established across different communities in Los Angeles. These meetings, presided by a member of the community and the captain of the area’s police station, are a place for the community and the police to get together and learn about the concerns of the community, as well as the ways the police are addressing the different problems affecting the residents. Most of the community residents who participate in these meetings are generally older people and in a better economic situation than the average residents. Further as Roussel (2015) demonstrates, CPABs portray a very partial version of what the community is and who belongs to it.

¹⁸ Streetsblog LA reporter, Sahra Sulaiman, has produced extensive and excellent coverage regarding the profiling of black and brown youth in the surroundings of USC, where young black and brown residents are being constantly pulled over by the police (Sulaiman, 2013).

South L.A. if he felt that putting the responsibility for deescalating community-police encounters on the young residents of the area was not asking too much. As he responded,

When I pull over someone, I do not know who he is or what has he done. He knows who am I, he identifies my uniform, he knows I am an officer, but I cannot know if he is a criminal or not. This is why the responsibility is on his hands. His actions will determine how the situation will go. Of course I am trained and prepared to avoid any escalation, but again, the moment I pull someone over, I do not know if he is a criminal or not (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, May 21st, 2015).

While in the context of police work, Capt. Rodriguez may be correct in his rational and seemingly neutral assessment, this statement is suggestive of the type of environment that surrounds the life of residents. Even with officers, such as this captain, who are seemingly working hard to improve the relations with the community, the premise is one of a constant threat. More importantly, young residents perceive themselves as being a threat, as having implanted in their bodies the signs of deviance. As Fassin (2011) argues, these encounters and discourses leave strong marks in the psyches and on the bodies of young brown and black residents of these communities.

In many ways, this situation, combined with the constant violence that surrounds young people as they grow up in these regions, has led to a naturalization of violence, as if being a victim of violence, including police violence, is part of the natural life of the community. Roger, an Afro-Brazilian young male whom I met at a youth center had had in the past several close encounters with the police, which ended in him spending some time in a juvenile detention facility. When I ask him how and why he was detained, Roger tells me:

“It was early in the evening, and I was having some fun with one of my friends. Suddenly *os homens* came from nowhere. With their guns out they came too quickly. My friend was able to run away, but for me it was too late, they caught me. Two of the officers held me tight, while a third one started slapping me.” “You piece of shit; I know it was you who stole the cellphone.” A robbery had taken place a couple of blocks down. “I know you sell drugs, where are they?” “I have nothing” Roger said. “You know what, I’ll offer you a way out,” said the officer, “I’m going to count to ten and you will run. If nothing

happens, then you're free. What do you say?" I knew what that meant, so I told him I was not going to run," Roger explained. After a brief back and forth, the officers shoved Roger into the police car and drove up the hill. They took him to an open area at the top of the hill, where, according to Roger, the police take people to execute them. They pushed him out of the car, beating and kicking him. They hold him straight and one of the officers pulled out two handguns and offered one to Roger. "The officer wanted me to take the gun. I knew if I did that I was lost, so I refused. He kept slapping me and trying to get me to take the gun. Finally, the officer smiled and said 'I'm on a good mood today, so I'll let you live this time.' They took me to the station and booked me for drug dealing," Roger explained. Shocked by the story, I asked Roger how he felt about the fact that they were about to kill him. "Well," Roger answered, "I was doing shit"¹⁹ (Sclofsky, field notes, São Paulo, October 16, 2015).

In one sentence, Roger explained the complexities of living in these regions. He never saw the police action as illegal, illegitimate, or even wrong. He was doing "shit"; therefore, the police had the "right" to do what they did. At a very early age, residents of São Paulo's periphery and South L.A. discover that they are at the mercy of police discretion. These traumatic experiences are not only a way of disciplining and governing behavior (Foucault 1991). They are also part of what Mbembe (2003) calls *necropolitics*, the power the sovereign has to dictate who may live and who must die. As Guillermina Seri (2012) powerfully argues, embedded in the concept of discretion we find the power of life and death. Even when this power is administratively and legally regulated, the power of deciding in a specific instance if the use of lethal force is necessary is part and parcel of the concept of police discretion.

In this sense, it is important to consider how the concept of police and policing evolved in Western political thought. Mark Neocleous (2000) indicates that from the late fifteenth century, political discourse in Europe centered around the concept of police. The concept referred to legislative and administrative regulation of the internal life of the community, and its ordinances referred to the management and direction of the population by

¹⁹ *Fazendo merda* ", "doing shit" in English, means that they were doing something illegal, which in this case it could be that they were selling marihuana or most probable smoking marihuana. While illegal it is not always socially condemned and it does not refer to violent acts.

the state. With the rise of liberalism,²⁰ the open intrusion of the state into the affairs of man was seen as problematic. Part of liberalism's solution to the problem of social order was to hand it over to law. Police came to refer to a more limited force focused on the prevention of crime and internal security. However, the supposedly formally equal system founded on private property also developed new ideas based on the underlying hierarchical relations of power within the system. Since the legal and governmental system were instituted to defend property, there must be a force to assure the implementation of these laws and to provide security. This force was the police (Neocleous, 2000). Therefore, behind the concept of police was the idea of establishing a bourgeois order that implied the control, surveillance, and repression of the dangerous classes, which had an economic but also a racial content. Both in the United States and Brazil, the concept of police adopted a similar meaning and the police was and is a central institution in the repression and control of labor struggles and race (Harring, 1981; Rose, 2000, 2005; Rosemberg, 2010).

FROM NECROPOLITICS TO IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

We have seen how residents of South L.A. and São Paulo's periphery share similar experiences as part of the necropolitics of state repression. Yet, we should avoid the mistake of thinking that the victims of state violence are passive objects being disposed at will by the discretionary powers of the state. The experiences with state violence have the potential of expanding the boundaries of imagined communities, such as those composed of residents of South L.A. or São Paulo's periphery.

In his seminal work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that nations are imagined communities; they are imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow

²⁰ Ryan (2007) contends that liberalism, as many other political concepts, is a contested one and as such it becomes difficult to define. However, what Neocleous is referring to in his work is the rise of what is known as classic liberalism, associated with John Locke, Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich von Hayek. It focuses on the idea of limited government, the maintenance of the rule of law, the avoidance of arbitrary and discretionary power, and the responsibility of individuals for their own fates (Ryan, 2007, p. 362). In this context, it is important to point out what Charles Mills argues is one of the most disturbing and salient features of classic liberalism, which is that while it developed at the same time in which Europe was expanding a mercantile system based on slave labor in America, most thinkers of the era were silent about race. This is more disturbing considering that some of these thinkers, such as Locke and J.S. Mill, had investments in the slave trade business. They develop a series of moral ideals, without ever mentioning that all of them were systematically violated for blacks (Mills, 1997, 1998).

members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006, p. 6). While the residents of the communities of South L.A. or São Paulo’s periphery may not know or ever know their fellow members, the shared experiences with segregation, exploitation, repression, and violence by state agents have the capacity to generate a communal bond.

Anderson highlights the existence of a series of rituals or mass ceremonies that are shared by the community and give content to the nation (Anderson 2006, p. 35). The traffic stops, searches, harassments, and violence have all become the mass rituals for the residents of the communities under study. These “rituals” are transmitted from generation to generation, and form part of the complex and very rich meaning of being “*pobre, preto, periférico*” or part of South L.A. When non-white mothers in São Paulo or Los Angeles tell their children the precautions they need to take if stopped by a police officer, what they are doing, apart from protecting their children from state violence, is transmitting communal knowledge. This same knowledge, the details of which may be particular to each place, is shared unconsciously by mothers across space and time. Becoming conscious of this process is to become aware that there is a larger community that shares similar agonies, and may create a stronger and larger movement of resistance.

SIGNS OF RESISTANCE

Resistance to police violence and abuse takes many forms, from survival tactics, to cultural expressions, and direct action. Nonwhite residents have developed a series of survival tactics that are deployed on a daily basis. João, a middle-class Afro-Brazilian male in his late sixties, works as a paralegal worker and is an activist in the Afro-Brazilian movement. He was born and raised in one of the favelas in the southern periphery of the city, and now lives in a middle-class neighborhood where there are almost no Afro-Brazilians living there. I asked João how does it feel to live in his neighborhood:

“It is nice and it is frightening at the same time,” João tells me. “It is frightening because at the end of the day I don’t really belong here. I am seen as a service provider, as a doorman, a security guard; they never see me as a resident, especially the police. Every time I see a Military Police patrol car I shiver. They constantly stop and frisk me, they ask me what am I doing here, and unless I show them some proof that I live in the area they won’t believe me. Nowadays, every time I see a police officer I begin acting as if I am delivering documents or

private mail to some place. In this way I've been able to avoid being stopped as frequent as before" (Sclofsky, personal communication, São Paulo, October 9th, 2015).

Many residents have developed similar tactics, which help them cope with the feeling of living under siege. In Los Angeles, for instance, many of the interviewees comply with unjustified search requests by the police in order to avoid uncomfortable confrontation or running the risk of becoming victims of police violence. Marcus, an African-American male in his fifties, who works as a construction supervisor in Los Angeles, shares much of the frustrations expressed by other residents of South L.A. He recalls an instance when, travelling with his daughter, he was stopped by a police officer:

"The moment I saw the police car behind us and I heard the officer asking to stop, I got nervous," Marcus recalls. "I told my daughter to slow down, stop the car on the side of the road, cut the engine, and put both hands on the steering wheel. I put both my hands on the console and waited for the officer to come by. If I were a white guy I could have left the engine running and even complain to the officer about why he pulled us over, but not when I'm black," Marcus complained. "I've been pulled over a couple of times and I don't remember having to turn off the engine," I said. "That's what I mean, when you are black and live in this side of town, the rules are different. Every time I am pulled over by the police I feel I have committed a crime, even when they just ask me questions and let me go without any ticket or warning." Marcus said bitterly. "You know, I have two daughters and I always wanted a son, but the idea of having a young black son driving through L.A. terrifies me," Marcus confessed (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, June 19, 2015).

Several organizations, the Santos Mártires Church in São Paulo and the Youth for Justice Coalition in Los Angeles for instance, have designed and distributed informative flyers to instruct young residents of these communities how they should act when pulled over by a police officer. While both flyers inform residents of their rights, they also ask residents to comply with police orders, avoid sudden moves, and talk respectfully to the officer in charge. These survival tactics may save lives, but at the

same time they run the risk of naturalizing police unfair practices. After yielding so many times to the requests of police officers, the right to refuse to be searched may lose its practical value.

A further sign of mobilization is the growing expressions of cultural resistance taking place in both cities. A new literature genre, called “literatura periférica”,²¹ developed in the early 2000s in São Paulo’s periphery, where writers and poets shared their daily struggles through literary works. In a later stage a series of literary soirees, where local artists get together to share their work and life stories, were created. Residents of the periphery, especially young residents, have joined these soirees and share, through art, their life experiences.

Danilo has been participating and coordinating a series of art workshops and literary encounters in São Paulo’s western periphery. “It is a safe space to express ourselves, to share our frustrations, our hopes, and our struggles. I actively participate in two *saraus*.²² They are always full; people stand outside to listen and participate. It is a way of developing consciousness too, and showing new ways of resistance to all the violence that surrounds us” (Sclofsky, field notes, São Paulo, September 24, 2015).

A similar cultural reaction can be appreciated in Los Angeles. In Leimert Park, for instance, Ben Caldwell has been running a cultural center for decades. Many young residents of South L.A. participate in different activities offered at Caldwell’s art center.

“We have created a safe space here in which young people can come and express, through art, their daily struggles,” Caldwell told me. “The police have come and invaded the place several times. They’ve accused us of harboring gang members or even selling drugs. With the new Senior Lead Officer in the area we have developed a good working relation and things have calmed down.” Caldwell stated. “Every year we organize an art festival and a charade related to some of the topics that affect us. This year [2015] we’ll address the issue of slavery and police violence. It is a way of engaging with the larger

²¹ *Literatura periférica* translates in English as periphery literature. It receives this name due to the origin of the authors who developed this genre and the fact that they address in their works the meanings of living in the periphery. One of the first works in this genre was *Capão Pecado* by Ferréz in 2000, which was influenced by rap and hip hop culture that developed in the area. Hundreds of books were published since its inception, and the *Sarau da Cooperifa* launched an anthology of works in 2005.

²² *Sarau* translates in English as soiree.

community and making them participants in the fight for a better neighborhood” Caldwell explained (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, June 17, 2015).

A group of students from the Lula Washington Dance Theatre were teaching young community members a dance for the 2015 charade. The song and dance were created by Lula Washington when her nephew was killed and, according to the students, it represents a call for peace in the community.

“It is a powerful way of making a call for peace,” Mycah, an eighteen years-old African-American dancer said. “It is a strong way to make the community rise and get together against violence, especially police violence. These art festivals and the charade are a way of showing how important this community is for us and how we want to have control of what goes on here” (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, June 18, 2015).

A final example of mobilization that takes place in both cities, is through direct action. A series of forums and organizations have addressed the problem of police violence against nonwhite residents of these areas. From Blacks Lives Matter to Power and Dignity in Los Angeles, or the Fórum de Defesa da Vida²³ and Mães de Maio in São Paulo,²⁴ victims, relatives of victims of police violence, social activists, and community residents have come together to fight against police abuse.

The Fórum de Defesa da Vida, for instance, organizes a rally every year in Jardim Ângela in order to bring greater awareness about police violence and to call for justice. In 2015, the banner of the rally was “20 years of resistance: killings and prisons are not solutions,” and in 2016 it stated “for the end of the genocide against young black, indigenous, poor residents of the periphery.” Power and Dignity in Los Angeles, is another example of direct mobilization against police abuse. Created by Patrice Cullors and focusing on ending violence and abuse in county jails, it has been calling

²³ Fórum de Defesa da Vida, in English Forum for the Defense of Life, is a coalition formed by social activists, academics, members of the Church, and community residents in São Paulo’s southern periphery, which organizes regularly monthly meetings to address the social ills affecting the community and to fight against police violence. The Forum organizes a rally every year to protest police violence and the impunity surrounding police killings.

²⁴ Mães de Maio, in English Mothers of May, is a coalition formed by mothers and relatives of the approximately five-hundred residents of São Paulo’s periphery and the city of Santos, killed by the police during May 2006.

for the formation of a civilian oversight commission over the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

“We cannot disconnect the history of slavery, violence and abuse from the police violence we are suffering today,” Mark-Anthony, Director of the Health and Wellness program at Power and Dignity, told me. “LA County Jail system is one of the largest in this country, and the level of abuse that takes place inside these jails is inadmissible. We are an abolitionist organization, we need to put an end to mass incarceration and state violence against black and brown people,” Mark-Anthony stated (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, May 19, 2015).

Power and Dignity has recently had an important victory in their fight for the formation of a civilian oversight commission, when in November 2, 2016, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisions decided to create such commission; although it still lacks subpoena and disciplinary powers (Elmahrek, 2016).

Through the development of survival tactics, cultural expressions of resistance, and direct action, mobilization against police violence has been taking place in both cities, in attempt not only to bring an end to these abusive practices, but also as a form of shaping the meaning of being a nonwhite resident of these areas. Rap music, artistic performance connecting to a real and imagined African and indigenous past, and the formation of coalitions against police violence, can be seen both in South L.A. and in São Paulo's periphery. The words of the famous rap group from São Paulo, Racionais MC, sound relevant to São Paulo as much as they may sound relevant to South L.A.'s residents:

“Black drama/I know who conspires/And who is with me/In the trauma that I carry/For not being just one more fucking black guy... The drama of prison and slum/tomb, blood/Sirens, crying and candle” (Racionais MC, 2002).²⁵

The violence and suffering produce complex racial and spatial identities that are translated into resistance, from Black Lives Matter to Mães de Maio, from South L.A. to São Paulo's periphery. Margareth Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) demonstrate how the formation of movements

²⁵ “Negro Drama/Eu sei quem trama/E quem tá comigo/O trauma que eu carrego/Pra não ser mais um preto fodido... O drama da cadeia e favela/Túmulo, sangue/Sirene, choros e vela” Translated by author.

that cross-national borders increase the ability of local activists to put pressure and produce change. Certain U.S. cultural expressions of resistance, such as rap and hip-hop, have made their way to São Paulo. While adopting local content, it points out to certain connections in the experience of both places. In conversations, both in São Paulo and in South L.A., many young residents have pointed out to a linkage between local police violence against nonwhites and police violence elsewhere.

“The militarization of police and the policing tactics developed here in South L.A. not only are exported to other cities in the country, they are exported to other world regions too. From Palestine, to Brazil, to Africa, the fight is global,” Shonda, an African-American graduate student and activist in Los Angeles argued. “Our tactics respond to local needs, but the fight is definitely global” (Sclofsky, field notes, Los Angeles, June 9, 2015).

Recently, members of the Black Lives Matter movement and other organizations fighting police violence travelled to Rio de Janeiro to express solidarity with the struggle of Afro-Brazilians there. This highlights the fact that the struggle is a global one and the fight for freedom needs to be tied to one another (Waldron, 2016). Brazilian activists succeeded in making the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to file a complaint in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the Brazilian state for acts of police killings.

“We follow what is going on in the U.S. with Black Lives Matter and all that,” a young student in Capão Redondo told me. “In certain ways we envy them, we do half of what they do and the Military Police will start target practice on us. But it is good to know that the fight to stop the violence against Black people is happening in other places” (Sclofsky, field notes, São Paulo, October 19, 2015).

While we cannot point out to the actual formation of a transnational community of activism, this few examples show how links are being made between what is going on in the United States and in Brazil. This may help to develop a transnational consciousness and by sharing experiences of resistance an imagined transnational community of activism may surge and be able to produce significant change. This may finally challenge the notion that states in which their agents systematically violate the rights of specific portions of the population can be considered democracies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have demonstrated how non-white residents of São Paulo's periphery and South L.A. share similar experiences regarding state violence and police repression. This is part of a similar project of necropolitical governance in which certain bodies are deemed disposable and it is rooted in the way the concept of police with its control of the "dangerous classes" has evolved in Western liberal thought. These traumatic encounters with the police, even when they are not violent, affect the way racial identities are defined, and form part of the content of the communal identity. The fact that non-whites share similar experiences in different places has the potential of creating an imagined community that not only suffers together but also may engage in common struggle and resistance. Developing this transnational communal consciousness has the potential of becoming a first step towards a larger resistance movement.

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