Racialized Popular Feminism

A Decolonial Analysis of Women’s Struggle with Police Violence in Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas

by

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The action of the women of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas to avoid, prevent, counter, and denounce police violence, both infrapolitically and in the public transcript, are associated with the rise of a political consciousness that is gendered and racialized in the context of the genocide of Brazil’s black population. Their resistance, rooted in “Amefricanidade” and the lingering coloniality of gender, is best described as characterized by an intersectional consciousness of injustice.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, official statistics report that more than a fifth of the population lives in a favela (slum). Since drug trafficking factions emerged in the late 1970s, many of them have been competing for territory in urban spaces, particularly in the favelas, which offer strategic locations for drug sales. Thus, several of these favelas are subject to repeated and aggressive police and military operations as part of the war on drugs and the long-standing criminalization of black populations, contributing to the militarization of these spaces (Vargas, 2013). Although favelas have always had stereotypes attributed to

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them, today the dominant image in the collective imaginary is one of violence and danger. As a result, for most residents of Rio, favelas constitute a proverbial no-man’s land where it is better not to venture. In this context, my main interest has been to understand police violence and its role in reproducing intersecting power relations based on gender, race, class, and spatiality (Veillette and Nunes, 2017). More specifically, my research has focused on women and police violence in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. During my field research, I met with 21 faveladas (women living in favelas) in order to document and analyze their experiences with police violence, its impacts, and the means used to resist it. The favela residents that I met—all Afro-descendant women—identified various ways in which they fight police violence, whether in their everyday actions or in community or partisan involvements. The wide range of tactics used to counter police violence on a daily basis combined with strategies for denouncing it in public spaces can be understood as existing on a continuum between what James Scott (1990) calls the hidden and the public transcripts—between forms of resistance that undermine power without being detected and forms that openly challenge and subvert the established order. In this article, I argue that the specific realities they have to negotiate and the types of resistances they use are best described as an intersectional variant of popular feminism that I call “racialized popular feminism.”

To support this argument, I will first look at the concepts of popular feminism and of motherhood and develop an epistemological framework that links Afro-feminism, decolonial feminism, and the concept of “Amefricanidade.” I will then elaborate on what I mean by racialized popular feminism, explaining the various forms it takes in the hidden transcript, the public transcript, and the gendered breach that allows passage from one to the other.

POPULAR FEMINISM AND THE MOBILIZATION OF MOTHERHOOD AS A POLITICAL IDENTITY

During Brazil’s dictatorship (1964–1985), organizations proliferated and grew in the urban periphery (not merely the geographic periphery of the city but its political “margins”). The repressive attitude of the state toward residents of the urban periphery and its limited involvement in the provision of basic public services led them to formulate demands of the state to ensure their survival. These demands addressed the various deficiencies observed in their communities. According to the political scientist Sonia Alvarez (1990: 43), women represented the majority of their members, and their demands were first articulated in terms of their class location. In the 1980s and 1990s, left-wing feminists took this opportunity to reach out to women struggling in the working-class and poor neighborhoods to create a “gender-consciousness solidarity” in order to broaden the growing feminist movement (Maier, 2010: 35). Some observers and researchers have referred to this contextual alliance as “popular feminism.” More recently, others, such as Nathalie Lebon (2014), have instead identified popular feminism as the result of the organization of women from the working and marginalized classes
Veillette / WOMEN AND POLICE VIOLENCE IN RIO DE JANEIRO  89

(whether in urban or rural settings) to demand a better distribution of resources in a context where survival is a daily challenge. As in other women’s movements in Latin America and in particular those mobilizing against state violence (such as CoMadres, the Coordinación Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala, and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo [see Schirmer, 1993]), motherhood is at the heart of their formulation of their demands, at least initially. On the involvement of women in movements from the urban periphery during the 1980s, Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes (1993: 138) notes: “Women have created a political role for themselves based on their social status as wives and mothers but through which they have struggled for recognition of their role and rights as workers, residents and citizens.”

Concordant with this literature, motherhood was a central aspect not only of the lives of the women I met in 2016 and 2018 (many were mothers and grandmothers) but also of the way they approached their resistance to police violence as part of greater state violence. Depending on the circumstances and the objectives pursued, they used different registers of motherhood either to demand justice from the state or as a means of empowerment in the private or the public sphere. Yet, in other ways, their reality and their analysis start from the one described in the literature on popular feminism; the deadly and daily threat of police violence and the marginalization associated with living in a favela have shaped their consciousness differently. However, because they are residents of favelas, often Afro-descendant and poor, the legitimacy of their struggle is often questioned in two ways. Either it is naturalized (and therefore depoliticized) because it is perceived as a mother’s desperate attempt to obtain revenge or it is perceived, in accordance with the criminalization of the favelas, as a way of defending the rights of “criminals”—favela residents and drug traffickers, the two being constantly (and deliberately) confused. Nevertheless, it is common for the “strength” of the faveladas in the face of adversity to be recognized. This association between Afro-descendant women and “strength” is an oppressive image (hooks, 1981) that reproduces, for example, the racist idea that black women are “more resistant” than others to pain or heavy labor. Thus, while in other contexts in Latin America women’s mobilization subverts the essentialist idea of fragile and passive femininity, in the case of faveladas it faces contradictory discourses and images that reproduce a perception that sometimes victimizes them, sometimes questions their honesty, and sometimes relies on their “extraordinary capacities” for struggle on a daily basis.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE COLONIALITY OF GENDER

Intersectionality, as a social science idea, emerged among Afro-descendant feminists in the United States (from the 1970s on) who sought to grasp the complexity of power relations and their impact on social justice struggles. At the time, it referred directly to the idea that black women found themselves at the intersection of overlapping and dynamic systems of oppression based on their assigned gender, race, and class (Crenshaw, 1991; see also, among others,
Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981). Having no close correspondence to any of these identity categories, black women constantly find themselves on the margins of struggles and knowledge, whether as women, as blacks, or as part of the working class. The widespread use of the idea of intersectionality makes it, more than a theory, a field that focuses on the dynamics between different power relations and identities (Davis, 2008).

Black U.S. feminists were not the only ones to highlight the indivisibility of the oppressions they faced. Chicanas, indigenous women, and, more broadly, women from the global South also engaged with the theme of intersecting oppressions, considerably enriching intersectionality’s conceptual tools and methodologies (see Anzaldúa, 1987; Mohanty, 1991; Perreault, 2015). For instance, the Brazilian feminist Lélia Gonzalez (1988), whose writings are still rarely cited, has made significant contributions to our understanding of the articulation of sexism and racism in the production of violence against black women in Brazil. For her, this common experience is constitutive of an “Amefricanidade”—an Afrocentric epistemic category that highlights the African diaspora’s multiple and intensive traditions of resistance across the Americas. Furthermore, Gonzalez first exposed the continued difficulties for racialized women in defending an intersectional agenda (not always so named) in various social movements, including black and feminist movements in Brazil (Gonzalez, 2008: 39–40). Afro-descendant women find themselves on the margins in both movements because of the racism they face from feminists and the sexism they face from racialized men (Caldwell, 2010: 176), echoing the reality of their U.S. counterparts (hooks, 1984). And, as did their sisters in the United States, Afro-Brazilian women created their own movement (at the beginning of the 1980s) while remaining active in others (Caldwell, 2010: 175). For example, as residents of favelas they continue to mobilize against favela and black community removals (Perry, 2016) and seek justice when a member of the family is killed by police (Rocha, 2012).

I find particularly illuminating the reflection on co-constructed and dynamic oppressions developed by decolonial feminists such as Maria Lugones in the context of Latin America. As Lugones (2010) argues, categories such as race and gender are the direct result of colonization and of what Aníbal Quijano (2000) called a long-standing coloniality of power. The coloniality of power offers a conceptual tool to understand the transformation and evolution of the capitalist and racist divisions of labor in Latin America from colonial times to our days. According to Quijano, the coloniality of power works ideologically by producing difference legitimizing the exploitation and dehumanization of indigenous and Afro-descendant people despite the official end of colonialization (and, I would add, slavery). This social hierarchy constitutes the central pillar of colonial modernity in providing the structure for its power relations. The concept of coloniality of gender advanced by Lugones and built upon in Quijano’s coloniality of power refers to the dehumanization of women in this “colonized” world. It highlights women’s continued resistance to it—a resistance that underlines the constructed and violent aspect of social categories such as race, gender, and class, which cannot be understood separately.
RACIALIZED POPULAR FEMINISM

Because police violence and its response occur in a specific setting of power relations based on classism, racism, sexism, and spatial inequalities—which, as Lugones (2010) suggests, can be understood through the lens of the coloniality of gender—the resistance of women living in favelas is necessarily intersectional and not just gender- and class-oriented. I propose to understand women’s resistance to police violence as being a form of racialized popular feminism anchored in the lived experience of Afro-descendant women in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Just as popular feminism is conditioned by the survival-oriented strategies of poor women, racialized popular feminism is conditioned by the specific ways in which racism and place politics shape women’s consciousness and strategies for resistance. My analysis shows that women develop a gendered and class consciousness that is inseparable from a racialized consciousness.

Nevertheless, while I was in the field, it quickly became apparent that women did not always identify themselves as feminists and that when they did, their definitions of “feminism” varied widely. I chose to understand “feminism,” as Ferree and Tripp (2006: vii) suggest, “as the broad goal of challenging and changing gender relations that subordinate women to men and that thereby also differentially advantage some women and men relative to others.” Consequently, several tactics and strategies (including infrapolitical ones) can be understood as feminist, “whether or not individuals or groups choose to call themselves feminists.” This feminism is also rooted in a national context that, despite its claims to racial harmony, fosters social inequalities and genocidal violence against the black population. Therefore, for women living in the favelas—similar to other populations from the African diaspora in the Americas (and other racialized groups in a variety of contexts)—resistance is not one-dimensional but intersectional.

Furthermore, racialized popular feminism is not only the result of women’s participation in social movements, where they often develop a gendered and racial consciousness, but also a set of tactics and strategies developed in the realm of infrapolitics, where a significant part of their resistance to police violence is deployed. In addition, women living in favelas who avoid, prevent, counter, and denounce police violence do not always do so collectively or through political institutions. In order to grasp, as much as possible, the whole spectrum of their resistance, I build my argument on Lynn Stephen’s (1997: 21) suggestion that

rather than assuming the natural existence of collective identities, we have to look contextually at how mobilization arises and how its meaning and interpretation may vary between individuals over time. Groups of women who act together are often quite heterogeneous, and their ability to act comes from respecting difference while also forging a common argument through a shared set of questions.

Following this idea, Lugones (2010: 746) invites us to rethink the way in which the resistance of the colonized—or, rather, the dehumanized—subjects unfolds, focusing mainly on infrapolitics:
Resistant subjectivity often expresses itself infra-politically, rather than in a politics of the public, which has an easy inhabitation of public contestation. Legitimacy, authority, voice, sense, and visibility are denied to resistant subjectivity. Infra-politics marks the turn inward, in a politics of resistance, toward liberation. It shows the power of communities of the oppressed in constituting resistant meaning and each other against the constitution of meaning and social organization by power. In our colonized, racially gendered, oppressed existences we are also other than what the hegemon makes us be.

To adopt a posture of resistance in colonial modernity is necessarily to transcend or even subvert categories imposed as a technology of power. Resistance opposes the categories imposed by colonial modernity. An intersectional approach, rooted in a coloniality of gender analysis, therefore allows us to complexify our understanding of oppression and resistance.

In this article I focus on the political aspect of the daily resistance to police violence exemplified by women living in favelas. The argument I develop is based on the idea that these women, by mobilizing both in the hidden transcript (in infrapolitical space) and in the public transcript, resist the coloniality of gender: they act outside of what the hegemon makes of them. They are, for example, mothers who, contrary to what the dominant ideology holds, are not seeking revenge or protecting criminals (although it must be remembered that “criminals” also have rights). This resistance is, furthermore, political, since it seeks to fight injustice and goes beyond any “natural” reaction. Although faveladas’ resistance to police violence is not always worked out collectively, many forms of resistance coexist in the same group because the latter is intracategorically complex (McCall, 2005).

Thus, the racialized popular feminism I suggest has commonalities with popular feminism: women mobilize their role as mothers to strengthen their position as political subjects, and their activism often takes the form of survival tactics because of the extreme circumstances under which they live. At the same time, it departs from that form in that the consciousness developed is anchored in an analysis not only of their condition as women but also of the racist system they face every day. Furthermore, because their survival (and that of their families and communities) depends on their capacity to manipulate the coloniality of gender, their resistance is often invisible, masked to avoid being read as a threat to power. Finally, this racialized popular feminism requires them to fight on multiple fronts, mirroring the intersectional nature of not only their consciousness but also their understanding of oppression.

GENOCIDE, A CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE, AND AFRO-DESCENDANT WOMEN: A DIFFERENTIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The favelas in Rio de Janeiro have a long history of police violence. Since their creation in the late nineteenth century, they have continually been subject to repressive and brutal politics in which the police have played a key role.

Scholars have increasingly pointed to the police as a significant agent of militarization in these areas of the city, even in the case of special proximity and community-oriented police projects (Fleury, 2012; Serra and Rodrigues, 2014).
Others have pointed out that such violence had important roots in class and racial power relations, since the majority of the favelas’ population is Afro-descendant and low-income (Berenguer, 2014; Telles, 1995). For the Brazilian anthropologist João H. Costa Vargas (2013), despite the concrete improvements initially brought by recent policing initiatives—especially the “pacification program”—black victimization remains common. As a result, young black men (mostly from the favelas) continue to be the main target of police killings and violence (Amnesty International, 2015), since they are associated with criminality related to drug trafficking. However, the association between blackness and danger or criminality is nothing new; scholars often refer to it as the “criminalization of the favelas” (Campos, 2005; Zaccone, 2015). In fact, the military police in Rio de Janeiro have targeted the Afro-descendant population since their creation in 1809, when the Portuguese monarchy, then installed in Rio, feared the rebellious tendency of Africans brought to Brazil during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Holloway, 1993). This association is also the result of a latent racism often minimized by the myth of racial democracy.

The myth of racial democracy refers to the misconception that because there has been so much miscegenation between European descendants, Afro-descendants, and indigenous people and because of the lengthy absence of explicit segregation laws (such as those existing in the United States and South Africa), the different “races” live in peace in Brazil without racial oppression. Largely popularized by writers such as Gilberto Freyre (2006 [1933]), racial democracy has been deconstructed and associated with a myth obscuring actual racism in Brazil (Da Matta, 1987). To some extent, for Abdias do Nascimento (1978) and Vargas (2005), the myth of racial democracy serves as a cover for the “genocide” of the African diaspora in Brazil. For Vargas, police violence is part of the structural violence against African diaspora in the Americas that contributes to this “genocide.”

The concept of genocide, as developed by Vargas in the Brazilian context, refers to multidimensional acts of violence committed against members of the African diaspora. It combines the ideological and material faces of genocide. The ideological face includes whitening ideals (the will to whiten the Brazilian race) and the myth of racial democracy. The material face includes police violence but also cultural annihilation, material deprivation, segregation, limited access to public services, and discrimination regarding job opportunities. In that regard, it must be emphasized that police violence in Brazil is just a small part—but, likely, the most visible part—of a continuum of genocidal violence. Genocide highlights not only the centrality of racism in the perpetration of violence but also the constant dehumanization that Afro-descendants face in the postslavery era.

Police officers are not the only ones to kill—and be killed, for that matter—in the favelas, but they surely represent an important source of insecurity because of the excessive force they use in densely inhabited areas. However, their violence is not limited to physical violence often leading to death, and their target is not just young (black) men. Women are also subject to arbitrary killings, physical violence (beatings, for example), and threats. Furthermore, women in the favelas are more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment and sexual violence (especially when they are alone with police officers). The threats they
receive often target their families instead of themselves, and they frequently face systematic disparagement and victimization by police agents (see, for Brazil, Goldstein, 2003; Moura, 2008; Veillette and Nunes, 2017; and Wilding, 2014; and, for North America, Maynard, 2017; and Ritchie, 2017). Finally, when violence hits, women are drawn to specific roles and tasks reflecting a sexual division of labor. They are expected to “hold down the fort”: to take care of the wounded, generate (the only) income, run the household, provide moral and emotional support, and even demand justice (Veillette, 2017b).

This gendered division of labor is exemplified by the growing number of women who are united as mothers in organizations that seek justice when their husbands or sons are victims of police violence. As Luisa, an activist in a mothers’ organization, explains, it is ultimately women who have to take the responsibility for seeking justice (interview, Rio de Janeiro, June 13, 2016):

Here [in the mothers’ organization], there are women fighting. And as you can see, we do not fight against men. But, in a certain way, we have to . . . because it is like that: it is because we lose our sons, sons that we made with men. We do not receive any help from them because they are the first ones to “break down.” They think their suffering is greater than ours, but they are the first ones to fall apart. So, we have to hang tough, to be strong and help them get up. It is a fierce struggle, and it takes a lot of resistance to continue to live and to, ultimately, do what society does not do.

Because the care work is socially assigned to women (Molinier, 2012), they find themselves with an additional burden in a context of violence: that of caring emotionally and physically not only for the injured but also for all those who remain, such as children, spouses, and the elderly. This responsibility is all the more burdensome when it comes to funeral arrangements and the struggles that must be waged to prove the innocence of the victims and to bring the police officers responsible to justice. It is from this perspective that the state participates (at least) materially in the reproduction and maintenance of women’s oppression in the favelas: when their relatives are targeted by state violence (for being poor, Afro-descendant, and residents of favelas), a heavy workload is added to their daily lives. Thus, it is important to understand how state violence contributes to the reproduction of oppression to understand how women mobilize intersectionality in fighting back.

MOTHERHOOD AND EVERYDAY RESISTANCE TO POLICE VIOLENCE

In order to survive, women—and, in this case, particularly mothers—have adopted strategies and tactics for avoiding and deescalating police encounters. The most common tactics women mentioned were avoiding specific roads, choosing the “right” clothes for their children so that they would not draw the police’s attention, hiding valuable possessions that could arouse suspicion upon a search, and masking their own reactions when facing a police officer. All of these tactics are forms of low-profile and “disguised” resistance that are invisible, hidden from the dominant gaze, but effective. They are reminiscent
of the discussion on group survival by the Afro-feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (2009: 219): “This dimension may not directly challenge oppressive structures because, in many cases, direct confrontation is neither preferred nor possible. Instead, women craft Black female spheres of influence that resist oppressive structures by undermining them.”

The data collected indicate that a significant part of faveladas’ everyday resistance consists of providing protection from urban violence (understood as the continuum of genocidal violence) to their families, especially to their sons, who are known to be more vulnerable and exposed to lethal danger than their daughters. As a consequence, motherhood is an important part of faveladas’ political resistance to urban violence. In the favelas, where motherhood is often experienced at an early age, it constitutes the main source of “black female spheres of influence” or empowerment (Collins, 2009: Chap. 8).

Although some scholars have pointed out that motherhood may be politicized in the public transcript (a political discourse aimed at elites [Scott, 1990: 18]), it is also a way to attain political goals infrapolitically. In this case, survival and empowerment in a context of genocide are, without a doubt, a constant battle and a major achievement: “Black women throughout the diaspora, feeling victimized by the techniques of actuation of racism interspersed with the solidified and naturalized patriarchal logic, have gone out, and go out even today, in pursuit of ways to survive, to strengthen each other, and to orchestrate daily struggles, whether in the familial, professional, or affective area” (Berth, 2018: 105).

Often, this combativeness is expressed through the image of the woman warrior (guerreira), which is commonly used to describe Afro-descendant women, especially when dealing with urban violence (Veillette, 2017a). Luisa, during the interview, tried to describe specifically what she meant by “women warriors”:

And on top of all, it is the black women who resist. Why? Because here I see that all women are warriors—women who go forward—but black women in the first place because the resistance is in our blood. We have always had to struggle to survive. We are born into this world knowing that we must fight. Here, you have to fight to remain alive. You have to fight to get a job. You have to fight if you have a child. You have to fight to keep him alive. You have to fight for your own survival. I mean, you never stop fighting. Black women were born and die fighting.

However, the image of the woman warrior is not without contradiction, since it can also be perceived as the extraordinary strength of a “super woman” (Wallace, 1978) who is overly aggressive or overly resistant to pain.

Women sometimes also play the role of being submissive and weak. Similar to what Radcliffe (1993) argued (although racialization was not a part of her analysis) in the context of state violence, acting as the “good mother” may be crucial. As Radcliffe (1993: 212) observed while working with campesinas in Peru, female activism in a context of state violence follows “a dual pattern: on the one hand, peasants acted within a framework defined by a (Hispanic, urban, Catholic) image of women as weak dependents in their dealing with state agents such as the police, while on the other
hand, they consolidated a distinct gender regime." She called this regime "radical campesina feminity" and described it as characterized by combativeness and political commitment.

For Afro-descendants, however, playing this card often means performing the role of the black "mammy," described by Collins (2009: 808–881) as a "faithful, obedient domestic servant." In doing so, she adopts "the public face that Whites expect Black women to assume for them." For instance, one of the participants in a focus group held in Rocinha remembered a night when she had to step out of her house to help two adolescent neighbors who were walking home but were stopped by two police officers for simply wandering the streets. She had to impersonate a "mad mother" dealing with two disobedient children who were coming back home late. Facing the police officers who were holding her two young neighbors, she exclaimed, "Boys, what are you doing in the streets at this hour? Your mothers don’t know about that, do they?" (participant, focus group, Rio de Janeiro, August 27, 2016). By saying these words, she was performing the mammy role to show that she was "on the righteous side," permitting her to gain the trust of the police officers, who then asked her whether she knew the boys and whether they were involved in drug trafficking. She was then able to testify that she knew them and that they were not involved in any illicit trade or activity; she was able to persuade the police to let them go.

Although nothing unfortunate transpired in this instance, the participant was terrified at the possibility of one of the boys’ being murdered because of his nervousness in the face of the police—something that could have been interpreted as guilt. Because of the willingness of police officers to believe mothers who perform the mammy role and their relative unwillingness to publicly inflict harm on them, women are often the ones who have to intervene in favor of men in their community; they are also the ones who have to testify on others’ behalf and, in extreme cases, physically protect them.

Several mothers in the favelas have organized in recent decades to denounce the violent actions of the state and to demand justice when the latter does not ensure the safety of its citizens. Luísa is a founding member of such an organization, one that was originally oriented toward supporting parents whose teenagers had been arrested and detained. This organization has now turned into a solidarity network of mothers who seek legal assistance to pursue criminal charges against police officers: "First, the majority of the members are women who lost their children, generally boys. . . . Being black features as second—they do not have the same skin color that is totally dark, but most of them are black or descendant from black families. The other significant point is that most of these women are alone in the fight" (Luísa, interview, Rio de Janeiro, June 13, 2016). She goes on to say that the organization is also a place of gathering, sharing, and empowerment for women:

We are empowered not because we curse or because we want to take a weapon to kill. No, we are empowered because we have power. . . . This movement is the one that bears the consequences when public security is abandoned by the international NGOs . . . and when women are deprived of their children, they start to fight. And then, we get ready to stand up for them, and simply because I will never let down another woman’s child. She is a partner, and she is an
equal. She is a woman just like me. That’s why we have started this movement. We are women, and we are not weak.

These examples show that motherhood can be used politically in various ways. While, on the one hand, it can be conceptualized as a vector of empowerment in daily life, particularly through the image of the warrior, motherhood can also be instrumentalized when women come face to face with the state or its agents, especially when it represents the only possible way to get by or achieve political gains (Safa, 1990: 361–362). While “some white, middle-class, college-educated women argued that motherhood was a serious obstacle to women’s liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and child care” (hooks, 1984: 133), this example shows the political possibilities opened by motherhood, especially for marginalized women who do not have the same public legitimacy as others to demand political change. Motherhood is a substantial part of everyday resistance against police violence, overflowing into the public transcript (as in the case of Luisa’s organization) and thus forcibly shaping the faveladas’ claims and political stances. Motherhood constitutes one pillar of the politics of resistance invoked by Lugones (2010), one that may be politicized in the public transcript but is also and fundamentally infrapolitical, undermining power from below.

A GENDERED BREACH IN POLICE VIOLENCE

As we have seen, although infrapolitical resistance is an important form of resistance against police violence, a great number of women from the favelas also engage in more visible public and collective battles. For example, some raise their voices when witnessing police brutality, some organize and seek justice by directly appealing to the state’s justice system, some organize public protests, some refuse to obey direct orders, and some counter police violence. However, it appears that because of racist and sexist stereotypes associated with women living in the favelas, police officers hesitate to openly constrain them, especially if they perform the stereotypical mammy role, which does not really pose a threat (the mammy’s being perceived as dehumanized and lacking agency). An idea quite common across the favelas was that women had a kind of “privilege” to resist police violence—that because of the stereotypes associated with them they had a certain leeway to resist police violence that men did not have (Nina, interview, Rio de Janeiro, July 12, 2016):

You see demonstrations, for example, and women are always there, because—it’s crazy but, it’s like that—we have some privileges that men do not, because there is also in the collective and institutional consciousness [the idea] that a woman is fragile. There is a perverse side to that, but it gives us an opportunity, you understand? I do not know whether we have always done it knowing clearly that it is strategic . . . or whether women have this consciousness and seize the opportunity.

Drawing on many such testimonies, I argue that women fighting police violence work through a gender breach made up of their experiences with
motherhood and stereotypes arising from the coloniality of gender. Essentially, there is a breach in police violence that allows women and mothers from the favelas to make claims and carry on struggles that would otherwise be hard to sustain. Although this breach can become an added responsibility, it enables them to cross from a hidden to a public transcript. This also allows a better understanding of why women have increasingly decided to abandon discretion and openly confront police officers both individually and collectively. Thus, motherhood still represents one of the very few ways women in the favelas have of empowering themselves and entering the public transcript. Whether they choose to use a combative image of motherhood (the warrior) politically or as a way of conforming to hegemonic views on gender roles and race depends on the objective pursued in a given context. An intersectional perspective embedded in the coloniality of gender in Latin America and, specifically, in Afro-descendant women’s experience with state violence is enlightening because it takes into consideration the variety of ways women from the favelas resist (whether infrapolitically or otherwise) without depoliticizing the ways they choose to act. Thus, as they work their way through the gender breach, faveladas are definitely not conforming to what the hegemon makes of them but subverting it.

FIGHTING ON SEVERAL FRONTS

Why is this fight against police violence a feminist struggle and one characteristic of racialized popular feminism? What I call racialized popular feminism accounts for women’s resistance to race-based violence (the criminalization of the favelas), whether it is performed individually or collectively. Thus, it is different from Lebon’s popular feminism, which does not specifically challenge race relations, and from Maier’s (2010) popular feminism in that survival is not necessarily or uniquely oriented toward class issues and the redistribution of resources.

In order to fight police violence, women have to fight on several fronts—as mothers, spouses, daughters, and sisters in a predominantly black and poor urban setting—and at different levels, in both the hidden and the public transcript. In doing so, mobilizing a gendered and racialized image such as the mammy or the warrior can be useful in getting heard and taking action (through the gender breach) even though these images can also be oppressive. These two features—the inseparability of the hidden and the public transcript for survival in the context of state violence and gendered, racialized, and class consciousness—are what distinguish their feminism from “white,” “mainstream,” or “hegemonic” feminism. In many cases, women did not choose to organize on a feminist or women-only basis to fight police violence. For instance, the majority of the women I met were activists working in local human rights organizations or community institutions and projects. Nevertheless, most of them also identified themselves as feminists, although they often insisted that they were not “radicals.” During a focus group of 20 women in Complexo do Alemão, I asked them if they identified themselves as feminists, and one of them said, “I think it depends, because at times feminism is that very radical thing. This
radicalism, for example, I do not like it. But if it is a feminism of fighting for equal rights, I am a feminist” [general approval in the room] (participant, focus group, Rio de Janeiro, May 26, 2018). Even if the “fight for equal rights” may appear quite liberal, “a Black mother who may be unable to articulate her political ideology but who on a daily basis contests school policies harmful to her children may be more an activist than the most educated Black feminist who . . . can manipulate feminist, nationalist, postmodern, and other ideologies” (Collins, 2009: 218).

Participants also made very clear that they were fighting not just as women but also as Afro-descendants and as residents of poor, socially peripheral neighborhoods, as this resident of Complexo do Alemão did when asked about the meaning of resistance in the favelas (Lívia, participant, focus group, Rio de Janeiro, May 26, 2018):

Unquestionably, resisting is part of our lives. When you are born and raised in a favela, you already know that you have to go through hardships in life. First, because being poor in this country . . . poverty only serves you as a starting point for the struggle, because you are born into a class in which there are already all the difficulties and challenges. . . . Our history is rooted there—in our mother’s womb—from the African mother who was brought to Brazil as a slave, where there were natives . . . all this junction and all this slavery, I believe it is a historical struggle. It comes from maternal knowledge that grows within the struggle for life, for health, and for housing. I think it is much stronger here in the favela, where our fight for survival starts.

Therefore, their experience is clearly and often consciously embedded in an “Amefricanidade,” a common experience and knowledge of past, present, and continuous struggles faced by racialized women in a colonized world.

This intersectional consciousness can be identified not only in these women’s everyday resistance to police violence but also in the different types of public-transcript activism to which they devote themselves. In most cases, the two are intricately intertwined. For Lívia, who works to bring about changes in health and education, resistance is closely related to survival. Fighting police violence and urban violence requires, for instance, better education for children (preventing their involvement in drug trafficking and allowing them to find jobs in the future) and ensured access to quality health services. Her work—as a health agent in a Rio nongovernmental organization and as cofounder of a grassroots NGO in her own favela (Complexo do Alemão)—has brought her to understand the specific consequences of violence against women, especially with regard to health. Over the past few years, she has addressed this growing concern by organizing women-only discussions and workshops regarding important issues such as violence, human rights, and economic empowerment.

Some women are actively involved in a diversity of political networks based in the favelas through which they organize political protests and cultural activities, some of them community-oriented and others linked to political parties. One woman from Maré (a complex of favelas in the northern area), for instance, works on a project to culturally empower women through workshops on graffiti and DJ mixing and is one of the founders of a group of young people from the favela who are fighting for drug legalization. Another woman from Maré
runs workshops on “popular communication” in the favelas to give residents access to the knowledge and tools required to record and publicize human rights violations (Giannotti, 2016). Others assume leadership roles in their communities that allow them to join larger-scale black women’s organizations or “mainstream feminist” groups (Nunes, 2018).

Although the women I met were well aware that their resistance was linked to their specific positions as women in the favelas, most of them were actively engaged in community work or political organizations that did not directly address women’s issues or adopt openly feminist agendas. Nevertheless, it remains fundamental to “consider the existence of other kinds of feminism instead of defining a priori an appropriate feminist politics paying attention to the articulation of feminist and other social political movements and their counter-hegemonic possibilities” (Di Marco, 2017: 126). In short, they were “feminists”—women with a gendered consciousness of injustice—engaged in a diversity of causes, but they were very aware of the importance and centrality of women’s participation in different struggles across the country: “Then you see that the domain of mobilization and transformation belongs to them, women. When you visit the four corners of Brazil, you see movements of women that change the reality of violence; in Bahia, Minas Gerais, Paraíba, and São Paulo” (Lívia, interview, Complexo do Alemão, August 9, 2016). It appears to me that this example is typical of a popular feminism because one of its main features is its links with a broader and often mixed movement. However, it is also typical of a racialized popular feminism because, although these women from the favelas are part of larger movements, they still need, in everyday life, to continue the struggle at an infrapolitical level.

**A SPECIFIC WAY TO BE FEMINIST?**

What does this context reveal about feminism in the favelas and popular feminism? I have developed the argument that faveladas’ resistance to police violence can be characterized as a form of racialized popular feminism. Building on the expression “popular feminism,” which focuses on economically marginalized women’s participation in diverse social movements and the (sometimes) subsequent formation of autonomous organizations, I argue that to fully grasp faveladas’ political actions it is crucial to include tactics and strategies performed infrapolitically. This aspect of political resistance has been present in the Afro-feminist literature in Brazil and the United States and in some decolonial feminist works but has not yet been conceptualized with regard to popular feminism.

The struggle against police violence is only one of many that must be fought on a daily basis in the Brazilian urban periphery. That being said, this example has allowed me to identify the infrapolitical and public tactics used by the faveladas understood as points on a continuum and a specific modality of resistance that I call the gender breach. Faveladas’ infrapolitical resistance to police violence highlights one of the main differences between current conceptualizations of popular feminism and racialized popular feminism: in tense contexts such as Brazil’s favelas, a significant part of resistance will remain
unorganized, hidden, and survival-oriented. Donna Goldstein’s (2003) ethnographic research in the favelas confirms this when she argues that everyday humor remains the most accessible and most often used way of resisting urban violence for women. Because these women have been surviving genocide for a while now and in many cases have improved their livelihoods, it is fundamental to remember the political nature of the hidden transcript. For example, while the individual action of mothers could be seen as a “natural” response to experienced injustices, motherhood is, in fact, an important form of individual and collective empowerment and regularly allows women to take a stand in the public transcript, where their voices are usually inaudible. Through these reflections, I have also tried to highlight the intersectional nature of this resistance, demonstrating that a gendered consciousness arises from long-standing racism and economic inequality. As a consequence, it is crucial to acknowledge that Afro-descendant women and women living in the favelas have been feminists for quite some time, well before any suggestion of considering their resistance racialized popular feminism. Their efforts to protect their resistance from the dominants’ gaze have had the side effect of making it invisible and easy to overlook.

NOTES

1. During this fieldwork, undertaken in 2016, I met women from Rocinha, Chácara do Céu, Vidigal, Santa Marta, Morro dos Macacos, Morro do Urubu, Complexo do Alemão (Palmeiras, Nova Brasília, and Comunidade da Mineira), Maré (Parque União and Nova Holanda), and Complexo da Penha (Vila Cruzeiro and Grotão). Eight of them participated in individual open-ended biographical interviews, six in a focus group, and seven through participant observation. Participant observation was conducted on the invitation of participants to neighborhood parties, public hearings, and community activities. The data presented in this article also include those from a focus group held in 2018 in Complexo do Alemão when I returned to Rio de Janeiro to share the results obtained in 2016.

2. The use of the term “Afro-descendant” is chosen to highlight the nonwhiteness of the women met, although the color of their skin, their origins, and their racial identities varied greatly.

3. Many human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch (2016) and Amnesty International (2015), have denounced police impunity and practice in the favelas, where they often inculpate the persons killed with drug trafficking by leaving drugs and weapons on their bodies.

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