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Heritage, Protests and Coloniality in Contemporary Latin America

"We fight for the memory of our children": Political memory, *favela* heritage, and mothers of victims of state violence

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Abstract

There have been extensive studies of the struggles against Latin American military dictatorships of the 1960s and 1980s, especially regarding the activism of mothers of political activists who were disappeared. However there has been far less research about women's continued struggle for memory, truth, and justice in contemporary Latin America. There has been even less consideration of how small-scale urban protesters use memory within urban cultural geographies of activism. This article explores the production of political memory by mothers of victims of state violence in Rio de Janeiro. The mother's struggle encompasses heritage practices in *favelas*, as well as in the central business district, but deliberately recall and amplify the claims for justice from the 1960s and 1980s. This recalls not only the heritage connected with the dictatorship, but situates their practices within activists' lived experiences of the colonial state and its attempts to render their murdered children criminals.
Keywords: Memory, mother's movements, state violence, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Resumen: "Luchamos por la memoria de nuestros hijos": Memoria política, patrimonio de favela y madres de víctimas de violencia estatal

Existen amplios estudios sobre las luchas contra las dictaduras militares latinoamericanas de los años sesenta y ochenta, sobretodo sobre el activismo de las madres de los activistas políticos desaparecidos. Sin embargo, apenas se ha investigado la continua lucha de las mujeres por la memoria, la verdad y la justicia en la América Latina contemporánea; y aún menos cómo los manifestantes urbanos a pequeña escala utilizan la memoria dentro de las geografías culturales urbanas del activismo. Este artículo explora la producción de memoria política por parte de las madres de las víctimas de la violencia estatal en Río de Janeiro. Su lucha abarca prácticas patrimoniales en las favelas y en el distrito comercial central, pero recuerda y amplifica deliberadamente las reivindicaciones de justicia de los años sesenta y ochenta. No solo recuerda la herencia relacionada con la dictadura, sino que sitúa sus prácticas dentro de las experiencias vividas por los activistas del estado colonial y sus intentos de convertir a

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sus hijos asesinados en criminales. *Palabras clave*: Memoria, movimientos de madres, violencia estatal, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.

Introduction

The march begins in the wide boulevards of central Rio de Janeiro. In the frontline of the small crowd, there are mothers wearing T-shirts and holding banners with photos of children killed or disappeared by state agents and police. As they move along the thoroughfare, blocking traffic and viewed warily by urban commuters, they angrily blame the state for their children's deaths and demand that it stops its targeted killing. They shout the names of their murdered children, bearing witness to the youths' enduring presence in their lives and denying the state its attempts to silence them. With each name that is spoken, all the marchers respond loudly: 'present!' Tightly knit, and known to each other from earlier protests, these women fight for memory, truth, and justice. They oppose the militarism and impunity that enables state agents to kill innocent citizens without accountability. This could have been a description of a protest against Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1970s, when the military government instigated a violent campaign of fear that targeted the region's poor. It is, however, rather a description of the contemporary struggle of mothers in the 2010s in Brazil. In the defiant words of one woman activist, refusing the state's attempt to perpetuate fear and violence in her life, "dictatorship never ended in the *favelas*".

The right to memory, truth, and justice during the 1960s and 1980s have been extensively studied, as those deemed hostile to military dictatorships in Latin America were targeted in a range of violent campaigns. Scholars have especially explored the activism of mothers of political activists who were disappeared during these regimes, whether the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Ghilarducci, 2018), the CoMadres in El Salvador, or a range of comparable associations across Mexico, Central America and the Andean nations (Rivera Hernández & Ortega Breña, 2017). As famously articulated by Alvarez (1988), the focus of such studies is motherhood "as a social institution, not a 'natural instinct', that motivated these women to demand the whereabouts of their 'missing' children" (p. 324). Alvarez' framing of such actions is not uncontested in Brazil, with Macedo (2001) preferring instead to draw attention to women's resistance within home spaces, but there is nonetheless a broad recognition of the emergence of a politicized gender identity that underpins Latin American social movements in Brazil and beyond (Mercier, 2020).

The protagonism of mothers organized into social movements has created a novel tradition in Rio de Janeiro, extending the model of protest from the 1960s to 1980s into the democratic period. Many such mothers' movements have received significant visibility in the media, each group bearing the name of their *favela* or poor area, such as the Mothers of Acari, Mothers of Manguinhos, Mothers of Baixada Fluminense, or Mothers of Borel. Unlike

contemporary mothers' movements in many countries such as Argentina (Zubillaga, 2021), these protest groups in Rio de Janeiro shun a centralized organization. The Brazilian mothers organize themselves in consciously fluid and autonomous ways, decentralized into community groups or through individual mothers from different *favelas*. In this localized manner, the urban geography of the city (and the robust historical memory of communities in *favelas*) has become central to protest and political memory.

Human rights violations continue in Brazil, but there has been a lack of research about the struggle for memory, truth, and justice during the country's so-called democratic period. Given this, our article explores the production of political memory by mothers of victims of state violence in Rio de Janeiro in the 2010s. The mother's struggle for the memory of their children encompasses memorialisation in *favelas* and in the central business district with plaques, banners, ceremonies and memorials. Their struggle for memory is above all a struggle for the moral cleansing of their children, who were murdered by the state and, in addition, accused of being criminals. It relies on scales of situated injustice that connect the historical consciousness of local *favelas* to the city and colonial state, enabling heritage practices, political memory, and demands for justice.

Political memory and heritage in Brazil

Brazil has a history of state violence that shifted from the dictatorial apparatus of the 1960s to the police militarism in the current War on Drugs. This War on Drugs in Latin America derives from the importation of a penal project from the United States that criminalizes urban marginality, creating what many assert is a war against the poor (Wacquant, 2008, 2015). In this sense, the public security agenda in Brazil has been deeply influenced by US police assistance, which has been ongoing from the military dictatorship to the present time. As shown by Cavalcanti and Garmany (2020), this has reinforced Brazil's military style of law enforcement without fostering respect for human rights or rule of law. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Brazil's development agenda was tightly connected to the state's ability to project its power and authority into *favelas* (Håndlykken-Luz, 2020). From as early as the 1990s, urban social conflict regarding this "development" has been represented as a war necessitating police incursions and a willingness to use exceptional war measures despite local residents' democratic rights (Leite, 2012). This attempt to reinforce the state's presence by force, and willingness to treat residents of *favelas* as opponents, has continued to accentuate (Marques, 2021).

Police interventions caused the highest ever number of deaths in Brazil in 2020 (Bueno et al. 2020). More than 6,410 people were killed by the police, of which 78 percent were black citizens (Mello, 2021). Rio remained the state with the highest number of deaths in the country, with 1,245 people killed by the police in 2020 alone. These practices were encouraged by both the then-

Governor of Rio de Janeiro Wilson Witzel, and the President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro. Both far-right leaders are famous for supporting the motto "a good criminal is a dead criminal". In one interview, Bolsonaro said he hoped that "criminals will die in the streets like cockroaches", as a result of hard-line legislation that would shield security forces who shoot alleged offenders (Phillips, 2019). Witzel similarly explained how he thought the police should deal with suspected criminals: "the police will do what is right: they will aim at their little heads and fire" (Barbon, 2018). According to Samira Bueno, executive director of the Brazilian Public Security Forum, police officers are directly incentivized to kill through the support of the president and governors (Bueno et al. 2020).

As we discussed earlier, women in *favelas* often conceptualize motherhood "as a social institution" (Alvarez, 1988), with strong relational connections that give meaning to their personal experiences, alongside their awareness of unresolved injustice from the past. Their understanding of the intersecting spaces of motherhood and political memory, in this sense, reflects a long scholarly tradition that frames social memory as a form of connection. Paraphrasing Halbwachs, Lifschitz (2014) terms such communities of memory as "a desirous attraction that individuals establish when they talk about their past" (p. 147). Studies of social memory, therefore, generally relate "memory with the formation of affective and understanding communities (…) that do not, in principle, seek an effective action of social intervention" (Lifschitz, 2014, p. 148). Yet, for many who research community, memory and heritage in Brazil, social change and accountability are at the forefront of communities' demands. While social memory might establish spontaneous social ties, political memory would seek to establish intentional and strategic social connections, seeking to intervene to create social change based on past injustice. In his seminal work on political memory in Brazil, Lifschitz (2014) argues that:

> Both the process of construction of national memories and that of colonial memories speak of intentional memories that have the state as a strategic agent. (…) Furthermore, by annihilating insurgent individuals and groups, [the dictatorships] also annihilated other memories about this past that could challenge the "reconstructions" of national memory (p. 151).

With the end of the military dictatorship's formal control, new agents emerged in the public space who opposed the state's attempt to establish officially sanctioned memories by destroying communities' means to remember alternatives. The result of this return to public space has often been to render political memory an overt field of dispute and conflict. These contested public spaces enabled productive "memory battles", focused on social and political conflicts associated with unresolved and systematic historical injustices that have continued into the democratic era (Lessa, 2018). More recent scholars have queried this presentation of political memory as a series of dichotomous battles, and instead point to intensities and geographies of memory across Brazil's cit-

ies (Raimondi, 2014). In this manner, political memory became a defining character in the lives of local urban communities at the periphery of political power.

The role of heritage practices in maintaining political memory is well-recognized. Historical anniversaries are frequently used to amplify protest and to frame contemporary governments' actions through reference to past atrocities (Mason, 2018). In this manner, heritage practices form part of "conscientization" attempts to oppose contemporary violence that is connected to unresolved historical injustice (Kenny, 2009). This reference to consciousness-raising, while helpful, can obscure the complex relation between historical and contemporary violence and abuse. Smith's (2006) well-known reference to an "authorized heritage discourse" that is sanctioned by key stakeholders remains instructive, but does not translate easily to contexts where that discourse is formed by violent attempts to silence diverging memories through the destruction of heritage. As de la Torre (2017) writes about sites of memory connected with past atrocities in Brazil, collective memories remain deeply contested at multiple levels, without clear consensus on the role of political memory in local communities. Even actors united by their determination to memorialize victims of human rights abuse in Brazil diverge noticeably in their focus, and are best characterized by networks of fluid and interdependent relationships (Lissovsky & Ligia Letie e Aguiar, 2015). As we discuss in this article, such relationships have not previously been connected to spatiality and heritage in a robust manner.

Local protests against the destruction of urban heritage in Brazilian cities are longstanding, although there has been surprisingly little academic attention to its impact on communities' cultural practices (Simon & Braathen, 2018). While the steady increase in urban conflict remains regionalized (Kolling, 2020), there is rising public consciousness of the political actions and violence enacted against black people across the country (Veillette, 2021). It is the spatiality of the practices in local spaces that particularly concern us in this article. There is a wide range of heritage practices in favelas from memories associated with memorial sites to the song and chants performed at key times and places. Physically destroying communities, or seeking to intimidate people from freely moving around streets, denies people the right to maintain memories of their resistance to the state (Larkins, 2013). Indeed, in many ways, protesting the illegitimacy of police and state is an enduring heritage practice for people living in *favelas*.

Women's role in leading protests in *favelas* is complex and longstanding. In many ways, the social institution of motherhood, and military police's reluctance to attack mothers directly, allows the women to afford some protection to male youth in their community. Such roles come with expectations that they will conform to stereotypes of black motherhood, however, with its attempts to shame black *favela* residents for their supposedly criminal and dangerous children (Kolling, 2020). In rejecting this, many women assume *maternidade mili-*

tante to fight for memory, truth, and human rights for victims (Moura, Santos & Soares 2010). Such "memory activists" (Rousso, 1990) draw on a range of material supports for their memory work, including heritage and traditions that have deep roots of identity in communities. This heritage is now reimagined as a resource to articulate resistance to the police and War on Drugs, enabling the "warrior women" to fight the state that treats them as enemies (Ota, 2021). In a similar manner, Moura and Santos (2008) have shown how "women have been involved in multiple efforts to oppose war and militaristic policies", bringing examples of women's movements in the anti-war movement during the inter-war period and the Cold War. The authors also highlight how public mourning by mothers' movements during the dictatorship period created an unambiguous moral claim against the state (Moura & Santos, 2008). In the contemporary context, "entrepreneurs of memory" (Jelin, 2002) can thereby draw on deep possibilities of expression and struggle that traverse decades and centuries of the colonial state.

The relationship between coloniality and intersectional memories of injustice is at the heart of our article. There is a broad and increasing recognition of the colonial links that underpin exploitative practices in Brazil (Collins, 2018). There remains surprisingly little reflection on the connection between this enduring coloniality and protest in favelas however. Vaillette (2021) describes compellingly the "lingering coloniality of gender" that she sees as "an intersectional consciousness of injustice", connecting the past and present in Brazil. The "coloniality of power" that she articulates is contested with increasing visibility as the police increasingly seek to extend their authority over the *favelas*. That Brazilian police have always represented "a certain kind of social order" (Larkins, 2013), only reinforces the coloniality of their presence in the *favelas*. Rather than assume a conflict that is replicated evenly throughout the city, we embrace Raimondi's (2014) notion of "fertile memories" that exist in pluralities and with differing intensities and affects across the city. As we explore in our article, the activation of such political memories aligns closely with historical injustice and spatiality throughout the colonial city.

Fieldwork in the *favelas*

The research that underpins this article is derived from ongoing research relationships between Ota and mothers' activist groups in Rio de Janeiro. The article itself emerged from conversations between the authors as they reflected on their respective research in Brazil and Mexico, and was initially intended to be a comparative piece about mothers' activism and social networks in those countries. It quickly became apparent in our conversations, however, that the material from each country deserved to be presented and considered on its own merits, before a comparative article could proceed. This Special Collection provided the opportunity to frame our initial piece through the prism of Critical Heritage Studies, alongside the ethnographic research conducted from the pro-

ject's outset. The article emerged through a sequence of collaborative conversations that continued between the authors as the article's argument emerged.

Ota's first contact with mothers of victims of state violence took place more than seven years ago, when she participated in the "Second international demonstration against the genocide of black people" in a *favela* of Rio de Janeiro. At the beginning of the rally, black mothers spoke into the microphone about the murder of their children by the police and said they were organized in groups of mothers who resist state violence. Ota introduced herself to one of the mothers, Ana, [1] and explained her interest in researching social movements of mothers who sought to guarantee the rights of teenagers at the youth detention centre in Rio de Janeiro. Ana became a key informant and gradually introduced Ota to other mothers of victims of state violence and to social movements. Since that time, Ota has worked collaboratively with mothers' social movements to support their visibility and claims to justice.

The methodology for this article emerged through working with the "Network of communities and movements against violence", in downtown Rio de Janeiro. The Network is a social movement that brings together survivors of slaughter, relatives of victims of police brutality, and human rights activists who struggle against state violence. As the meetings continued, Ota and key leaders brought together a group of mothers with similar life stories and subsequently conducted three focus groups with mothers from different *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro. The focus groups consisted of six mothers and lasted approximately two hours, in which each mother was invited to introduce herself and tell her story. The number of mothers gradually expanded, as they shared information on their political activities, such as demonstrations, events and meetings. In addition to focus groups, dozens of public speeches of mothers were analysed in protests, marches in memory of massacres, public hearings, lectures, vigils, religious masses, meetings, and training courses in Human Rights.

Mason has worked with community-based museums and heritage sites across a range of countries in Latin America and the Philippines. His work explores how public perceptions of the past can enable human rights discourses in society, particularly through heritage sites and museum spaces. In working with communities and institutions across Latin America and Asia, he remains acutely sensitive to his privilege as a white, male, cis-gendered Anglo-Australian. He is similarly conscious of the tensions his privilege brings for ethical collaborative research between Australia and Brazil. While Ota holds Brazilian citizenship, Mason has no such connection with the people of Rio de Janeiro. He has a long-standing professional relationship with Ota, having discussed research synergies for several years, and it is in this context that the collaboration emerged. His contribution to this article focuses on the theoretical translation of the work into the Special Collection framework, and he continues to be led by Ota in the research practices and relationships that underpin the findings.

The authors affirm that research activity is not merely a technique for obtaining data, but a social relationship that involves understanding and empathetic participation in the dramas reported by the research subjects, requiring concern and sensitivity with the suffering of others. This affective connection was essential in the relationships of trust established and particularly in the double role of Ota as a researcher and an activist. This double role was important for her attending activist activities, such as demonstrations, meetings and public hearings, which was correctly seen as support for their struggle. In this sense, in the next section we analyse the production of political memory of mothers of victims of state violence in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro.

Political memory in *favelas*

The mothers of victims of state violence in Rio de Janeiro have a specific calendar of protests based on the anniversary of each slaughter or murder, and every year they march or promote events in the places of the massacres (overwhelmingly in slums or poor areas) to pay homage to their children's memory. In each site there are usually small plaques denoting the name and age of those killed, or more substantial memorials that the women revisit and maintain over many years. There are also national meetings of mothers of victims of state violence that usually take place once a year in different cities, bringing together mothers from all over the country. Protests in front of the courts of justice are also organised when the trial of any of those involved in the massacres or murders takes place.

In April 2016, Ota participated in the march to commemorate 13 years since the Borel massacre, having been invited by the mother of one of the victims. In 2003, four young people had been murdered by police officers in the *favela* called Borel in Rio de Janeiro, giving rise to the movement "Can I identify myself?". One of the four youths had been returning home when he was stopped by military police and "as he was carrying an envelope with his documents, the boy tried to identify himself and, for this reason, had his right arm broken by a blow by the police. Claiming to be a worker, he insisted on showing the documents, but he was executed before presenting them" (Farias, 2007, p. 19). Since then, the victim's mother Rosa has become a tireless human rights activist of the "Can I identify myself?" movement and of the Network of communities and movements against violence.

In the beginning of the march, Rosa was wearing a black T-shirt made especially for the occasion with the words: "Can I identify myself? 13 years of the Slaughter of Borel". She had brought a bag filled with these t-shirts to distribute to people who were going to the march. This is not uncommon, and those marching to commemorate an event will generally wear these special t-shirts in preparation for the march and the start of the walk. At the front of the march is Rosa's granddaughter, daughter of her murdered son, holding the sign "Can I identify myself? 13 years of the Borel slaughter". She walks with Rosa,

and with the poster containing the photos of the four young people murdered in the slaughter, with their names and professions written on it. The march is silent and pamphlets about the slaughter are distributed to passers-by. On the way up a street, armed police intimidate the protesters. A militant insists on handing them the pamphlet, some police receive it while another refuses to take it. The march ends just above where the police were standing, at the entrance to the alley where the young people were murdered, and where a plaque was placed in 2013 in memory of the massacre's tenth anniversary. The police try to intimidate the protesters, hiding with guns in alleys and cars near the rally. In this protest, as in other marches, the mothers criticise police violence with accusatory mottos such as "no more slaughter, murderous police"; "it's not over, it has to end, I want the end of the military police" and "no hypocrisy, this police kills poor people every day".

At this point in the protest, a circle was formed and the mothers begin to speak individually of their experiences. Rosa begins by talking about the enduring pain for the families that continues to be experienced thirteen years after that slaughter. As is common in such events, other mothers then speak in solidarity, connecting their own loss with the events of Borel. After the emotional speeches of other mothers whose children were killed by police, we went up the alley where the four young people from Borel had been murdered to place a cross and a new plaque that demarcated thirteen years since the massacre. Candles were lit under the cross and everyone held hands to pray.

Image 1: Mothers put a plaque in homage to another mother (Vera) who died, and her daughter (Bianca) killed by police, *favela* de Manguinhos, 11/05/2019.

Source: Rafael Daguerre.

Memorial tributes like this take place every year in other *favelas* in the same format with marches, solidarity, and plaques. The horrific killing at Borel is far from unique, but nor is the act of remembrance and defiance by mothers. These commemorative acts are common throughout the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, embedding the resisting mothers in the cultural geographies of the city and in its local political memories. Their actions reclaim transitory streetscapes as

permanent inscriptions of memory for local communities. While it remains dangerous for these women to move between favelas that are often controlled by different gangs, these local acts of affirmation and refusal to be intimidated are central to the identity of communities in the *favelas*.

Image 2: Memorial for the black youth killed by police with a plaque with the names of the victims, and graffiti on the wall depicting corpses and the writing "Mothers of Manguinhos against the extermination promoted by the state", 14/05/2016.

Source: Rafael Daguerre.

Political memory in the colonial centre

Some months after the commemoration of the Borel massacre described above, in December 2016, relatives of the victims of state violence built a Christmas tree in memory of their loved ones. They placed the replica tree in the Praça Floriano, one of the most prominent central squares in Rio de Janeiro. The square is at the heart of the city's heritage precinct, and is surrounded by the ornate buildings of the City Council and the municipal theatre, as well as the National Library, cultural halls, and popular traditional bars patronised by the very wealthy. The site is in the heart of Rio de Janeiro's cultural and business district, and is a popular destination for tourists and workers alike; it is the literal and symbolic center of power for the city's political establishment. The significant visibility of the square contrasts sharply with the invisibility of *favelas*. "Going down from the hill (*favelas*) and occupying the asphalt (fancy suburbs)", is a popular saying meaning to break symbolic barriers and demystify the image of the so-called "wonderful city". The technique has been used by protesters occupying malls and touristic beaches during the pandemic, as a means to claim their right to space, visibility and justice. In this instance, the protest reclaimed activists' right to the city centre and the spaces of its elected politicians, demanding the right to show the public and visitors how the city treats the black people who are its residents.

The so-called Christmas tree was made from an iron frame by a father whose 4-year-old son was killed by police, and was decorated with photos of young people murdered or missing as a result of state violence. Given the extremely busy nature of the square, the tree's construction attracted the sustained attention of passers-by. Many people joined the demonstration or took the opportunity to talk with family members to understand why they were claiming the city square. One mother talked about the meaning of this demonstration to one interested onlooker:

> We built this tree on December 16 to show society, the state and the country how much we could not be happy with this date that is internationally celebrated – December 25 – the day of Jesus' birth. For us, as mothers and having conceived our children, it should be an important day, but because of the tragedy that befell all of us, we cannot be celebrating this date as we should, so we set up this tree as a way to feel a bit close to our children. (...) Not being able to be with our complete family as every society wants is very difficult on the 25, that is why we decided to be together on the 16 so that somehow, we could really feel that we were united as a family, in this case, because of the pain. This is how we see ourselves when we understand that we have a common enemy, which is the state that caused all the suffering we went through on that very important day.

The women were present in the square for the whole day, talking and reminiscing about past Christmases and their families. They also consolidated their anger at the state, raising their visibility and the memory of their children. Most poignantly, and one by one, they each solemnly placed a photo of their child on the tree. One of the women at the tree remembered their day and its impact on her as a warrior for her children against the iniquity of the state:

> We made a circle around the tree, and there we were shouting our battle cries [outside City Council], saying our children's names, letting out all the feelings of love we have for them and also all the feelings of anger we have for not being able to be with them on this very important date. We ended up knowing that in fact these children of ours were very much loved, by us, by our family, friends and by the society to which they belonged and together we also affirmed to each other that they were not the criminals that the state said they were.

In this way, political memory "installs the past in the present, produces a disjunction, a radical anachronism, which makes everything that seems to be opposed to the political present, such as the absence, what has passed, the unactual, becomes contemporary" (Lifschitz, 2014, p. 156). The children's photographs, conjured into the city space, were far more powerful than if the children had been physically present. It is the mothers, but also their absent children, that accuse the government of negligence, cruelty, and a disregard for the principles of the major Christian festival of Christmas.

Image 3: Relatives of victims of police violence hold the Christmas tree, Praça Floriano, 16/12/2016.

Source: Maria Eduarda Ota.

A subsequent demonstration was organized for the removal of the tree one month later. Instead, it became a protest to highlight the tree's early removal without consultation. For family members, the tree was simply stolen from the place, without anyone knowing who did it and where it was taken. Not only was this deeply disrespectful, but provided further insult and injury to families' memory of their already-abused children. A poster workshop was held in response, and mothers and family members drew Christmas trees with the names of the murdered young people and phrases such as: "Where is the tree with the photos of our children?", "Where is our memory? They kill our children and erase their stories", "They even kill the memory", "Our children live in our struggle". After making the posters, all of those present went up the steps of the City Council and the mothers expressed their anger for not having been able to complete the planned demonstration because of the tree's removal. At the end of the event, each mother shouted her child's name, and everyone answered "present!", lighting candles in memory of each murdered young person.

Passers-by, tourists and merchants from the area came to ask what had happened and many expressed their solidarity. In this sense, we can see that "political memory is enunciative and denunciative, it summons testimonies that challenge the state and justice in a radical issue: we are as we inherit, and if we are deprived of the legacy bequeathed by our dead, we cannot be" (Lifschitz, 2014, p. 156). In extending Lifshitz's work however, we argue that this event draws attention to the activation of memories through the location of protests. The city council building and gentrified square not only contrasted favela residents with the city elite, it disrupted the authorized heritage *discourse* of the space and challenged the center of political authority.

Dictatorship has not ended: March 31

A military coup took place in Brazil on March 31, 1964, initiating two decades of harsh repression and political violence that constituted one of the longest and bloodiest military regimes in Latin America. On March 31, 2005, exactly 41 years later, a massacre was committed by a police extermination squad that killed 29 people in Baixada Fluminense, a poor region close to Rio de Janeiro city. Ota participated in the protest for the 11 anniversary of *Chacina da Baixada* (Baixada Slaughter) in 2016, at the invitation of an activist mother who had lost her son in this massacre. Such protests in Rio de Janeiro can make sense only when seen in the historical context of the military dictatorship, the legacy of its violence and unresolved injustice.

The meeting point for the protest was set on the main road in the municipality of Nova Iguaçu, at 1pm, with our departure scheduled for 2pm. Ota arrived at 1pm when there were still few people present, just a mother of a victim from another state and about six people from Amnesty International, which was supporting the act. An activist whose brother had been murdered in the same massacre arrived and lamented the lack of mobilization around this massacre in recent years. She remembered previous protests that had attracted so sufficient activists that they had successfully closed important avenues to traffic. At around 2pm, the most active mother from the town arrived with her husband, followed by their children, daughters-in-law, granddaughter, and friends. They carried posters and brought a car equipped with a sound system that would provide the central focal point for the march through the town. On the posters, there were photos of the victims of the slaughter and sayings such as "the dictatorship has not ended in communities and outskirts. When will democracy arrive and with it the guarantee of rights?" (see Image 4). Other posters defiantly affirmed, "the history of a great country can only be written with a lively youth. Enough of the extermination of youth" and "Violence continues and chooses other victims, the next could be you. That is why we want peace together".

Family members in the march wore t-shirts printed with photos of their murdered loved ones, and the mother from Nova Iguaçu asked Ota to wear a t-shirt carrying the image of two brothers who were victims of this massacre. A reporter from a TV channel was present, alongside newspaper reporters to whom activists gave a prominent interview. The walk eventually started at 3 pm, and its route traced the places where the 29 people had been killed: at each place, marchers stopped, placed flowers and said the name of the person who had been killed there, to which everyone replied "present!" Many kilometres were covered with strong emotions mixing with the heat of the day and the rain that was by-then falling. Nova Iguaçu's mother walked in front, near the car with the sound system, talking into the microphone about the slaughter, saying that the walk was a tribute to the victims of the state and regretting that this practice continues to happen. In the bar, where the greatest number of people

had died on the day of the massacre, there was a longer pause, when the names of all victims were read into the microphone and "present" was answered. Under heavy rain, it was decided to finish the journey, now with the presence of the mothers who came with the Network of communities and movements against violence and had joined the march along the way. Mothers from several *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro who carried banners with their children's photos were present. Two mothers distributed pamphlets about the eleventh anniversary of the Baixada massacre wherever they went, and many people otherwise uninvolved in the protest who were moved by the act of the mothers and family members. Arriving at the final destination, a light refreshment was distributed to the participants, and everyone said farewell.

Image 4: Banner with the writing: "The dictatorship hasn't ended in communities and outskirts. When will democracy arrive and with it the guarantee of rights?", Nova Iguaçu, 31/03/2016.

Source: Maria Eduarda Ota.

During these closing moments of the protest, an activist mother claims that the dictatorship was over only for the bourgeoisie. Intense in her anger and grief, she argued that "we have to show that the dictatorship is not over. This past is very present to us. The poor and blacks are victims of the continued dictatorship. It will not end until we demilitarize the police. This 'military' name is present 24 hours on our periphery". It is noteworthy that in rallies and protests, the demilitarization of police is always a prominent demand, as it is explicit in the regularly chanted rhyming refrain: 'It is not over, it has to end, I want the end of the military police' (*Não acabou, tem que acabar, eu quero o fim da polícia militar*). There are also campaigns for the demilitarization of police and against police incursions in *favelas*.

Many scholars argue that Brazil has not yet settled its accounts with the country's dictatorial past, since the period of so-called transitional justice has had no public investigation nor accountability for the serious human rights violations that occurred. Nor was there a serious reform of institutions (such as the army, the police, public security institutions and the judiciary), leaving open wounds in the incipient democratic institutions and allowing the continuation of authoritarianism. This failure to attempt to heal means that the city's sites of violence and murder cannot be commemorative alone. They remain places of

accusation and demand of unresolved injustice. They are not sites to make claims solely against individuals, but against the unreconciled state and system of dictatorial power that sustains it. In re-democratization, neither the pardon of those who violated citizens' rights, nor the pacification between the opposing camps were publicly discussed at the end of the military regime. (…) Re-democratization remained unfinished; citizenship was incomplete, mutilated, restricted. (Zaluar, 2017, p. 23).

Slavery has not ended: Racism and colonial state

If the police violence of today has its antecedents in the military dictatorship, the formation of the militarised police itself dates to the times of slavery. According to Rocha, "the creation of the royal guard in 1809 marks the first institutionalization of the continued presence of the military in black people's lives in Brazil. This force was created to protect the colonial Portuguese royal court from the masses of black slaves who occupied Rio de Janeiro at the time" (Rocha, 2012, p. 67). In this sense, it is worth mentioning that "an important reason for establishing the police was to supplement the coercive discipline slave owners traditionally supplied, given the difficulties of maintaining vigilance over slaves in an increasingly complex and impersonal urban environment" (Holloway, 1993, p. 282). In few places is the coloniality of the modern Brazilian state clearer than in the cityscape of Rio de Janeiro. Mothers of victims of state violence of the 2000s do not only relate their suffering to the dictatorship, coordinating marches on dates that resonate across decades of oppression. They regularly and consistently relate the violence they suffer today with the heritage of African slavery in Rio de Janeiro. As one mother said to Ota in a vivid and painful description,

> the slave quarters still exist, it is the outskirts, it is the *favelas*. And the bounty hunter for us is the state behind the police uniform. And the lashes turned into revolver bullets that kill our children. And when we see that there is colour and gender in the prison, we know it's a bit of the slave ship.

Black mothers still suffer the consequences of the colonial state, 133 years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, they still do not have the right to be a mother. If during slavery they had their children sold, today they bear witness to their children having been murdered by state agents. During a focus group with ten mothers of victims of state violence, all reported the police's disrespect towards *favela* residents. A mother stated that a police officer once said to her that "black women do not have kids, they have a litter; he said we were dogs". This resonates directly with Angela Davis' writings on slavery in the United States (2016) in which the characterisation of slave women as "breeders" rather than "mothers" reveals a racist colonial imaginary that continues to unfold in the present.

These mothers must fight to "re-humanize" and "re-moralize" their children, repeatedly re-demonstrating their non-involvement with crime (Freire, Farias, & Araujo, 2009). These women need to justify that they were "good mothers" and not "factories that produce bandits", as the former governor of Rio de Janeiro offensively stated. That is, they must undertake a "moral cleansing" of themselves and their children for the injustice of their experience to be recognized in public discourse (Freire, Farias, Araujo, 2009; Rocha, 2012). As one activist mother related at a Human Rights Conference in 2015:

> I fight for these issues because I understood that it was not just with me, there were a lot of people who suffer it and there is a bigger thing that is the racial thing. That happens to us because we are black. It is a population that since the time of slavery is set for these things to happen. Because no woman gave birth to a son to be killed by the police, or gave birth to a child to be arrested.

The coloniality of the contemporary state is reflected in the cityscape of Rio de Janeiro more broadly. The heritage of the dictatorship continues to be woven throughout the cultural geography of the contemporary city and its government. Sites of torture and massacre remain unmarked by an unrepentant administration after decades and centuries of violence against the poor and those in the *favelas*. Retracing the final steps of those killed by police maintains their presence in their neighbourhoods and builds affective connections between mothers who share experiences. It also challenges the atate's right to control the spaces of the *favelas*, affirming residents' ability to make meaning and demanding their right to access their city without fear. Their struggle for memory is for the right to have their children recognized as victims by a state that criminalizes them without treating them as citizens. As one mother stated, "we and our sons are victims of the state that kills and yet criminalizes". Another mother says that "when I see those bastards trying to incriminate my son, it is as if they were killing my son again". Moreover, the state renders them without protection under the law, positioning them as internal enemies of an ongoing colonial project. Their actions affirm a heritage of protest and a refusal to be silenced that is at the heart of the Brazilian state.

Conclusion

Mothers whose children were killed by police are fighting to affirm the memory of their children, and of the repeated killing of others like them by the state for decades and centuries. They demand truth and justice, in continuity and solidarity with the mothers from the dictatorships across Latin America from the 1960s to the present day. They demand to be treated as mothers rather than breeders, claiming the humanity of their children and themselves, in continuity with the African American enslaved mothers. From the denunciation of racism, they rescue their history as black and poor women, inserting them-

selves in an older struggle and feeling pride in its origins, epitomised in the expression "our steps come from afar". Denouncing the fact that neither the military dictatorship nor the colonial state has ever ended in the *favelas*, these mothers recall the past into the present, showing how state violence continues to unfold itself through history when the wounds of colonialism have failed to be addressed.

The groups of activist mothers are local, fluid, autonomous, and without hierarchical authority. The Brazilian mothers' struggle for the memory of their children encompasses memorialisation in *favelas*, extending this to the central business district with plaques, banners, chants, and memorials. Their actions seek to reclaim the streets of their own districts, marking the sites of injustice and seeking to end the impunity with which their children's killers acted. These protests do not only give voice to their children, they challenge the lack of democratic accountability by refusing to be silenced or rendered peripheral to the city.

The mothers' struggle for memory integrates political memory in the *favelas* with the city's broader urban landscapes of meaning. In doing so, they challenge the state twice over. Firstly, heritage and protest are a central part of their struggle for the moral cleansing of their children, who were murdered by the state in a pattern of action that has continued unabated for decades. In addition, and in common with other regions of contemporary Latin America, the mothers strive to refute the accusation that their children were criminals. In the contemporary War on Drugs, poor black people still must fight for the right to life and for the right to memory, since the state seeks to monopolise the legitimate use not only of the material violence but also of symbolic violence (Wacquant, 2015).

We affirm that mothers of victims of state violence constitute powerful memory agents and heritage activists in this memory battle against the state. Importantly, we assert that their protests operate across scales of history and place, intensifying as their activism intersects with historical injustice. This could not be more important given Brazil reached the highest ever number of deaths resulting from police intervention in its history last year. Political memory, activated by the city's colonial and dictatorial heritage, and produced by mothers of victims of state violence, is resistance against the official memory of the state that not only kills but criminalizes black people, wounding them without justice and accountability.

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Notes

1 All personal names are pseudonyms to preserve the identity of mothers.

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