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**I've killed and I've robbed. I'm a man!  
The Brazilian Racialized ImagiNation and  
the Making of Black Masculinity in "City of  
God"\***

*He matado y he robado. !Soy un hombre; el imaginario de nación  
racializada brasileira y la construcción de la masculinidad negra en  
"Ciudad de Dios"*

*Eu já matei e já roubei. Eu sou um homem!: A imaginacao racial  
branca e a construcao da masculinidade negra em "Cidade de Deus"*

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### Resumen

Este artículo explora la representación del hombre negro joven presente en la película "Ciudad de Dios" (2002). La película hace uso de "escrituras patológicas" de la masculinidad negra en Brasil, que la presentan como criminal y desviada. La imagen predominante de una corporalidad negra masculina como fuente de peligro e impureza sirve de base al régimen de dominación racial brasileiro, al tiempo que las narrativas de la violencia hacen explícitas las formas en las cuales la nación brasileira es imaginada mediante un refuerzo de lo racial. Acá, lo negro es consumido como producto exótico, al tiempo que es entendido como amenaza para la armonía nacional. La nación es, por tanto, escrita y re-imaginada como paraíso racial, pero casi siempre inscribiendo la muerte en los cuerpos negros.

**Palabras clave:** Masculinidad negra; Prácticas policivas; Sexualidad; Nación; Violencia Urbana.

### Abstract

The article explores the representation of young-black men in the 2002 film *City of God*. The film deploys "pathological scripts" of Black masculinity in Brazil as criminal and deviant. The controlling image of Black men's bodies as a source of danger and impurity sustains Brazilian regime of racial domination, and the narratives of violence make explicit the ways in which the Brazilian nation is imagined through a racial underpinning. Blackness is consumed as an exotic commodity, yet is also understood as a threat to national harmony. The nation is, then, written and re-imagined as a racial paradise, but mostly by inscribing death on the black body.

**Key-words:** black masculinity, policing practices, sexuality, nation, urban violence

### Resumo

O artigo explora a representação dos jovens negros no filme "Cidade de Deus", de 2002, o qual insere "planos patológicos" que apresentam a masculinidade negra como criminosa e pervertida. A imagem controladora dos corpos de homens negros, apresentados como agentes de perigo e impureza, ratifica uma dominação racial no regime brasileiro. Em adição, as narrativas centradas na violência, mostram de modo manifesto as formas em que a nação brasileira é imaginada com uma proeminência racial. Negritude é consumida como uma mercadoria exótica, mas também é entendida como uma ameaça à harmonia nacional. Tudo isto faz com que o país seja, de forma iterada, representado e imaginado como um paraíso racial, mas principalmente pelo fato de que a morte jaza registrada no corpo negro.

**Palavras-chaves:** masculinidade negra, práticas de policiamento, sexualidade, nação, violência urbana.



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Consider the following statement from Sergio Cabral, ex-governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro: “[Abortion] has everything to do with urban violence. I am in favor of women interrupting an undesired pregnancy. You look at the number of children born at Lagoa Tijuca, Méier and in Copacabana [elite neighborhoods]. Now, you look at Rocinha, Vidigal, Alemão [*favelas* in Rio]. Zambia, Gabon standards. That is a criminal factory.”<sup>1</sup> The *favelas* pointed out by Cabral have been under military supervision by the National Army and Rio’s Special Unit (BOPE) as part of a “pacifying” program pushed forward by the government as the city prepares to host international sports mega-events in the upcoming years. His statement came months after the massacre in which at least forty residents of Alemão – one of the largest *favelas* in the city – were killed by the police in a favela invasion<sup>2</sup>. Cabral’s secretary of public safety defended the massacre, arguing, “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs”<sup>3</sup>.

Although disturbing, there is nothing new about the statements made by Cabral and his cabinet. Nor are the police’s military-style operations outside the norm of Brazilian society’s racial logic. The *favela* has historically been a source of anxiety for state and the white society. As a black geography, it feeds narratives of criminality, animality and horror. Known as one of the most violent police forces in Brazil, Rio’s Military Police operates under a racial register that associates *favela* and black women’s bodies as a source of violence, and black men as the city’s foremost public enemies. This article is about yet another iteration of these nightmarish narratives: *City of God’s* images of Black men. Drawing insights from an established field of analysis (e.g., bell hooks, 1992; Marriott, 2004; Collins, 2005, Pinho, 2005; Jackson II, 2006; Ferber, 2007) This article focuses on the fictional narratives by which Black manhood is constructed as synonymous with violence, virility and savagery.

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1 His statement can be read here: <http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Politica/0,,MUL155710-5601,00-CABRAL+DEFENDE+ABORTO+CONTRA+VIOLENCIA+NO+RIO+DE+JANEIRO.html>

2 See <http://www.pstu.org.br/node/12664>

3 See <http://www.cartamaior.com.br/?/Editoria/Direitos-Humanos/OEA-recebe-denuncia-contra-megaoperacao-no-Complexo-do-Alemao/5/13532>

In other words, the social construction of Black men as such informs and is informed by a racial imaginary that treats them as inherent criminals.

In this stigmatizing regime of representation, this review argues that the mass media's discursive dehumanization of Black males should be read as symbolic violence that legitimates and informs the state's practices of domination. In this sense, the operations against favelas conducted by the police (predominantly Black urban areas) should be understood in relation to the process of creating a "controlling image" (Collins, 2005) of pathologized social geographies. These become the places *par excellence* in which state's technologies of terror are deployed to contain the Black body in zones of exclusion. Helicopters, sophisticated weapons, rogue police officers, cameras, reporters ... all are devices that produce the narratives of criminality and state sovereignty. It is in the context of the militarization of public security and the media-produced culture of fear that the *favela* is reinforced in the white imagination as a place of disorder, and its inhabitants as criminals.

Such racialized narratives of violence produce life-and-death outcomes, as evidenced in the racial disparities in homicides in urban Brazil. According to official data from DATASUS/Brazilian Census Bureau, between 1996 and 2006, homicides among 15-24 year-olds have increased 31.3%. The homicide rate within this age group is 170% higher than that of the overall population. The vast majority of the victims, 92.1%, are young males. The homicide rate within the black population is 73.1% higher than among whites. In states like Paraíba and Alagoas, the victimization rate of blacks is 700% higher than among whites (Waiselfisz, 2006:24). Drug trafficking, organized crime and street gangs are some of the factors in the victimization of Black youth, but they are far from being the only ones.

Researchers such as Ignacio Cano (1997), Jorge Silva (1998) and Vilma Reis (2005) have shown that Black males are the primary victims not only of criminals, but also of the police. While data on the racial distribution of police lethality are hard to come by, official statistics show that the country's two major cities – Sao Paulo and Rio – kill more people than the entire US or South African police forces (e.g., HRW, 2009; Amar, 2003). As for the state of Rio de Janeiro alone, between 2003 and 2007, Rio's Military Police killed 5,616 people (Silva and Carneiro 2009). In April 2003, Rio's Military Police killed 125 people. In that year, civilian casualties reached the same number of people killed in the US war in Iraq (Amar, 2003).

In this paper, state violence involves not only lethal police force against black young men. It also refers to policies that reproduce poverty, unemployment and other vulnerabilities to premature death (Gilmore, 2007). As disturbing as it is, killings of black individuals in the *favelas* by the police should be understood as only one component of a mundane reiteration of black life as disposable life within the Brazilian polity. In this sense, black bodies held captive and killed are expressions of the racial state, and are part of a broader system of racial domination in which the state appears as the main organizer. As Carole Nagengast (1994) contends, "insofar as it is tolerated or encouraged by states in order to create, justify, excuse, explain, or enforce hierarchies of difference and relations of inequality, [these] are acts of state violence, even though states themselves may not appear on the surface to be primary agents" (p. 114).

Still, because deadly violence against black young men is a hyper-visible manifestation of the racial state's *right to kill and let live* (Foucault, 1990), the text focuses on this particular group, while paying attention to the negative outcomes of black gender stereotypes. Thus, the interest in the fictional representations of blackness as criminality moves beyond representation *per se*, and focuses on the materiality of race. That is, how discourses about black men's bodies produce the political environment for symbolic, structural and physical violence not only against black men, but against the entire black community.

While Black males are at the center of this analysis, this paper should not be read as claiming the black male experience as paradigmatic of the Black condition. Devon Carbado (1999) has called such male-centric definition of racial oppression a "gendered construction of black racial victimhood" (p. 4). According to Carbado, by treating the heterosexual black man as the archetypical victim of racism, scholars have "left unarticulated the complex ways in which race, sexual orientation, and gender function as compounding categories of subordination" (p. 9). While Carbado's critique must be taken very seriously, in putting black men at the center of this analysis, the goal is to examine a racialized system of representations of Black masculinity that disempowers the entire black community. Additionally, an analysis is made of how black men's bodies have come to be a field of state intervention.

As will be highlighted later, instead of discussing the structural causes of deadly violence in urban Brazil, *City of God* explains violence as a problem of dysfunctional families, deficient Black culture, and black men's bestiality. How do such ideas about black bodies produce geographies of violence? How are black geographies – such as the *favelas* – produced in the narratives of black male criminality? What do fictional representations of poverty and criminality tell us about broader practices of racial domination in Brazil? In an attempt to answer these questions, the following hypotheses are developed here i) *City of God* exemplifies the common-sense understanding of Black men as criminals, and ii) the pathologization of *favelas*/shantytowns as places of criminality, danger and fear is a discursive ideological apparatus by which racial domination effectively takes place in urban Brazil.

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### ***City of God: The Violent Making of Black Masculinity***

*City of God* is based on ethnographic work by Paulo Lins (1997). The film, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund in 2002, is a story about the *favela* Cidade de Deus [City of God], in the western zone of Rio de Janeiro. The narrative is organized around the lives of two Black teenagers. One of them is Rocket (played by Luis Otavio), who is portrayed as an honest, innocent sweet boy who dreams of being a famous photographer. The other is Dadinho (played by Douglas Firmino), the central character, who grows older to become Little Zé (played by Leandro Firmino), “the most feared drug dealer in the *favela* and one of the most wanted criminals by Rio de Janeiro's police”, as stated by the film narrator.

A flashback invites the viewer to as far back as the 1960s, when poor inhabitants of the city occupied the *favela*. Little Zé's and Rocket's childhoods are then situated in a death-driven, hyper violent *favela* whose residents are either passive victims or complicit in youth delinquency. The first scene of the movie, in which a group of men pursues a chicken, is a metaphor for the permanent war between drug dealers. The scene prepares the viewer for what is coming next: a display of black bodies, guns, sex and geographies trapped in a predictable chain of violence.



Rocket and Little Zé are the two sides of a narrative through which racist stereotypes of the *favela* and its residents are organized. Rocket becomes a good person, a docile boy despite the hostile environment of the *favela* and his family's own financial hardship. Little Zé, the feared head of the gang, is depicted as a blood-tasty drug dealer who aims to control the whole City of God. There is no way out for Little Zé and contrary to Rocket's domesticated behavior, he is portrayed as a natural-born-killer. Rocket's and Little Zé's lives intersect in their childhood, but contrary to the former, who works and behaves well, Zé chooses the wrong way.

Little Zé's pathological behavior is the centerpiece through which the movie's narrative is organized. In a remarkable scene, Little Zé is a 12-year-old Black boy who develops a plan to rob a motel in downtown Rio. The disturbing scene shows white motel guests being killed by the Black child. That day, Little Zé showed all his criminal instincts, resulting in bloodshed in Rio's rich/white area and a permanent man-hunt in the *favela*. The white victims' despair and horror are contrasted with the pleasure and insatiable will to kill of the black criminal. The scene depicts a perverse child that embodies evil; he kills his victims while laughing and playing with his gun. The savagery of a black child and the impotence of his white victims produce a racial catharsis – the viewer feels a sympathetic reaction toward the white victims, and hatred and fear in reaction to Zé. Finally, the scene closes with the narrator's voice: "On that night, Little Zé satisfied his thirst to kill." Moreover, to reinforce his beyond-repair criminal nature, the narrator informs us, "At eighteen, Little Zé was the most feared and most respected hood in City of God."

Rapes, death and drug-trafficking, are the elements around which the narratives of black (and white) masculinity are structured in the movie. The "coolest gangster in *City of God*" is Benny, Little Zé's light-skinned partner in the drug business. As the film progresses, Benny passes through a self-transformation in the way he dresses, his hairstyle (he mimics Thiago, a white playboy who comes to the *favela* to buy drugs) and his personality (he becomes the peacekeeper between the two gangs). He is also able to date beautiful women like middle-class, light-skinned Angelica, while Little Zé has to pay for sex or rape women. Even when the filmmakers portray positive features of (black/light-skinned) characters like Benny, the main effect is to reinforce the bestiality of Little Zé. Benny's acceptable beauty and coolness are made possible in opposition to Zé's dangerousness and ugliness.

Zé's hyper-sexuality is explored during a party in the hood when he gets turned down when he asks a woman to dance. This seemingly banal scene becomes a key event. Hurt in his masculinity, Zé humiliates her boyfriend, Galinha, a hard-working young man who has resisted pressure to be part of the drug business in the hood, by making him take off all his clothes and dancing in the middle of the stage. Later on, Zé's revenge is accomplished when he and his gang invade Galinha's house, rape his fiancé (that this character is not given a name is telling of the place reserved for Black women in the movie), and kill members of his family. Left alive, Galinha joins the rival gang led by Sandro Cenoura, an easy-going, white drug dealer. Galinha ends up being an important soldier in the war to defeat Little Ze's band.

***I've killed and I've robbed. I'm a man.***

The depiction of the male figures in *City of God* suggests some hegemonic understandings of Black masculinity in urban Brazil. The subaltern masculinity of Black men becomes hegemonic through the movie's representations of violence. In the same vein, hegemonic white masculinity is made peripheral, insofar as violence is concerned, and becomes the ideal type for civility and peace. The roles played by the white drug consumer Thiago, the white journalists, and the white drug dealer Sandro Cenoura are constituted in opposition to the aggressive masculinity of black men.

Black masculinity is defined not only by the aggressiveness and madness of Little Zé and his gang, but also by the docility and passivity of some of *City of God's* residents. Rocket's self-transformation is a case-in-point. In his role as the film's narrator, Rocket can transit between two physical and symbolic worlds – the black crudity of the favela and the white harmoniousness of downtown Rio. He transforms himself from a *favelado* into a citizen, from a boy into a man. His docile, non-threatening behavior is his ticket to access the city as suggested by his acceptance as a photographer for a mainstream newspaper. Although he proves his masculinity by having sex with a white journalist and by joining his white male colleagues in the newsroom, Rocket's masculinity remains conditional. His photographs are published on

the newspaper's front page, but he receives no credit; his fear of being killed by the police (he is a black *favelado*, after all) makes him withdraw from bringing other pictures to sight. Little Zé and Rocket are not so different from one another, the movie seems to suggest. They are the two sides of the same coin: a *pathologized script of black masculinity*<sup>4</sup>.

The literature on masculinities has stressed the existence of differential access to the privileges of masculinity. Most important, scholars have criticized masculinity studies for not interrogating hegemonic masculinities, that is, white heterosexual manhood, nor reconsidering the essentialist construction of the concept of "masculinity" itself (see Gardiner 2002, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The reified account of masculinity has been challenged by several authors, and progressive scholarship on this subject should begin by interrogating this very category. Nevertheless, black masculinity is a "political problem" that justifies our theoretical engagement with this matter within white supremacist society (Gordon, 1997; Ferber, 2007).

In Brazil, the incipient research has mainly been concentrated in the fields of public health and urban sociology, stressing the relationship between manhood and violence (Batista 2005, Lima 2003, Cecchetto 1997, Monteiro 1999). A growing literature has paid attention to black male performance in public education (Rosemberg, 1996, Pinto & Carvalho 2004), and to the gendered dimensions of racial discrimination in the job market (e.g., Quadros, 2004; Soares, 2000).

Still missing is an integrated analysis on gender, race and violence in Brazil. The works of Waldemir Rosa (2006), Osmundo Pinho (2005), and José Jorge de Carvalho (1996) are some of the very few attempts to discuss racialized forms of masculinity in the context of violence and social exclusion. Their focus on "black culture" and representation – hip hop, graffiti, and mass media – provide insights into the strategies of resistance developed by black men to re-signify their public image in Brazilian society. The cultural arena, therefore, appears as a strategic site to affirm identity and challenge hegemonic narratives of black men as a-political and dangerous.

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4 This sentence is borrowed from the incisive work of Ronald Jackson II (2006) and David Martinott (2004), who analyze black men and mob violence. Although their analysis focuses on the United States, the black racial condition throughout the African Diaspora authorizes the use of their lenses to read the Brazilian regime of black representation.

Some scholars have called into question mainstream feminism's critique of masculinity for not considering the work of race in producing distinct forms of masculinity. The ways Black men are interpolated as subaltern, they argue, must be understood within the context of a "pathologized script" in which the Black body is constructed as the deviant other by white supremacist ideology (see hooks 1992; Jackson II 2006). The universalistic construct of masculinity also reinforces stereotypes of the black *macho*, without considering that there are different ways Black men have lived their gender identity. As bell hooks points out,

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

This critique is not meant to deny black men's investment in patriarchy, as hooks notes, but rather to contextualize their practices within the common-sense understanding that, in order to survive, black men need "to become better patriarchs" (hooks, 2004:xiv)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, in conversations regarding the social construction of black masculinity, it is important to ask to which forces Black young men are responding when they engage in so-called deviant behavior (see Gordon 1997). Edmond Gordon (1997), for instance, urges us to see black men's practices as more than a "social problem," as mainstream literature has suggested. On the contrary, "[t]he 'problem' of black males, generally couched in psychological and sociological terms (eg, hypersexuality, deviance, immorality, delinquency, and criminality) must be thought of in political terms" (Gordon 1997:47).

In an ethnographic account of baile funk, gangs of jiu-jitsu practitioners, and black music club frequenters in Rio de Janeiro, Marcia Cecchetto (2004) shows how male gender identity is experienced through different forms of masculinity in the context of violence in the city. She identifies compliance

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5 She argues that in order to deconstruct this culture of domination, Black males must refuse to take part in white patriarchy; "they need to know that their ambivalent position as males in a white patriarchal world will never be fulfilled" (hooks, 2004:66).

with the conventional script of masculinity as synonymous with virility, consumption of drugs, and explicit violence. Among some black youths, she noticed an investment in the style of masculinity that emphasizes the conquest of women. Among others, this style of masculinity showed that respect, elegance and self-control were more prevalent. Although these behaviors are themselves too normative, her work points to different ways male gender identity can be lived. Indeed, in the author of this review's own work with young black *favela* residents in São Paulo, alternative practices developed by marginalized black young men to live their gender identities were identified. Some get involved in drug dealing others struggle to get into the university, others become fathers as teenagers, and others craft a political identity around the black movement. Contrary to the stereotypes of black masculinity, there is no relation between black men and violence, aside from the structural and political theater where some selected practices of particular individuals gain meaning as a racial truth.

It is this link between masculinity, race and violence that the movie *City of God* desperately seeks to prove. Violence is not only essentialized as an inherently male characteristic, but the film also portrays it as an inherent part of black male identity; black manhood is conceived of in terms of heterosexuality, virility, aggressiveness and violent geographies. An obvious manifestation of this naturalized violent black manhood is the filmmakers' insistence in putting guns in the hands of black children. By portraying the transformation of black children into criminals, *City of God* naturalizes violence as a vocation embedded in black men's character. The 10 year-old Steak, the newest member of Zé's gang, has his baptism by shooting dead a street-thug-kid in the favela:

Zé - *Let see if you are ready [giving a gun to Steak]. Choose one.*

Steak hesitates and Zé insists:

Zé - *Go on, Steak. I am not kidding. Go, I wanna see.*

It is through his performance as a "man" that he becomes recognized by the other members of the gang as one of them. Later on, when a rival gangster chastises him, Steak gives the following answer:

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

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

From Little Zé's massacre of defenseless white victims, to Steak's killing of another child, to the final scene of the film in which a gang of kids take the control of the *favela* and kills Zé, there is an inescapable panorama of violence in which black children transform themselves into men. The message stated in the images is that to be a black male is to be feared, is to be cruel. How might black (and white) kids interpret the movie's construction of black childhood as the key moment of the making of black criminals? What does it tell the viewer about the predictable violence against blacks, which is required to preserve white order in the city?

In the movie, there is no space for an understanding of the City of God *favela* as part of a broader system of racial domination. Although at one point the narrator describes the *favela* as a place where the state is present only through politicians' promises and police extortions of its residents, the narrative of violence in the movie is de-historicized, de-politicized, and de-contextualized<sup>6</sup>. Instead, the movie takes the easy shortcut of an urban war rhetoric that over-emphasizes the power of drug dealers and portrays the *favelas* as lawless lands. It is not hard to imagine the racialized outcomes of these urban narratives of fear and crime (Silva, 1998, Vargas 2005). The movie seems so intent on portraying black-on-black violence that it fails to address the role of the state in the victimization of black youth in the *favela*. Police violence, for instance, appears as peripheral, although *favela* residents are the main victims of the police in Brazil. There is no community solidarity in the City of God, either. The scenes with "regular" residents show them as passive victims or police informants. They are disorganized and a-political. Indeed, there is no way out of the pathological cycle of violence that organizes the social life in the *favela*.

Here again, the Black male's body is the center of a spectacle of horror where death is banalized, and violence becomes the only way to solve conflicts. Portrayed as cold-blooded criminals, the death of black males is not only predictable, but also absolutely necessary to the very constitution of the city as a civilized, secure, peaceful space. The movie delivers its message in a very effective way. The aggressive performance and disposition of bodies on the screen are combined with technological sophistication (aerial shots show

6 For an analysis of City of God's "trivialization of violence" and favela residents' reactions to the movie, see Oliveira, 2009. See also Ribeiro (2003) and Bentes (2007) for a discussion on the narratives of violence in Brazilian cinema.

the marvelous city and its surrounding *favelas*) to integrate geographies and bodies in a cohesive narrative of crime and order. Violence is thus the organizing principle not only of black manhood, but also of the city's geography itself. City of God provides, therefore, narratives of the spatial arrangement of difference – narratives of spatial alterity – in the anti-black city.

### **Racialized Regime of Representation**

The mass media is a privileged space where hegemonic discourse on Black masculinity is symbolically constructed. Moving beyond the still unresolved debate on the complex relation between mass media and violence, the focus here is to highlight the work of ideology in sustaining relations of domination (see Thompson, 1995). In effect, the dominant image of a black body as a source of constant impurity, danger and fear has legitimized what this article sees as a *dehumanizing strategy*. This ideological approach does not produce merely representational/discursive categories. It also produces life-and-death outcomes, as the statistics on black premature death, unemployment and residential segregation, among other inequities, indicate (e.g., Vargas 2005; Batista, 2005).

Instructive here are Pierre Bourdieu's (1995) propositions about symbolic violence. This term refers to a set of beliefs and practices imposed by the ruling class to maintain the social structure of a given society. Symbolic violence is a means of social production. The symbolic order is achieved through the dialectic process of "incorporation of structures" and "ritualization of practices" – inculcation and appropriation. Bourdieu coined the term "habitus" to describe the process through which a given set of practices and beliefs becomes commonsense – that is, when the "objective social structure" becomes an internalized ritual of domination (Bourdieu, 1995:166). The concept of habitus is important here because it allows the unveiling of the mechanisms by which ideology sustains relations of domination grounded in the production of myths and discourses (idem, 1995:85). If this interpretation of Bourdieu's proposition is correct, it can be argued that, as a shared habitus, the dehumanizing devaluation of blackness in popular culture should be understood as a mode of domination.

The "social death" of blacks (Paterson, 1982) and the intimate relationship between blackness and criminality in everyday discourse calls for a rea-

ding of black physical annihilation not as a problem but as a solution. Nina Rodrigues ([1933]2004) discusses this relation in his studies on the black character, and the Rio governor's statement from the beginning of this article is a case-in-point. Because black life is seen as worthless life (and is shortened by precarious job positions, lack of access to health care, education, residence, malnutrition and so on) when physical death meets black bodies it does not elicit the sort of responses expected for white suffering. That is to say, violence against the black body is a habitus, of a shared truth that maintains the social production of white privilege in Brazilian society.

Maria Damasceno (2000), Mariza Correa (1996) and Patricia Collins (2005), among others, have highlighted the role played by the popular culture industry in perpetuating stereotypes based on sexuality, gender and race. They argue that media's repertoire of images is a symbolic form of domination that controls, commodifies, and de-politicizes blackness. From the Brazilian invention of the *mulata* and the blood-thirsty black criminal to the US racist construction of Black women as jezebels and mammies, the black body is tied to a regime of representation that simultaneously consumes blackness as exotic/deviant/exceptional and reiterates black inferiority (see Collins 2005, Ferber 2007).

Ronald Jackson II (2006) refers to this pathologized system of representation as "polysemous hegemonic inscriptions of Black bodies" (Jackson II, 2006, p.123). According to Jackson II, the black man's body is a surface where polysemic texts are written: it is racially *scripted* as uneducated, violent, exotic, sexual, exploitable and incapacitated (see Jackson II, 2006:46). In this sense, the totalizing narrative of violence of Brazilian mass media rallies a set of meanings about the Black body that marks it as the other. These *signifying practices* (Hall, 1997) mobilize fear and anxieties to produce both the white city and the black *favela*, the black criminal and the white victim. As Stuart Hall (1997) shows in another context, within such regimes of representation, racialized bodies became discursive sites to perform the making of the difference. Of course, these practices are not new, and they reveal the endurance of the colonial order in which culture is biologized and difference is naturalized as inferiority:



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

Race and sexuality have long been privileged places for what David Marriot has named a white 'compulsive fascination' with black female and male bodies. In the case of black men, stereotypes of the black rapist, the black athlete and the black criminal have historically fed white racist imagination (Marriot, 2004:xiv; Collins, 2005; Ferber 2007). These "controlling images" (Collins, 2004) are political tools for the reproduction of white supremacy. If Sander Gilmar's definition of stereotypes is correct ("We need the representations of difference to localize our anxiety, to prove to ourselves that what we fear does not lie within" (1985:240)), what are whites telling about themselves through these representations of black men? How do whites profit with the negative representation of blacks in Brazil?

As it has been explored so far, the hegemonic discourses on heterosexuality, violence, and fear in *City of God* illustrate how racial domination operates in the supposed racial democracy of Brazil. That is to say, although it may be true that racism is also a (white) psychological disorder, the killing of black men's public image needs to be contextualized beyond the realm of individual obsession and situated within the anti-black social system (Bonilla-Silva 1996). Thus, it is suggested here that the dehumanizing strategies in the mass media should be read as symbolic violence that rationalizes, and makes possible, the devaluation of black life in the anti-black city. As Abby Ferber (2007) has argued,

These steadfast images of black men naturalize and reinforce racial inequality. They reinforce the message that Black men are naturally aggressive, are violent, cannot succeed on their own, are not suited for professional careers, are not good fathers, and need to be controlled by white men (...). Black men continue to be reduced to their physical bodies and defined as inferior to White men. (2007:22)

Put simply, the argument is that the postcolonial representation of the Black “other” in popular culture updates the colonial regime. Now that race as a biological category has been placed under deep scrutiny, the cultural industry needs to reshape its rhetoric with a more aggressive and less explicit control over the image of racial “others.” Thus, our present is marked by a racial hegemony that denies the existence of race, even as race organizes social life through what Brazilian scholar Lélia Gonzalez (1983) has appropriately called “Brazilian cultural neurosis”<sup>7</sup>. In the following section, the narratives of violence of *City of God* are contextualized within the ways the Brazilian nation has been historically imagined.

### White ImagiNation

Most literature on urban violence in Brazil (see for instance Da Matta 1991, Zaluar 1994, Cano 1997, Caldeira 2003 among others) has ignored the anti-Blackness that defines the Brazilian nation. Is it not the case that there is something inherently anti-Black in the national imaginary that makes Black bodies out of place in the country’s *Brazilianidade* because, at the same time, Black culture becomes a currency in carnival, athletics, etcetera. The Brazilian national project never included Blacks, because such a group was an obstacle to the ideal-type of modernity and civilization celebrated by white elites. As some scholars have shown, the transition from colony to Republic did not change the infra-human status of blacks. To the contrary, the republic was a racial project that aimed to “solve” the black problem through *embranquecimento* [whitening]: as Brazilians came to resemble Europeans more closely through miscegenation, Brazil would achieve the status of a civilized nation (see Skidmore 1995, Munanga 1999).

The troubling black presence within the nation is described by Frantz Fanon (1963): “The two zones [the white and the black worlds] are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. (...) They both follow the principle of a reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous” (1963, p. 39). This ontological impossibility, marked by the non-human, non-citizen black is, in fact, a necessary condition to the making of

7 Judith Butler has named it as “white paranoia” (Butler, 1993).

the nation as a white imagined community. Countering Benedict Anderson's ([1984]2006) earlier formulation that racism was not a component of nationalism and that the nation was built upon *print capitalism* rather than biological bases, Paul Gilroy (1987) argues that the nation is indeed constituted through racial discourses. The process of making Britain a pure, homogenous nation, he suggests, is an ambivalent process, for it is also a process of creating 'otherness.' Cultural and biological ties are articulated to create national/racial boundaries that he calls the "new racism." For Gilroy, new racism

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

Regardless of the specificity of Britain's racial formation, Gilroy's argument can be useful to the understanding of Brazilian nation-building. While citizenship and national belonging in Brazil have deeply racialized roots, Blacks appear in the popular representation of the nation as the exotic object of white consumption. Carnival, samba, football and sexual tourism are incorporated into founding narratives of Brazil as a mixed nation (Da Matta, 1991). While race is foundational of Brazilian society, this culturalist perspective negates the existence of racism; after all, Brazil is different from the US and South Africa (see Marcos and Maggie 2007, Fry 1995). There is no incoherence here, for this "racial ambivalence" (Hale 2006) is precisely what makes the re-production of the Brazilian nation as a white nation possible. Within this framework, the following questions can be posed: How is the historical reality of colonialism updated and re-actualized through contemporary narratives of violence? How is violence deployed to sustain the Brazilian nation? These questions invite reflections on contemporary narratives of urban violence – such as *City of God* – as part of a national imaginary that regards blackness as anti-nation.

If *City of God* is a racial strategy of imagining the nation, it is necessary to unveil how the nation is performed as a racial project. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1990) contends that the nation is the result of a creative work

of “cultural elaboration”<sup>8</sup>. According to Bhabha, the nation is produced and lived by two processes: a pedagogical and a performative<sup>9</sup>. The school, the church and the national media are examples of living narratives being told. The performative process is the constant making/becoming. Bhabha’s argument is critical to the understanding of the ways the nation is ‘written’ in the body: *People write the nation by performing the nation. And by performing the nation they contest, negotiate, re-write it.* In his framework, being a good or a bad citizen depends upon the ways one performs the nation<sup>10</sup>.

What happens, then, with the bodies that are inherently unfit in the nation? Here, it could be argued, lies the Black negation within the Brazilian nation. Blacks cannot be full citizens in the Brazilian regime of citizenship, because writing the nation in Brazil has historically meant to erase the Black subject, as the literature on black genocide in Brazil illuminates (Vargas 2005, Nascimento 1989). As the opening paragraph in this article illustrates, the survival of the nation requires the taming and control of black bodies seen as a national threat. The governor’s claim that black women’s bodies are dangerous places suggests that, indeed, “not just (any)body can be a citizen,” as Jacqui Alexander (1994) has forcefully argued in her analysis of the reproduction of the nation and the heterosexual family.

“(…) some bodies have been marked by the state as non-productive, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation” (1994:06).

8 It is already well known Bhabha’s insightful reflections on the ways the colonized disturbed the emonic codes of the colonizer by the process of ‘productive ambivalence’ (Bhabha, 1990:67) in which the body of the colonized were both the object of the colonial abuse, but also a vehicle of power/subjectivity. The interest for this paper in Bhabha’s reflection is his formulation on the ‘other question’, that is how the other is constructed by a web of discourses, as well as his formulation on the way differences (sexuality, race, class, gender) fit in the narration of the nation.

9 The pedagogical process is learned from what Althusser (1979) had previously identified as the ideological state apparatus (ISA).

10 People are normalized/disciplined through pedagogical techniques of the body, which produce ‘good’ citizens and docile subjects, as Foucault (1979) noted.

Now and then, here and there, the black body is the “surface” upon which the nation is written. As the absolute ‘other,’ the black body is both the anti-national and the folkloric symbol that makes possible the very idea of a multi-racial, horizontal community. There is no contradiction, therefore, between celebration and genocide. The position that Black Brazilians occupy in this nation is concomitant with the constitution of whiteness. At the same time that the nation consumes blackness as culture, it needs the racial boundaries that provide a white sense of belonging and, therefore, also needs systemic violence against black people.

Like in the movie, the nation is performed through the politics of terror: poverty, unemployment, urban segregation, negative stereotypes and killings by the police. *City of God*, therefore, must be understood within the larger context of Brazilian imagiNation. The racist imagination of the filmmakers – depicting black young men as natural-born criminals, and the *favela* as the privileged place of evilness and moral degradation – needs to be read as part of the system of racial domination that subjugates and kills blacks in Brazilian urban settings.

### Conclusion

By examining the politics of representation of Black men in Brazilian popular culture, this paper has suggested that the controlling image of the Black male as criminal, ugly, polluted and evil be one of the strategies by which racial meanings are produced. This image, in turn, paves the way for allowing the killing of black young men in Brazilian *favelas*. While Black men are far from unique in their victimization by racial injury, they are specifically subjected to homicidal violence. In this context, the narrative of masculinity in *City of God* is organized around three central issues: violence, sexuality and race. The movie’s narrator, Rocket, is an exception among the black youth that fall in disgrace in the *favela*. Only through hard work is Rocket able to escape the fatality of living in the *favela*. Little Zé, on the other hand, embodies violence in its most primitive form. In the white racist minds of *City of God*’s filmmakers, Zé represents the natural-born, out-of-control criminal. Because he does not fulfill the requirements to participate in the white nation, in order to be recognized as male he must be feared, must have outstanding sexual performance, and must prove his manhood at any cost.

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