

***“We lost the meaning of life”:  
A short reflection on the genocide of the souls in a  
Brazilian “periferia”***

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It's Friday night and I'm glad the week is over. In the distance, from far, from the other side of my fifth floor window, I hear some rumbling: string of three bangs and a pause. Months ago I stopped wondering what that sound might be: gunshots or fireworks. Today I hope for solidarity fires that some favela groups might use to show their solidarity with recent victims of the police abuse of power and blind retaliation in other parts of the city. When fires are heard in Palmeiras it's because they announce that the police are coming, or new drugs are for sale, or that they are going to “invade” another gang's territory.

It's been almost one year now since I started my intellectual (and emotional) journey toward understanding the everyday strategies of survival of the poor, and the importance of trust between people at the margins of Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará, in northeast Brazil. Fortaleza is Brazil's fifth largest city (IBGE, 2015), and its most violent. This city ranks 5th in the world in inequality of wealth (UN, 2010). Conjunto Palmeiras, my research site, is the poorest of the 117 neighborhoods that form Fortaleza (Desenvolvimento humano por bairro, 2014). Palmeiras is situated at the frontier between the city and “the interior”, what Brazilians call the non-city parts of the state of Ceará. Palmeiras is, as a friend put it, an imitation of a town from the interior, or “um interiorsinho,” a small interior (town). Yet it has the aspirations of the larger big city where the mega-scripts of success in life are different from those in small interior towns. Mega-scripts are understood here as the general frameworks that define success and failure in a different context (Vélez-Ibáñez, 2010). The urban mega-scripts imagine a life where material gain defines success, and the American dream can be a Brazilian reality.

This short piece deals with my personal understanding

of violence, economic precariousness, danger and suffering as filtered by my own challenges in taking this reality as "normal."

In Fortaleza, social classes are segregated by color. White is the color of neighborhoods near the sea, with tall buildings, luxury cars, and exotic beaches nearby. Indigenous and black people live in neighborhoods layered from the center outwards, and only commute to meet the comfort of the rich in daily rituals such as cleaning, caring and serving. Or they can resist in small communities; lost spots in the "city of walls." In Fortaleza, segregation is a continuous process. Between two "predios", high elegant apartment buildings, it is common to see "barracas," improvised houses made of bricks, with their colored front walls and small corner shops selling "churrasco" (grilled meat) at 7 A.M., vitaminas (smoothies) or popcorn, among other cheap snacks. Along the avenues connecting the airport to downtown city development projects aimed at replacing a chain of "barracas" or two stories houses with more "predios" threaten to displace those who happen to be poor, but well positioned in the new geography of this touristic city.

Social inclusion policies (such as the conditional cash transfer program, Bolsa Familia) put in practice since the first Lula government in 2002 help, but the results are slow to materialize. History, chronic and structural poverty, and inequality, amongst other factors, slow down this process of change.

One year among people from the poorest neighborhood has put me in the front line with the anxieties, fears and concerns that define this reality. Peripheries are not just geographical, they are places of social and economic exclusion as well. They appear to be places of extremes. Political narratives once originated in semi-structured interviews talk about extreme kindness and love but also extreme violence. It's only here that you find old humble ladies, unduly aged by a lifetime of poor nutrition and hard work, who welcomed me into their homes and spoil me like I was their granddaughter, with nata (a specialty of butter), fresh bread and hot coffee. It's also them who tell me stories and share gossip about "matadores" (professional killers) capable of firing their guns at a father

holding his son in his arms. An old poet living in the Palmeiras neighborhood put it well:

*We lost the meaning of life, that's what happened to us  
 .... if in the past when a boy died, friends and neighbors  
 tried to console the family, today in the same situation  
 they say 'another one' and go to see him as they would  
 go to the circus ...*

### **"We lost the meaning of life..."**

Life does not make sense anymore under the "another one" logic; you realize this with a bus ride to the periphery. At 7 A.M., from the windows of overcrowded buses, you see motorcycles carrying a husband and wife, she with one or two children in her arms, slipping between cars and buses in the country where the traffic signs are mere suggestions.

Because life does not make sense, during the year I spent here I lost track of the number of friends and acquaintances who lost someone dear and young in "traffic," the euphemism used by the community to describe the daily violence that binds death and loss to quotidian existence. Words alone have lost their power to encapsulate all the suffering. The health agents would tell you about friends and neighbors: "The lady had a child and he befriended the wrong persons so..." And they never finish the sentence, leaving with the implicit understanding that the young man died in the drug traffic. You shut up and look ahead, dedicating a short moment of silence to the dead.

Official statistics published periodically by the Municipal Secretary of Citizen's Safety present citizens a list of all felonies that have occurred throughout the city, from illegally carrying a gun to homicide. Reality beats the numbers. More than once in a week, I counted in Palmeiras more dead than the official statistics collected for the entire city. Suffering does not fit into statistics, but the numbers don't make any effort in this sense either: they are part of the power game. They only fluctuate to give meaning and legitimacy to the establish-

ment. What is counted matters, and what not is left behind: it doesn't exist even in the impersonalized form of numbers. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes puts it well:

Public records—whether official censuses, birth of baptismal certificates, marriage and divorce records, or death or burial certificates—are no 'pure,' 'accurate' or 'objective sources of information.' Nor are they politically neutral. But they do reveal as society's system of classification and its basic values including what is considered hardly worth tracking or counting at all (Scheper-Hughes, 1996: 891).

The same goes for interviews. Many of my interviews ended in tears, where stories of daily life in Palmeiras were inextricably linked to memories of death and loss: a lost brother, child, cousin, nephew or a neighbor. Trauma leaves dark details imprinted on the brain; these details are then passed to me:

*"When I arrived he was lying on the floor and there were just the dog and a bird."*

*"When I got there my mother was screaming on her knees."*

*"When I arrived there was nothing more to do."*

When I least expect it, glimpses of these conversations still ring in my mind... "I could eat but the fridge is always empty at home," repeated in my memory in the voice of a dear friend. Or I hear part of my interview with a young single mother: "If he keeps asking for food I'll send him to his father." After eleven months, I'm afraid of interviews, because they often force me to assume the role of therapist. It is a therapy of tribulation in which young and old need an outlet for the overwhelming trauma, and I am there asking questions. Indeed, my interview format has actually been used as a method of treating depression. They call it "community therapy."

It works in other neighborhoods, but not here. A week with three interviews means a weekend of sleep and listlessness for me. A week with two interviews gives me a free weekend where I have some energy left to think of myself, or to adventure on another bus ride to an unexplored part of the city. I know what I want to understand, but I lose control of my own work. I know where I go, but do not know where I might get to in those two hours.

In that setting, life started to lose meaning and value even to me. Many say that life is cheap at the periphery. I heard ten-year-old children saying, "Killing doesn't hurt...." They learned from an early age that their daily struggles carry no promise of helping them to transcend the pit of despair their families have occupied for generations. Their philosophies for living echo these circumstances.

Poverty in northeastern Brazil is structural: it has been there for centuries, rooted in institutions. It seems here to stay. Ironically, close to Fortaleza is Redenção, the first city to abolish slavery in Brazil in 1888. The house-museum in Redenção has belonged to the same family since the early 20th century. The plantation where the house is located currently hosts a handful of dark skinned and poor Brazilians who work there. The house looks like it did in the 19th century. When I visit, the guide, a local boy, shows us the pictures of "the former owners" in a row on the wall. Under these pictures are those of the former employees of the house. These were children of slaves, most likely. The guide says with resignation, "If it wasn't for the laws, I am sure that the practice of slavery would not bother some today." Brazil tends to present a face of egalitarian democratic racial relations to the rest of the world. Blacks are not excluded in foreign eyes. Capoeira, Brazilian mulatto women from the Carnival, and the national dish of feijoada are all adjectives of a sexy, intense, and welcoming country for the white Western tourists. Tourists do not reach the periphery to understand or expe-

rience the day-to-day costs of maintaining the aesthetics for a postcard-Brazil. Many still fully enjoy the ultra-cheap sex tourism, the beaches worthy of Instagram pictures, and an exoticized poverty built into the landscape.

The worst and deepest poverty is buried deep with the psyche of the very poor. This poverty is not about money or food; it is the resignation of the “one more” logic: the resignation that nothing can be changed, and that life is cheap. Social inclusion policies tend to focus too much on numbers and material transfers. Beyond politics what is needed is seeing others as equals, regardless of class and color. One of my best friends, a teenager, was telling me about the quota system for college admission, according to which ethnic and economic minorities are assigned places in colleges:

*We don't want to enter through the back door. We want to get there just like the rest of the people, by our own means and potential, not because we are poor, 'pardo' or black. We want to have an education system that allows us fair entrance there. It's a question of dignity....*

### **“Our life is not a video game!”**

I started to believe that a young poor black man from periphery has little chance to remain unbeaten or threatened at least once by the police, especially if he listens Bob Marley or Brazilian funk and doesn't try to hide it. A Rasta friend, a philosophy professor in one of the high schools at the periphery of Fortaleza, told me many times about the beatings he received from the police. To his understanding, they were punishments for having long hair, for being black, and for being poor in a suburb. All of this happens because the police think of him as possible future criminal who will cause trouble later. The criminalization of poverty is a painful daily reality. Police burned his eyebrows with a lighter and extinguished

cigarette butts on his skin. The formal establishment—police, governmental officials, etc.—treats extreme poverty and suffering as symptoms of a hereditary disease. Fighting this social mega-script is suspect. It's not surprising that my friend is now more afraid of the police than of a potential assault. A flyer announcing the 3rd Caravan of the Periphery in Fortaleza mentions that "in 2012 in Fortaleza were registered 1,920 homicide cases; from this number 1,731 of the victims were black people and 1,294 were young people. (...) 90% of the homicide victims in 2012 in Ceara were black people and 67% were young people."

In this climate, it seemed fair to seek out the stories of those instigating violence in Palmeiras. So I headed to the nearest police station. I was already preparing for a more or less polite decline for an interview. I was already thinking about what I could say to justify my asking for interviews. Should I tell people about the Ph.D.; should I say something about it being from the United States? In the time spent here I learned to use different rhetorical strategies depending on the context. Especially for the middle class, my light colored skin is not sufficient to gain admission. Saying I'm "from Romania" inspires no reaction. Who knows anything about Eastern Europe? But when I say, "I am a student from Europe," I receive more friendly attention. With a few minor changes, I can turn indifference into euphoric enthusiasm. "I'm from Romania and am now doing a PhD in the United States..." And with that, I'm deemed worthy of attention. I've forgotten the number of times that middle class Brazilian professionals introduced me to their friends: "She's Romanian, **but** she's doing a Ph.D. in the U.S." Depending on the conversation, I play with the adjectives of Romania, Europe, Eastern Europe, anthropology, student, or Ph.D. student to obtain the desired effect. At the periphery, I still find many old illiterate people for whom I am from "the other side of the world." "Where is Romania?" "Is it in South?" I always reply, "No, Romania is not in the south of Brazil."

With the Civil Police, I didn't have to go through the normal rigmarole to gain entrance. They were more than eager to share their stories about the expectations and realities behind their job as "cops" in one of the most feared areas of the city. What came after was similar to community or group therapy. In Brazil, the Civil Police are responsible for solving all cases of felonies. Military Police, by contrast, have a preventive role. In Ceará they sent what is called the "Ronda," a community patrol service, and sometimes a "Raio," an intervention service for extreme cases. In order to have an informal conversation with the beneficiaries of the program Bolsa Família inside CRAS (The Center of Reference for Social Assistance), the institution where people enroll for this program, I needed to make a special request to the Regional Secretary of Labor, Social Development and Hunger Fight. I imagined the procedure to receive necessary permissions might take more time than my dissertation.

At the Civil Police office, I found that a team of no more than twenty police officers were charged with documenting and resolving all crimes in one of the most violent neighborhoods in the most violent city in Brazil. Of these twenty, less than half conduct forensic investigations, and the remainder hold various administrative posts within the Police Centre. They talked incessantly about their personal dissatisfactions with their jobs: having to buy their own uniform, badges, and the bulk of the cartridges they use each year. Some felt the need to talk about the many death threats received, and the fear that goes with seeing people they spent months trying to apprehend back on the streets. "We also have families and are scared. People believe that we are supposed to run after each person who steals a phone. But 'a vida da gente nao e um video game' (our life is not a video game)."

Besides that, increasingly their work involves guarding the forty prisoners for whom there is no room in the local detention center. In two rooms that normally hold three to



four prisoners, there are now forty. It's hot all day long, every day, every night, every month. Hot and humid. The broken sewage system and the wind that distributes this fact relentlessly to all of our nostrils help you feel this hellish place even better. One policeman complains, "I understand [the prisoners] did something illegal to be here but ... at night they have to try take turns to decide who will sleep by the wall, because there's no place on the wall for all on them." Another police officer adds, "If you go to see them, know that they will start to complain. They'll think you are a social assistant or a human rights activist...so they will complain. Just ignore them." "Nobody comes here from a human rights group to talk to us," adds a colleague. "Because we are far from what it means to be human...there can be no human rights here." "Some will stay here a full month. All day they sit and talk about how they will escape, what they will do then, and so on... Our work is reduced to taking care of them, and the cars in front of our building. These cars are stolen but the warehouse is full and in these cases the investigation can take up to five years. I did not go to Law School for this," says one of the policemen. The delegate told us how in the 1970s when the population of Brazil was half it is now, in the state of Ceará there were 5,000 civilian policemen. Today there are 2,000 in the entire state and this doesn't take into account that urban violence has risen sharply over the past forty years. Although nothing justifies the violence, under these conditions, one cannot help but think that something must regulate this system to insure its perpetuation. Having all this in mind, it's not then surprising that the police use racial profiling to defend their own "culture" in a war where both sides attempt to leverage stability through the demonstration of violent potential through performances of terror.

One late Wednesday night a policeman in Fortaleza was killed while protecting his wife in an assault. During that night, from Wednesday to Thursday morning within a three

and a half hour time block, 11 young black teenagers were killed in Grande Messejana (O Povo, 2015), the district where my field site is located. Later investigations showed that none of the victims had any criminal record or evidence that they had been involved in crime or drug trafficking. Police officials later publicly assumed responsibility for these murders, saying they were committed as acts of revenge for the dead police officer. The invisible genocides become visible. What differentiates war from peace? A friend in Palmeiras once asked me: "How is the situation in your country? We like to say that here in Brazil it's good. Because we don't have wars, we don't have shootings." And all her friends start laughing: "We have that in fact...but we don't have a war." What defines our "peace" and how does it differ from "war"?

Last night I had a dream, typical of my fieldwork in Brazil. I dreamed of a world of eternal childhood in a place where death had meaning. Death, personified, was coming, but with sufficient notice, most of the time. S/he wasn't an uninvited guest that broke into our homes without warning or cause. Death had a majuscule, it was a moment to remember the lost one; it was a ceremony and afforded the dead one his dignity. In my dream, bells would ring twice for men and once for women. Each time, my grandma would stop her crocheting, and look out of the window, far but nowhere, whispering to herself, "Who died today...?" The dead people in my dream still kept some sort of life though the ceremonies we all did for them, every week, month, every 40 days, every year, in a ritual of loving remembrance. But if life has no meaning, does that mean that death has lost meaning too?

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