On April 12, 2007, as part of my job with Criola, a Black women’s organization, I had scheduled a meeting with twenty-one women from different counties and cities of the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil to discuss an ongoing project on Black women’s health. However most of them could not go to the meeting because of a police operation in different areas of the state, and they feared of being the target of a stray bullet during a shootout. Those who could attend the meeting shared in their statements and examples the difficulties in organizing with and informing neighborhood women due to the usual and severe violence. All those stunning experiences facing violence remained in my head after the meeting, and something kept me from going back home. After two hours walking around downtown, I finally arrived at home, and I was told by my devastated mother and aunt that my twenty-four year old cousin, Cosme, had been murdered.

Neither the experiences of the women from Criola nor my family experiences are isolated cases in Rio de Janeiro. My cousin was one victim of homicide among the more than 6000 that took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2007 and among more than 47,000 throughout Brazil (Waiselfisz 2010). The Mapa da Violencia 2011(Waiselfisz 2011), a annual publication about violence in Brazilian cities, shows, for the first time, what the Black population already knew for a long time: we live in a state of genocide. The probability of being a victim of homicide in Brazil is almost three times higher for Blacks compared to whites (SEDH-PR et al, 2009); and although 92% of the homicide victims are Black men, Black women are direct victims of the consequences of these deaths. This research paper calls attention to the Afro-Brazilian women’s experience of anti-Black genocide in the African Diaspora.

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In order to theorize on the Black women experiences of violence, I engage with the UN definition of genocide, and pursue scholar Joao Costa Vargas’s (2010) suggestion that political activist Ward Churchill’s analysis drawn from the UN definition contributes “to a better understanding of what the theoretical and political stakes around genocide are” (Vargas, 2). Reflecting the UN Convention on Genocide, Churchill suggests that genocide is in itself “a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups, as homicide is the denial of the right to live of individual human beings” (1997). Churchill presents genocide as a historical event, whose primary forms are physical – such as direct killing; biological – such as preventing births; and cultural genocide – such as the expropriation of its means of economic perpetuation. These works, linked to other productions from the African Diaspora and Black Feminist scholarship allow us to say that, although we cannot prove the intentionality, the results of the state’s policing practices throughout the years have produced a continuum of physical, biological, and cultural forms of violence against Black Brazilian Women that constitutes genocide as the terror that characterizes Afro-diasporic communities.

Some scholarly works give us a sense of some of the consequences of genocidal state practices in Black women's lives. In a study of the bodily and mental harm suffered by secondary victims of violence, scholars Soares, Miranda, and Borges (2006) show that those who have seen the violent death of a beloved continue to experience physical and mental pain even three years after the fact (75). They also affirm that traumatic experiences with bodily and mental symptoms are distinct in men and women, women being more likely to develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)².

Black activist Jurema Werneck (2001) shows that Black women’s health is affected by the racism and sexism inherent in the structure of the Brazilian state. Werneck analyzes how Black women are vulnerable physically, mentally, and emotionally, a condition created by the structural violence

²It is a type of anxiety disorder which occurs after seeing or experiencing a traumatic event that involved the threat of injury or death. (NIMH, n.d.)
affecting poor and Afro-Brazilian communities. The author points out that “Brazilian health [and I include security] policies have continuously reproduced these kinds of discrimination that shape Black women’s lives,” which in my view is one facet of the *necro* and genocidal state.

Preliminary field research conducted in the summer of 2010 in Rio de Janeiro allows me to suggest that Black women, specially the ones who live in favelas, are portrayed and blamed as the ones responsible for the violence in this Brazilian state. Evidences collected from state representative speeches also lead me to suggest that criminalization of poverty linked to eugenics discourses and the denial of a full citizenship have informed the public security policy in Rio de Janeiro in its genocidal practice. To exemplify, the current state governor, Sergio Cabral, said in 2007:

It [birth control] has everything to do with violence. You take the number of children per mother in Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, Tijuca, Meier and Copacabana, [and] it is Swedish standard. Now, take Rocinha. It is Zambia, Gabon standard. This is a marginal production factory (G1, n.d.).

The current secretary of public security, Jose Mariano Beltrame, said in 2007:

One thing is the murder of a citizen in Copacabana. Another thing is a police officer enter [ing] in the favela da Coreia and killing some people. Death in the favelas is another kind of death. [The politics of confrontation] will end when public order becomes real. While this is not a reality, the fighting will continue. This generates death. The confrontation is inevitable. Goals are goals to achieve. (O Globo, 2007)

Cabral clearly not only associates violence with poverty by referring to the differences in birth rates between wealthier (and whiter) areas of the city and the favelas, but also links it to race by referring to Zambia, an African country. Beltame makes it clear that the Rio de Janeiro state role is to protect wealthy whites from Black people, the majority in favelas, differentiating the meaning of deaths in different areas of the state and in different bodies, and attributing to the Black women of slums culpability in the violence in the state as if their infants already was born delinquents.

In my research, I interviewed several Black women who had a family member killed either by the police or by drug dealers. Their narratives are mortifying and speak for themselves. I suggest that
through the deaths of their loved ones, Black women also experience a kind of death themselves.

The relation between violence, fear, and racism are part of the cultural politics of Rio de Janeiro and very present in their narratives. The stereotype of criminal young Black men is spread by the racist mass media through films and soap operas that consistently display them as drug dealers, cruel murderers, drug addicts, and delinquents. The symbolic violence of the everyday display of Black bodies performing violence helps to maintain a fear of the Black body and to diffuse this fear throughout society. But how do Black women, as the parents and relatives of “the feared”, experience that? Marilene states

I fear for the lives of my children, my own children and the children from the community. I fear for their lives. I live with it every day. The worst violence that can be committed on our families is the violence against our children, our youth.

Lily also reports: “We live with fear. Every time we have monitor our fear. They say that lightning never strikes twice in the same place, but it falls. I cannot stand on more deaths.”

The relation between Suffering and the Body appears in many speeches. The suffering caused by the violence in the lives of Black women is written on their bodies, which can be seen as texts of a continuous and notorious violence. As scholar Veena Das points out, “violence is not an interruption of ordinary life but something that is implicated in the ordinary” (2000). Black women in Rio live ordinarily with the suffering. About this topic Marilene states:
The pain covers my whole body. It is firm and strong despite the years. Even if I have the power to reduce the pain in a single part of my body in order to take it off, I couldn’t. It is a part of me. It always will be. She had no one else but me. She was inside me; she was part of my body. How would I forget a piece of myself?

Patricia, who became an activist against police brutality after the Candelaria Massacre, also contributes by saying:

Everything has changed in my life. In the past, I could sleep longer, relax, and not felt nervous. Now I live tense because of the threats. I cannot die now; I cannot leave aside the struggle. I think it is an abuse having to change my routine because of the military police.

Longing is another feeling always present in their narratives. It is important to notice that longing never comes alone. It is always followed by an outrage, a questioning, or a justification, as if they try to signify the death.

Margarida said: “To wake up and look at his brother is to remember him. Everything reminds me of him. Now I’m only in mourning ... They did not think of consequences. They did not think that the mother will suffer, relatives will suffer. They just think about that moment. I couldn't do anything.”

Zica stated: “It is very recent for us. So I try to keep him saying: Bless me grandma! It destroys the family. The police and the drug traffickers end with the family. They not only kill the person, they kill and end with the family.”
Lily remembered: “I kissed him the day before. There is always the hope that one day he will arrive. We did not see the body, you know? The hope remains. I wish he could come and say: ‘Mom, I was playing soccer over there. Did I came late?’”

Their activism and political practice are present either at home, in their families, in the community, or in the public arena. Black woman find, through their leadership, space for action or reaction. By remembering how they became activist, Marilene says:

“We started to take action because of the outrage we felt. Our main objective in the beginning was to find the bodies of our children and give them a decent burial. Later, our intent as Human Rights activists was that nobody else had violated their rights... unfortunately we did not get that.”

And, Zica says: “Nobody knows why he became a criminal. He was not born a criminal. Which family wants its son to be a criminal? I decided to give more support to families within the community. Today I work with kids to show them that they are citizens and that the city belongs to them. Not just the slum.”

Collectivity and support networks are decisive in these Black women’s lives. Sharing the suffering with whoever experiences the situation is how they find comfort. Lilly affirms: “You know that who is on your side is who understands your pain. We talk as equals. I know that my complaint is the complaint of the other.”

In summary, commonly understood to affect Black men, the violence in Rio de Janeiro, has hidden social, economic, political, and emotional effects on Black women. Marked by high homicide rates, the metropolitan area of the region can be seen, sadly, as a huge plantation of oppression.
associated with violent deaths. However, their experiences are made invisibilize. The Black women’s narratives presented in this paper show that not only through the death of their biological sons and daughters, but also though the deaths of sons and daughters of the Black communities, they experience a kind of death themselves. Taking this in consideration, and given the constant interaction with death throughout the African Diaspora, “Are we dead already? If the answer is “Yes,” what are our possibilities of action? How can we create community through death? For the future of genocide studies, how can we engage in a research that can produce liberation? Is that possible? How can we engage in genocide scholarship and avoid it from becoming just a flow, or a wave, that everybody wants to talk about?

References


