

Ethnographic inscriptions of state-milícia terror in Rio de Janeiro: extraction of profit, life and bodies¹

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ABSTRACT

This article is inspired by anthropologist Michael Taussig's provocation to "think-through-terror". It seeks to explore, in an ethnographic key, terror devices and practices enforced in Rio de Janeiro by the police and illegal mafia-like paramilitary groups called *milícias*, in order to scrutinize the flows of power that connect disappearances and violent deaths to a language of terror. It starts with the accounts of the daughters of the "Mothers of Acari", exploring the subjective and familial impacts of the eleven young people's disappearance after the "Acari massacre". The second part covers, via accounts included in a judicial process, inscriptions of terror in the *modi operandi* of *milícias* in gated communities of the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* housing program, located in Rio de Janeiro's West Side. In its closing, the article demonstrates the connections established between terror, pedagogies of cruelty, spaces of death, and the logics of extraction of profit, life, and the body.

KEYWORDS

Terror, enforced disappearances, police, Brazilian *milícias*, extraction of profit.

Inscrições etnográficas do terror estatalmiliciano no Rio de Janeiro: da extração de lucro, da vida e de corpos

RESUMO Este artigo se inspira na provocação do antropólogo Michael Taussig de "pensar através do terror". Busca explorar etnograficamente dispositivos e práticas de terror policiais e *estatais-milicianas*, com o objetivo de perscrutar os fluxos de poder que conectam desaparecimentos e mortes violentas a uma linguagem do terror. Para tanto, na primeira parte, explora, através de relatos das filhas das "Mães de Acari", os impactos subjetivos e familiares do desaparecimento dos onze jovens que "sumiram" após a chacina. A segunda parte percorre, a partir de narrativas contidas em um processo judicial, inscrições do terror nos modos de agir de grupos *estatais-milicianos* em condomínios do Programa Minha Casa Minha Vida, localizados na Zona Oeste do Rio de Janeiro. Na parte final, aponta para as conexões entre terror, pedagogias da crueldade, espaços da morte e lógicas de extração do lucro, da vida e do corpo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Terror, desaparecimentos, polícia, grupos estatais-milicianos, extração de lucro

I. WAKES AND STITCHES OF THE WOUNDS OPENED UP BY TERROR²

Throughout my research, I was told several stories by the mothers of people who disappeared during police operations, especially between 2008 and 2012, the time period encompassing my PhD fieldwork research. In some cases, it was the fathers or siblings who reported the cases; however, the bulk of the testimonies came from the mothers. Previously, for my master's degree, I had already dedicated myself to studying the political experience of the "Mothers of Acari". During all these years, one thing that always had an impact on me and left me somewhat staggered and uneasy, while also warranting a greater analytical effort, were the explanations and images of terror narrated by these mothers, as well as the tremendous strain and willpower they showed to move on with their lives after such horrid experiences.

This article aims to carry out an ethnographic exploration of the inscriptions of terror arising from practices enforced by Brazilian illegal mafia-like paramilitary groups known as *milícias*³. The objective is to focus on the *modi operandi* of these groups – which I will call state-*milícia modi operandi*, so as to differentiate such practices from official police operations, while simultaneously stressing the state's participation in the development of *milícias* –, emphasizing ethnographic inscriptions that draw us closer to Taussig's (1987) provocation of "thinking-through-terror", especially on the flows of power that connect disappearances and violent deaths to a language of terror (Taussig, 1992).

It's not just any disappearance, but disappearances⁴ associated with contexts marked by the paradoxical tension between the intensification of a security-driven state and the political and territorial expansion of "supra-state" or "paralegal" forces (Reguillo, 2021). In the specific case of contemporary Rio de Janeiro, this intensification is mainly due to the expansion of police power and its attempt of autonomization of any and all external civil control, and to the growth of "new" criminal groups, made up of active or former police officers, firefighters etc., which have been labeled "*milícias*". This dual increase, in addition to the historical actions of criminal factions linked to retail drug trade, has turned certain territories into acutely violent areas, creating zones of indeterminacy in which identifying the perpetrators of terror and holding them accountable becomes increasingly difficult, all while simultaneously diffusing terror widely. In addition, suspicion of direct or indirect police involvement with crime fundamentally hampers investigations and prosecution while the justice system, in turn, is also often engaged in covering up corruption and police brutality.

Many times, it is impossible to identify the perpetrators of these crimes. At other times, terror - which exerts territorial domination and strikes fear of being affected by the violence of these actors - produces such strenuous silence as to make it impossible to effectively press charges and gather evidence during police investigations. Hindered, on the one hand, by criminal and police violence and, on the other,

1 | I want to thank Adriana Vianna, Angela Facundo and Roberto Efreim Filho for our exchanges and for inviting me to take part in the dossier of which this article is a part; to Aline Leite for the exchange and affectionate sharing of the stories surrounding the Mothers of Acari case; and, finally, to Hugo Araújo for his research work on the criminal cases. This article presents partial results of the project "Militarization in Rio Janeiro: understanding social effects and dynamics contemporary", coordinated by Márcia da Silva Pereira Leite/UERJ and financed by Faperj through the "Edital 28/2021 – Programa de Apoio a Projetos Temáticos no Estado do Rio de Janeiro".

2 | Translation: Alessandro Funari and Maria Teresa Mherab

3 | There is no consensus among scholars on the definition of "*milícia*". One of the first studies on the Brazilian *milícias* was developed by sociologist Ignacio Cano, in which the term is defined in relation to five axes which, according to the author, must occur simultaneously: (1) control of a territory and the population inhabiting it by an irregular armed group; (2) the coercive nature of this control; (3) the drive for individual profit as the central motivation; (4) a discourse of legitimacy referring to the protection of residents and the establishment of order; (5) the active and recognized participation of state agents in it (Cano, 2008).

4 | Different approaches and frameworks on the subject of the disappearance of people in Brazil have been developed by various authors. The recent increase in academic production on this subject demonstrates the growing interest in the topic. Without pretending to exhaust the academic production on the subject, we can consult, among others: Ferreira (2011); Araújo (2014); Leal (2017); Franco (2021); Willis (2022); Villenave (2022); Araújo *et al.* (2023).

by the fear and generalized distrust of the wealthier strata of the city, the population residing in the favelas and peripheries lead besieged lives (Machado da Silva, 2008). “My son disappeared and we don’t know who did it. If it was the police, the drug dealers, or the *milícia*. If it was a boyfriend or an ex-boyfriend. We’re left completely in the dark,” Graciela once told me, commenting on her son’s disappearance.

These stories and their effects unfold as time wears on. More than that, it is this scenario where terror has made life defective and degraded – led by death’s ability to take life hostage, connecting the living and the dead – that life unfurls itself and is lived. It is in this web of terror and intimacy, between destruction and reconstruction, that the subjective experience of life is woven, as Aline tells us: “I am a poor, black woman from the favelas. I’m thirty-nine years old and this happened when I was seven. I can’t tell who I am, Aline, without the Acari massacre, and I can’t tell what my life would be like without the Acari massacre. I can only tell about this wound that was opened and never closed. (...) And the state doesn’t even do anything to alleviate this, this pain, this open wound, which probably won’t ever close, but which, together, we are trying to stitch up.”⁵ This statement by Aline refers to the implications that witnessing violence has on the formation of the subject, of having to learn “to inhabit the world, or to inhabit it again, in a gesture of mourning” (Das, 2008: 222).

The Acari massacre, named after its namesake favela in Rio de Janeiro’s North Side, took place on July 26, 1990, when eleven young residents of the community and its surrounding areas were kidnapped by the hands of a death squad made up of military and civil police, known as “Running Horses” [*Cavalos Corredores*]. These youths were taken from a farmhouse in the city of Magé never to be seen again. According to the police report, weeks before the trip, Acari hosted a June Festival⁶, when six armed police officers reportedly deprived Edson de Souza, Moisés Cruz dos Santos, and Viviane Rocha of their liberty. The police allegedly found weapons, jewelry, and money in the homes of these youths and threatened to “do away with” all three if these “drug dealers” did not pay them “five million *cruzeiros*” (then Brazil’s official currency).

The only witness who was there when they were taken was Laudicena Oliveira Nascimento. According to her testimony, on July 26th, 1990, at 11 p.m, a group of hooded men entered the farm where she lived, knocked down the door of her house claiming to be police agents and demanded money and jewelry. The victims were then allegedly taken away in vehicles. She and her grandson managed to jump out a window and hide in the woods, where they heard the sound of roaring engines. Another witness, Claudiomar da Silva – personal driver of João da Silva Bistene (a member of the Armed Forces known as “Peninha”) – in his statement included in the Military Police Coordination report attached to case file, alleged that this soldier was the leader of a gang that is allegedly involved in the disappearance of the elev-

5 | The excerpt from Aline’s statement is part of the testimony she gave on June 8th, 2022, at a public hearing held by the Human Rights and Minorities Committee of the Federal Chamber of Deputies, intended to debate developments in the Acari Massacre Case, which is currently being processed by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

6 | [Translators’ Footnote] June Festival is a traditional popular celebration that takes place in June in several regions of Brazil.

en youths of Acari. Silva added that this group of police officers allegedly entered the farm and deprived the victims of their freedom, taking them to Peninha's own estate, where they were allegedly murdered, had their chests cut open and were thrown into the Estrela River. Allegedly, all women in the group were victims of sexual violence.

It wasn't until five years after the case that the police carried out a forensic examination of the Estrela River, in October 1995, using a "suction pump" to remove sand from the riverbed. This method destroyed the material taken from the waters, eliminating any evidence they might have come across and making it impossible to draw any sort of conclusion. Similarly, in August 1991, another instance of forensic negligence took place when the van used to move "the eleven" captured youths was found 11.16 km from the scene of the crime, in a vacant lot used for "dumping" bodies. The vehicle had been burned down, and forensics found red stains on the outside and on the floor of the car, which were considered to be blood. However, due to the poor state of the material, no microscopy examination could be carried out to attest if the blood belonged to "the eleven".

During the course of the police investigation, macabre reports on the supposed fate of the victims kept piling up: the bodies had supposedly been fed to animals, such as lions and pigs, adding a spectacular and extraordinary dimension to the case. In a search and seizure procedure, the police found out that a house had been built on the site where, according to a tip-off, once stood a lion cage. The bodies were also said to have been buried in the same location. As tearing down the house was not an option, the search then became impossible.⁷

On January 15th, 1993, Edmea da Silva Euzébio and Sheila da Conceição, mother and cousin to Luiz Henrique Euzébio, one of the missing youths, were both murdered at the Praça Onze Metro Station. These murders occurred shortly after Edmea had received information about potential perpetrators of the crime and testified in court about the participation of police officers. The case was dismissed, but took a decisive turn after the testimony of a new witness. The witness allegedly revealed there was a meeting, held in the office of then state deputy Emir Laranjeira, in the Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro, to plan Edmea's murder. At the time of Luiz Henrique's disappearance, the group of accused police officers was led by then-Colonel Emir Laranjeira. In 2022, the Justice Department ruled that the participation of the former deputy had passed its statute of limitations deadline, and Emir Laranjeira was not put on trial. More than 30 years after the murder of Edmea and Sheila, the remaining defendants were acquitted on April 4th, 2024, due to "insufficient evidence".

The Acari case and the participation of mothers in the struggle for justice and reparation constituted the starting point of the political experience of movements composed of mothers of victims of state violence in Rio de Janeiro and in Brazil, af-

7 | The testimonies and information mentioned here are included in the documentation produced within the scope of the Acari Case Police Inquiry and are duly referenced in Report [Relatório] n. 100/21, Case [Caso] 13.691. *Relatório de Admissibilidade e mérito* [Admissibility and Merits Report]. Cristiane Leite de Souza et al., Brazil. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. May 20th, 2021.

ter the dictatorship (1964-1985). During the long period in which the case dragged on in courts, the mothers' health deteriorated and some came to pass away. Vera Lúcia Flores died in 2008, at the age of 59, in poor health and deeply distressed, having never discovered her daughter's whereabouts or obtained justice. Later, in 2012, Marilene Lima de Souza passed away. The case is currently pending before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Having initially established a close relationship with "family members of victims of police violence" in Rio de Janeiro from conversations with Marilene and Vera Flores, two Mothers of Acari, years later I came to foster close relations with the next generation, their daughters, who, due to the deaths of the most active mothers who "took over the case", "stepped up" in the fight for justice, truth, and reparation.

In 2023, I was contacted by Aline Leite, daughter of Vera Flores, who was interested in participating in any project I might be taking on. Based on a recommendation by her psychologist, Aline decided to engage in some activity to "occupy her mind". She started working with me on a project I was developing at Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz), on territory-based public health surveillance aiming at producing and publicizing information about health status and its social determination in favelas and peripheries of urban centers, shedding light on various precarious situations that differentially affect populations inhabiting socio-environmentally vulnerable territories in urban centers. Two activities of this program consist of creating a newsletter (designed as a magazine) and recording podcasts. In 2022, the "Mothers of Acari Case" reached its thirty-second year. We took the opportunity to put together a dossier of articles published in *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*. The following year, we promoted a generational shift and opened our podcast mics to the daughters of Acari.⁸ Aline's participation was of paramount importance in opening up a channel of dialogue with the other daughters, allowing us to hear the story of the Acari case from different perspectives. We devised a methodology that consisted of a "conversation" between Aline, Rosângela, Vanine, and Rita, based on issues focusing on the effects of the event on personal intimacy and on family life.

Rosângela da Silva is the daughter of Edmea da Silva Euzébio and sister of Luiz Henrique da Silva Euzébio. Vanine de Souza Nascimento is the sister of Wallace Souza Nascimento and Hédio's niece. Rita de Cássia Souza Santos is the daughter of Marilene Lima de Souza, and Aline Leite is the daughter of Vera Flores and Cristiane's sister. The accounts of Rosângela, Rita, Vanine and Aline allow us to delve into several issues of the greatest magnitude, intensity, and importance: how can the life and existence of one person – in fact, of several people – come to confound itself with the story of a massacre? How does the terror of disappearance and violent death permeate the bodies and lives of those directly affected by violence, but also of those who are indirectly impacted by it? How does the terror of these practices destroy personal and family projects, wreck any idea of home, violently heaving in-

8 | Podcast *Radar Saúde Favela*. Ep. 3. "Mães de Acari: a segunda geração" [Mothers of Acari: The Second Generation]. Link: <https://radarsaudefavela.com.br/podcast-radar-saude-favela-3/>.

dividuals into a cadence of eternal deferment and infinite mourning? What is the fate of a life who has experienced extreme situations such as a massacre and forced disappearance? Let us listen to the voices of Rosângela, Rita, Vanine, and Aline.⁹

Rosângela

I know everyone suffered, just like I suffered, it's just that, when you get down to everyone, I suffered more. Cause I lost my mother in a murder, my brother disappeared. My family boils down to three children and my husband, who put up with me to this day. My health is in shambles. The family I have today, which is on my mother's side, the family I had, everyone's afraid, they don't get together anymore cause they're afraid something might happen, just like it happened to my mother, just like what happened to the girl Sheila, who died too, but it was a mistake, they thought it was me.

Thirty-three years and there's no justice. To get absolutely no answers, I feel disdained. And, yes, I hope there's justice, for those [who] did it to pay. Or for someone to say they found my brother's bones, of all the eleven. This Brazil we've got is blind, it's blind by its very nature. Who's it blind for? For the poor, cause it's been thirty-three years and we don't have any answers. I'd think they'd had to give us an answer, cause we're human, we're a family. We're people, same as them. Only we're poor and from the favelas, as I've heard a lot of them tell us. That we're poor, we're from the favela, a family of criminals, so we wouldn't get any answers, they'd just leave it at that. But I believe that I get to have an answer before I die, cause the Acari case should be treated with more respect, with more dignity.

They threatened to kill us, all our families, even mine. I lost my mother, I had to stay with my children in the middle of the street, leaving them with others and then picking them up. I was being threatened by these policemen. They killed my mother and they told me they were gonna finish me off too.

My mother was a very good person, she was good to everybody. Where we lived, where it happened, people adore her. When it happened, she was, like in a state of shock. She couldn't get up to do anything else. We searched and searched, and my mother said they could kill her if they wanted, but that she was gonna find her son's body. Well, she tried a lot and didn't find him. I'm here in her memory, so that before I die, we can find a solution as well. Before I die I want to find a solution. The grandchildren ask, "Where's grandma?", and we don't know what to say. She's dead. We say she's dead. But they don't know everything. And I don't want to die not knowing what happened to my brother and without an answer to my grandchildren, cause my children, they already know.

We've been through hell and back when we were on the streets. Today we live in a rented little house, in a community, and we're afraid. Cause many of the police officers, I know they're not dead, they're not in prison, and we're afraid they're gonna do something cruel to us. This is the memory I have of my mother, a warrior woman who went in head first in what happened.

⁹ | For the first version of this article, that was written in Portuguese, I tried to preserve the spontaneous character of the speeches, which includes regional variations in language, colloquialisms, and other elements typical of everyday speech. The purpose of this choice was to honor and value the individual and cultural linguistic expressions of the participants, enabling a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences. [Translators' Footnote] In this translation, we, in turn, tried to preserve the manifest ideas of the author with regard to the "spontaneous character of the speeches" and colloquialisms. However, it is important to observe that this translation does not address aspects linked to regional Brazilian linguistic variations (i.e., Brazilian linguistic variations are not English linguistic variations, whatever they may be), and that every translation is a translation. Many others are possible. We hope the words we invoke in this translation do not reduce any pain embedded in their speeches.

Rita

I was eleven at the time. The day we got news at our place, I remember it well. I remember it clear as day. After that day our lives were never the same. The shock was violent. My mom at that time used to work in a store downtown and she had just been promoted to manager or assistant manager, something like that, and she was super excited, super happy. And she had to drop everything, absolutely everything. Cause they had meetings, they spent the whole day together there in the Acari favela. We didn't live there, but the mothers spent all day there. (...) And you can picture it, she had four other young children and had to go through all that. Unfortunately, it was inevitable that she became absent. Having to take care of everything herself, the children, the house... It was a lot for just one person. Of course, if she had someone to share this burden with, things surely could have been different.

To wait thirty-three years for justice for me means the justice system itself failed. It's very sad to come to the conclusion that so much struggle on their part, of the mothers, amounted to nothing, absolutely nothing. The only justice we get is God's justice, cause the justice of men, unfortunately, is getting worse and worse.

We know that we, as their children, carry in all of us the scars of our mothers, of our family, which ended up having to get restructured, reorganized, because of what happened. We know that our stories would have been very different if this hadn't happened, or if at least we had the support of the public authorities, psychological support, emotional support, been able to follow-up at every stage of the case. But what we realize is that what still drives us is the power of the pain, of the indignation of losing someone, of missing someone; seeing time go by and not getting some closure, I mean, not being able to have a final word on the matter.

Vanine

At that time I was ten years old. I remember those happy youngsters, going to spend a few days on the farm, my father's farm. They waved us goodbye and went. My grandma said when they got there it was all joy and laughter. It's a very modest place, small and rural. They got there all happy, singing, all excited. What happened there changed everything. All that joy was disgraced by that episode, those men came in, all hooded up. My grandma managed to jump out the window, together with my cousin. My uncle who was there sleeping with the kids wasn't able to do it and they were taken away. They just didn't find my grandma cause, as she'd lived there for a long time, and she had those woods back there, she knew all the ins and outs of that place. And my poor grandma, she was an old lady and was still strong enough to grab the kid by the arm and keep him silent 'til everyone was gone. To this day, it's still very difficult for me to set foot in that place. This year, 2023, on January 18, my father passed away. Because... This happened in 1990, our family suffered so much after that. My mom and dad started arguing a lot after my brother disappeared. My mom, she was out of her mind, she

thought he had to look for him more, help the search, do something. In their marital spats, my mother said that if my brother didn't show up in a year's time, they'd split up, and then in 1991, my mom and dad went their separate ways and my father went on to live on the farm. So my dad's been living there since '91. This year, 2023, he passed away. My father didn't get to hold my brother's death certificate and my uncle's death certificate in his hands. So many people went to see my father, so many journalists, reporters, he took part in so many things related to the Acari case and unfortunately he left us, he passed away, before seeing his wish fulfilled regarding his son. It absolutely impacted our family structure, our family organization, because of that fact. Surely our story would've been different if it hadn't been interrupted by their disappearance.

And to wait for thirty-three years! Actually, at the time we thought we'd wait just a couple of days, a week, a month; and with all these comings and goings, thirty-three years went by. Yes, today we're still waiting for justice. And we believe that we are, even at such a slow pace, getting closer and closer to it. We needed the death certificates in order to take a new step, to be able to move on, even if just to overcome that feeling we still have in us that at any moment they might show up, because without the death certificate, no one's actually dead. If no one's dead it's because they're alive, they're somewhere?

The Acari case should be remembered by voices, current voices, all of our voices, us family members, who still fight and wish with all our hearts for some closure, for some dignified explanation for each family. We must be heard. We need to speak. We need to be seen, not only by bringing this episode up again, but for the consequences, for the impact this case had on our families, on all of us.

Aline

We're not stay-at-home moms, cause they invaded our homes on that July 26, 1990. We have a roof over our heads, but there's no home anymore since they took away our children, our loved ones from us. We've got empty seats at our Sunday family lunches; my sister Cristiane disappeared, my sister Ivana, who's homeless, who couldn't take it and found comfort in drugs. And my mother, she was killed by the State – yes, the State – when the State didn't manage to solve it, didn't manage to investigate it, didn't manage to produce a death certificate, which at that point would've been a victory in itself since she couldn't bury her daughter with dignity. Even though I don't have a structured family, I've been living a drama for thirty-three years, though I'm a psychological wreck, I'm still here.

To use a phrase from Lygia Fagundes Telles, "we will not slash wrists, much to the contrary, we'll stitch double-threaded, all open wounds," cause it still burns, day after day, but each mother sews a thread and so we intertwine. To them, no smiles, just clenched fists. Justice will be served, but it will not be associated with any government, cause we're ungovernable

mothers. To give up is not an option.

The accounts offered by Aline, Vanine, Rita, and Rosângela call upon a commentary made by Sharpe (2023), who highlights the need for an intense emotional, physical, and intellectual care, tending to the needs of those who are dying, to ease their path, and also to the needs of those who remain. The need to confront the accrual of effacements and to create other kinds of knowledge capable of dealing with wake and wake work as a way of plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black death. Sharpe argues in favor of an aspect of Black existence in the wake as consciousness and proposes that existing in the wake and being in the wake is “to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.” (Sharpe, 2016 : 13-14).

According to Taussig, it would be foolish to turn a blind eye to the role of terror in the creation of colonial reality. Terror, in addition to being a physiological state, is also a social state, whose special effects allow it to serve as the mediator par excellence of colonial hegemony. One of the most striking traits of terror is its ineffability, i.e., its narrative and analytical impossibility. Terror establishes an important space of death in the creation of meaning and consciousness, “nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes” (Taussig, 1987: 4). It is in the face of these updated forms of implementing this colonial power and its forms of administration and government of violent death and forced disappearances that those who live in and are traversed by the space of death struggle to stitch up the wounds opened up by terror and make life possible to be lived, and death to be mournable.

To the extent that the armed conflict in Rio de Janeiro (and beyond, to different degrees and configurations) has shaped the framework of contemporary politics, it is analytically relevant to consider the different manifestations of terror devices put into effect by different armed groups and how they may potentially be translated into effective criminal charges. For example, the terror of official police operations, the terror instituted by illegal death squads made up of police officers, the terror of *milícias*, and the terror of “drug trafficking”.

In this sense, it is significant to examine a series of questions, such as: what are the configurations and relations between state-related official military power and unofficial paramilitary power? What are the connections between illegal armed groups and instances of political power? What belongs, officially or otherwise, to the state? How do resources and practices of terror circulate and openly move between different operators of terror? How does a population feel and is affected by living near a death camp?

Bearing such questions in mind, in the following section I aim to explore, in

an ethnographic key, the inscriptions of state-*milícia* terror in a working-class gated community in Rio de Janeiro's West Side, based on the *narrative corpus* included in a case file of a legal procedure. While in this section I have specifically taken up the emblematic case of forced disappearance known as the Acari Case, or the Mothers of Acari case, resulting from the action of a death squad comprised of police officers known as "Running Horses", in the next section, the article goes on to explore how the so-called *milícias* act.

II. STATE-MILÍCIA TERROR DEVICES: PEDAGOGIES OF CRUELTY AND SPACE OF DEATH

Unlike the terror of official police operations carried out in the favelas – and which drags on in the courts – denounced by the organized movements of relatives of victims of police violence and residents of local communities, the possibility of going public with charges taken up against state-*milícia* terror is even more restricted. As previously mentioned, I am using the term "state-*milícia*" so as to differentiate the practices of these groups from official police operations, while at the same time stressing the state's participation in the development of *milícias*.

To what extent is it possible to deem what has been conventionally called, in Rio de Janeiro, by the name of *milícia* as parastatal, given their clear connection with instances of political power, especially those related to public safety policies, with significant involvement of police officers and other state agents? In other words, how to define this configuration in which state agents trained to fight crime turned to killing for organized crime and to establishing their own private armed groups, taking advantage of their condition as state agents to leverage their own economic and political interests?¹⁰

To explore the wealth of accounts included in a criminal case may be a way to ethnographically describe state-*milícia* practices of terror and put into perspective an entire political cartography on the city's development, on the control of bodies, territories, businesses, and markets. The criminal case in which I will focus on below can be thought of as a social construct that produces a narrative, outlining the *modi operandi* of groups accused of constituting *milícias*. My objective is not to use the criminal case to analyze the bureaucratic operation of the justice system in its actions against the *milícias*, but to apprehend the plots and storylines that emerge from the various testimonies and documentations that make up the case files and that contribute to emphasize the relations between terror, intimacy, markets, and processes of dispossession.

10 | Journalist Rafael Soares recently published the book *Milicianos*, which follows the trail of several police officers who began their careers in the police and had a meteoric rise in the world of crime, outlining the complex relationship between law enforcement agents and criminality. Police officers trained to fight against crime formed a consortium of killers with a varied clientele, including *bicheiros* (bosses of the Brazilian popular betting game called "jogo do bicho", which is considered a petty offense), *milícia* members, businessmen and politicians. Later, this group of police officers became one of the main *milícias* in Rio de Janeiro, inaugurating a partnership between drug traffickers and *milícia* members (Soares, 2023).

RIGHT TO HOUSING AND BROKEN PROMISES OF A HOME: HOUSING PROJECTS, MILÍCIA PROJECTS

Carlos Dutra Domingues reports he agreed to leave the trespassed property where he lived, in Cidade de Deus, in exchange for an apartment in the Coimbra condominium, located at Estrada do Palmares, in a neighborhood called Jesuítas, in Santa Cruz (Rio de Janeiro). The property would be paid for by Carlos in a financing program connected to *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, one of the most important Brazilian government housing projects. As soon as he started visiting the site, even before being handed the keys to his new apartment, it was generally known that the area was controlled by members of a *milícia* known as “Liga da Justiça” [Justice League], who notified him about charges regarding the “services provided” by them, such as cable TV, water supply, basic grocery packages¹¹, among others. Along with this warning, messages and threats were also passed along that the residents of Cidade de Deus were not welcome there, and were to abandon all plans of moving there. Should they disobey such recommendations, four people would die on a daily basis.

11 | [Translators' Footnote] *Cesta básica*, in Portuguese, is a Brazilian economic term that designates the set of foods that seek to guarantee a family's nutrition for a month.

(...) since then, many people have “disappeared” from the site and families have lost their loved ones; that the deponent, frightened of being another one made to disappear, has left the Coimbra condominium and returned to Cidade de Deus and is currently being allowed to live with a third party as a favor, having sometimes to spend the night on the street; that the deponent learned that approximately three days ago an individual who lived in the condominium, who moved there from Morro da Pedreira, was murdered and their body was left near the apartment buildings and, afterwards, it was removed by *milicianos* [*milícia* members] and moved to an undisclosed and unknown location; that the deponent learned from comments made by residents of the condominium that *milicianos* are wont to discard the bodies of the people they execute into the Guandu River, in the woods next to the condominium, on a street known as Lama Preta; that the deponent heard from a former resident of the Almada condominium, named Walter, who was looking for the body of his brother Denísio, that during such search, he, Walter, declared having found, in Lama Preta, several plastic bags with dismembered bodies, and that he did not find his brother's body. (Testimony of Carlos Dutra Domingues in the case file)

In his testimony, Carlos also mentioned that he had had contact with several *milícia* members, or *milicianos*, and was able to report the names of several of them, pinpointing the supposed leader, his son and his wife – who is thought to be the owner of a pizza restaurant in the vicinities of the Almada condominium.

“CLEANSING”, HOMICIDES, AND DISAPPEARANCES

Arlindo Lima states he has been a resident of Santa Cruz for fifty years. Born and raised in the neighborhood, he sought a specialized police station out of utter outrage with the arbitrary nature of the situation that had been developing in the area. According to Arlindo, about four years prior, an individual, also a long-time resident of the Santa Cruz neighborhood, after living for a long time in the João XXIII sub-neighborhood, reappeared in Jesuítas spreading the idea of creating an armed group to “patrol” Santa Cruz and “purge alleged criminals from the place.” Arlindo claims to be aware that the sub-neighborhood known as João XXIII was under the control of a paramilitary group led by an individual from Campo Grande, who was, allegedly, a police officer. The organization was known as “Liga da Justiça.” Arlindo also reports that, over time, he witnessed long-time residents of the neighborhood join the organization, mentioning the names of some of them and emphasizing that some were supposedly police officers. Allegedly, this “organization” was composed of twenty “criminals” and committed various crimes with the objective of “collecting the resources necessary for maintaining its structure, as well as guaranteeing personal profit for each of its members”.

He also reported that he knows of numerous homicides and kidnappings committed by *milicianos*, mentioning two crimes in particular: the first was the murder and disappearance of a lawyer, whose name he does not know, but he is aware that this crime reached nationwide news on the TV show hosted by Wagner Montes, at TV Record. According to him, the lawyer was said to be harassing the wife of a *miliciano*, as he was sending text messages to her cell phone. The *miliciano* was said to have replied to the text messages and arranged a meeting with the lawyer. Soon after, the lawyer disappeared. Several residents of the area took notice of this fact and attributed the disappearance of the lawyer to said *miliciano*.

The second crime was reported to be the disappearance of a resident who worked as an entertainment promoter and was being extorted. Below is an excerpt from the testimony included in the case file:

That the second fact that the deponent learned was the homicide of Lenílson, which the deponent knows is in a relationship with Quésia. That this homicide was said to have occurred approximately 3 years ago. That Lenílson was a long-time resident of Santa Cruz, although the deponent had known him for only one year. That Lenílson worked as a promoter in the entertainment business, owned sound equipment and this was how he made a living. That on one occasion, on a date the deponent is unable to specify, members of the Criminal Organization appeared during one of the events promoted by Lenílson and demanded a substantial amount of money, which the deponent is also unable to specify, as a condition for Lenílson to be able to carry on with his work activities. That Lenílson accepted this extortive conduct for

some time; however, as the deponent said to have heard, the criminals further increased the amount to be paid as extortion, which led Lenílson to rebel, although not as direct confrontation, he merely elucidated he had no means to pay what the organization demanded of him.

That a mere few days after he refused to pay the amount due for the extortion, the criminals Waltemar, Tenório Dias, and Leonardo, appeared, unannounced, at approximately 1 a.m., at Lenílson's place of residence, and as he was closing the outer gate of his backyard, they fired numerous gunshots at him and snatched him away, placing him in the vehicle from which they originally emerged, and drove towards an unknown location. That Lenílson disappeared and his body was never found. (Arlindo's testimony in the case file)

Regarding the extortive activities of the *milícia*, Arlindo states that the organization charges a "protection fee" to any and all commercial establishments; the amounts vary between forty and three hundred Brazilian Reais (US\$8-US\$55) per week, to ensure that merchants will not be "bothered" by criminals. The organization also acts as loan sharks, and Arlindo learned that a baker, known as "José", supposedly took out a loan at exorbitant interest rates and, after a while, "José" disappeared. Several homicides are committed at that locality, and the members of the organization "do not bother to hide their faces or identities, only, when it comes to executions, they do not leave the body on site, always making sure the victims disappear, or 'dumping' the bodies outside Santa Cruz." It is Arlindo's opinion that this *modus operandi* is intended to intimidate and inhibit any reactions or to preclude local residents from seeking help from the authorities.

The *milícia* group tried to expand its "protection fee" in the Jesuítas neighborhood, but local residents strongly rebelled against the extortive practice, and, "coincidentally", they had their homes invaded, pilfered, and robbed, as did the local church. In the understanding of Arlindo and other residents, there was not the slightest shadow of a doubt that it was the members of the *milícia* themselves who were carrying out these robberies in order to instill fear and convince the residents to pay said "protection fee".

LIVES, HOUSES AND BODIES AMID EVICTIONS, THREATS AND CONTROL

In his statement to the police department, Zacarias reports that he was a resident of Honório Gurgel and, on June 8th, 2012, his family was assigned an apartment by the city administration of Rio de Janeiro in the Almada condominium. A week after being handed the keys and the provisional documentation from City Hall, they finally moved in. The condominium has 464 apartments divided into 30 blocks and the entire complex is controlled by *milicianos*.

After about a month of living in the apartment, he was approached by residents who sent him a message from the “*milícia*”: its members were watching him due to the fact he left early for work and returned at late hours, so the *milícia* was suspicious that he “was a thug”. According to Zacarias, *milicianos* ordered him to take his family and leave the property that same week, otherwise they would kill his entire family. Even though his wife stayed home with their three children, in face of that threat, they were left with no alternative: he took his wife, the children, and moved out. They left behind documents, furniture and clothes in the property and, when they went back to recover their belongings, the *milícia* had already changed the locks, making it impossible to enter the apartment.

Based on rumors and hearsay, Zacarias claims to know the name of the supposed leader of the *milícia* and that the *milicianos* tend to move around more in the condominium during the nighttime. One thing that took Zacarias and his wife by surprise was the fact that the *milicianos* knew everything the couple owned inside their house, especially since they were newcomers and had not yet made friends in the area. Local residents called the couple asking them not to go back to the condominium, fearing they might be victims of some violent act by the *milícia*. The person who came to live in their apartment is named Zélia, also a resident of Honório Gurgel. In order to get hold of a property in the Almada condominium, Zélia had joined forces with the *milicianos* who drove Zacarias and his family away and started herself working for the *milícia*, patrolling the condominium, delivering messages to its residents and taking information up to the bosses.

THREATS, TORTURE, EVICTIONS, TERROR, DISAPPEARANCES, AND THE STATE' CONNIVANCE...

In a testimony given in court, Gabriel Almeida reported that he was a resident and the apartment manager – on an informal capacity – of a housing complex located at Avenida Aterrado do Leme, in Santa Cruz, and sought the police a few months after having problems with the group of *milicianos* who were establishing their power in said housing complex. The *milícia* group is said to have “usurped the ownership” of forty-seven properties on the site and put them up for sale, illegally, as they are apartments pertaining to the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* federal program and could not be sold in such a manner. They forced people to draw up statements by their own hand in order to officialize the donations of the properties.

The *milicianos* were looking for several first-floor apartments to be turned into commercial establishments. With this intent, they wanted to seize the apartment owned by Gabriel, who claims to have refused it on the grounds that he had established agreements with *Caixa Econômica Federal*, a Brazilian state-owned bank. Faced

with Gabriel's refusal, the *milicianos* then ruled that Gabriel now owed them a sum of ten thousand reais (US\$2,000). Gabriel claimed he was unable to afford such payment and the *milícia* determined he and his family were to vacate the property, to which he replied he would not leave. One day, he received a call from his wife saying that the *milicianos* came to his apartment and declared that he and his family should vacate the property effective immediately, otherwise they would "serve the heads of the deponent's children, two and three years old at the time, on a platter." His wife was desperate.

The following days, his wife called again, from a neighbor's cell phone, informing him that the *milícia* had denied access to an internet service provider to install a landline and internet in their property. Gabriel told his wife to meet him at a mall located in northern Rio de Janeiro and advised her to immediately vacate the premises, leaving everything behind except their documents. Since then, they have not been able to return to the site and have lost all of their possessions. They were one of the first families to live in the area, having moved there in August 2014, and before the first year was through, on April 25th, 2015, they were evicted.

When *Caixa Econômica Federal* inaugurated the housing complex, it informed that, after one hundred and fifty apartments were duly occupied, they were to hold an election to choose an apartment manager. As Zacarias was an electrician, he noticed several construction errors and carried out various maintenance procedures on the building. Some tenants asked him to assume, informally, the position of manager. Until one day an individual "in a SpaceFox model vehicle" showed up at the condominium, armed with two pistols. He gathered the tenants and said that they were free to organize themselves, but that he was there to make sure everyone knew the rules: "This is part of Batman's *milícia* and we are part of the Jesuítas group"; the Jesuítas group "is a sort of principality within Batman's kingdom"; "there's to be no robbery, no rape, and no drug dealing." This individual also allegedly said that there was a business with connections "to Mr. Ricardo (Batman), and that up to that moment the tenants were under their protection, which is why they had to pay a protection fee." The protection fee was stipulated at seven hundred and eighty Brazilian reais (US\$155) per week, for all tenants. The same individual came back a second time saying that they were allowing people to set up businesses in their apartments or stalls outside the condominium, on the sidewalk. Each shopkeeper was to pay twenty-five reais (US\$5) a week, and those who did not pay would lose their stalls and equipment.

According to Gabriel, the issue was taken by the residents to City Hall, which in response sent a representative named Joana. Joana took all the keys to the unoccupied units and handed them over to the company that provided the gated community access control service. Afterwards, the tenants found out that these keys "were handed to the first tier members of the Jesuítas *milícia*". Then three "second

tier” *milicianos* – the “second tier” was “in charge of four pillars: exploitation, extortion, homicide and access control” – took up residence in the condominium and associated themselves with new residents who moved in after them, via deals carried out by real estate brokers. One of the brokers was killed due to some disagreement with the “*milícia*”. As time wore on, people who were connected to the slot machine racket in the Areal de Irajá residential complex¹² started moving in, and the condominium managers started being “co-opted by the *milícia*”.

Milícia members paraded around the condominium brandishing high-caliber firearms and broke into apartments to threaten or evict tenants. On one such occasion, these men came to his apartment, carrying rifles, and threatened his wife.

[...] this would also happen to other people; that people had been tortured and killed; that nine residents disappeared in the “Aterrado do Leme II” condominium; that a man over 65, known as “Miguel”, once touched his motorcycle against one of “Alex’s” sons and later apologized; that the boy was not injured, but, after a few days, a rumor spread that photographs of children in their underwear were found on “Miguel’s” cell phone; that the *milícia* banned him from the place and took his apartment; that, usually, evicted tenants were put in a white Amaro model vehicle and disappeared; that on several occasions, bodies of executed people had cropped up; that the *milicianos* imposed on residents the purchase of basic grocery packages in the amount of R\$180.00 (US\$35); that they needed to hire “Gatonet” [an illegal set-top box that provides access to television services] for R\$60.00 (US\$12); that if a technician from the “Sky or Oi TV” companies was called to the location, the co-opted condominium manager would write down the address and name of the tenant who hired the service and pass it on to the high-ranking members of the *milícia*; that *milicianos* prohibited hiring such services; that there was an agreement with the city administration that there would be no charges for public water supply for a two-year period, but that the *milícia* charged a fee for water supply usage; that several residents moved out of the area, which led to a decrease in revenue; that on a Friday night, *milicianos* turned off the lights in all condominiums and set up a barricade, heavily armed, preventing anyone from Light S/A from reaching the area in order to turn the lights back on; that they only turned the power back on Monday; that they cut off power supply to the Aterrado do Leme I, II, III, Coimbra, Almada and Aveiro condominiums; that during this period, *milicianos* were barbecuing in the street in front of the condominiums; that the following week a white Astra model vehicle carrying bodies, exuding a pungent odor, appeared on the site; that said vehicle was parked in front of the condominium; that the police walked by the body and did nothing; that City Hall did nothing; that there was certainly some agreement between City Hall, the Military Police, and this *milícia* group; that the *milicianos* collected money every Friday, and on Saturdays they held funk parties; that he saw the body of a homosexual teenager; that the *milicianos*, in order to showcase their power, took the life of an individual who was allegedly prostituting himself as he had no other means of livelihood; that they administered bites all over the young man’s body; that he was found naked, covered

12 | Known as “Amarelinho de Irajá”, it was built in the 1950s with resources from the Industrial Workers’ Retirement and Pension Institute, and is located in the Acari neighborhood, in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

in bite marks, with a hoe-handle implanted in his mouth and a broomstick implanted in his anus; that the body was left there so that the residents could see who was in charge; that the image of the young man's body still pops up in his head; that sometimes he is sleeping and wakes up with that scene in his mind. (Gabriel's testimony in the case file)

It is this memory, as registered in Gabriel's testimony, that drove him to cooperate with the justice system. According to the case files, he said he believed in justice, in human rights, and in the state, and that the guilty party should be lawfully tried and pay for the harm they have done. His family members, however, did not seem to share his beliefs or commitment to justice. When he told his family what was going on, they were terrified and beseeched him to take all the money he had and move to another state. They believed that what Gabriel was doing "wasn't going to get him anywhere, quite the contrary, it was only going to further expose his family." He acquiesced and moved to another state. After getting a formal job in his new state of residence, he thought about going to the Federal Police to report the events, after all, he had to leave the apartment, but he still had his obligations before *Caixa Econômica Federal*. When he contacted the Federal Police, he was told he should return to Rio de Janeiro to report the incidents.

Gabriel received a "message" from a "*miliciano*" accusing him of stealing a safe and demanding his return to Rio de Janeiro to settle the issue, adding that he should hand over the deed for the property. A family member of Gabriel even contacted the *milícia* member to try to mediate the conflict, but the situation got even worse. Gabriel then decided to return to Rio de Janeiro, and left his wife and children at a friend's house "to seek out justice." He started looking for the then-inspector Alexandre Capote, of the Police Station for the Suppression of Organized Criminal Acts and Special Investigations (DRACO) and who had been in the spotlight for his actions during investigations against *milícias*. However, Alexandre Capote was no longer in the unit as he had moved into Internal Affairs. Another inspector, Alexandre Herdy, took Gabriel's deposition.

According to the testimony included in the case files, an institutional apparatus involving the Police, the Santa Cruz Public Prosecutor's Office, agents of the Human Rights Commission, and the Public Security Secretariat was set up, establishing security conditions so that Gabriel was able to testify. Gabriel, who was prevented from working "because he was cooperating with the justice system" and also because he had once before been "located by *milicianos* due to being working under a formal labor contract," joined the Witness Protection Program. During this period, he was solely involved in informal working arrangements in order to avoid being located.

During his testimony, he was asked by the defendant's defense if he had ever

been involved in any criminal proceedings because of this condominium. He responded by stating he was involved in a lawsuit against the condominium manager, in which he was both “victim and plaintiff in the proceeding.” Acting under the direction of the “*milícia*”, the manager allegedly said that Gabriel had threatened him. At the Santa Cruz Police Station, while trying to report a complaint on the threat, Gabriel stated he had heard it straight from the head of the notary’s office that he could end up being “a new Amarildo”¹³.

In a testimony during a hearing, Gabriel recognized several of the alleged “*milicianos*” via photographic evidence while also identifying the individuals responsible for extortion, loansharking, threatening, and torture. When placed before the judge, he expressed his willingness to cooperate with the justice system, but showed concern for his situation and pleaded with the judiciary to enforce measures aimed at the social reintegration of his family, and the judge stated that he would be offered guidance after the hearing. Gabriel managed to be placed in the Witness Protection Program, but there are reports of witnesses living in the police station as there were no vacancies available in the program.

13 | The “Amarildo case” became nationally known when Amarildo Dias de Souza, a bricklayer’s helper, disappeared on July 14, 2013, after being arrested by military police and taken from the door of his home in the Rocinha favela to the headquarters of the neighborhood’s Pacifying Police Unit (UPP). Six police officers, including the UPP commander, were convicted of torture murder, concealing of a corpse and tampering with evidence. Amarildo’s body was never found.

CULTURE OF TERROR, SPACE OF DEATH AND PEDAGOGIES OF CRUELTY

Throughout this article, I have sought to ethnographically explore a series of practices of terror that both involve and influence intimate experiences related to the body, to homes, routines, and affections. Technologies of destruction aimed at wrecking family life projects, at ravaging domestic and community spaces: death threats; dissemination of hearsay, intrigue, and lies used to destroy reputations and justify forcibly evicting people from condominiums; invading homes while flaunting rifles as means of intimidation; the ostentatious circulation and showcasing of large-caliber firearms in the internal space of the condominiums; setting up barricades in the streets to control the movement of people and to carry out a “cleansing” policy, exterminating alleged “drug dealers” or residents who were simply “removed” from their original faction-controlled areas, even if they have no “involvement”, to be resettled in housing projects of the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* program; the obstruction to hiring and accessing urban services offered by the government or by formal private companies, such as the water supply, internet, telephone, basic grocery packages; the techniques of control, surveillance, and vigilance to identify and punish those who circumvent or attempt to deceive the wide-ranging system of economic exploitation and profit extraction implemented by “state-*milícia*” groups; controlled power outage imposed on several housing projects at the same time, leaving large amounts of tenants in the dark, as a way of “sending the message” that residents must purchase solely services provided by the “*milícias*”; separating chil-

dren from their mothers, while the mother herself had to go before “*milicianos*” to provide explanations as to having “harassed” the principal of a public daycare center for requesting to have her daughter enrolled; tortures and the public application of corporal punishment; dismemberment and disappearance of bodies; sexual violence, torture, impalement, murder, and public exposure (in front of the condominium) of homosexuals who were allegedly involved in prostitution; the fetid corpses of dead people left inside vehicles close to police presence, without the police doing anything about it; murders of people, which were later turned into missing persons; dismembered bodies wrapped in plastic bags, displayed on the sidewalks to be seen by all who leave for work in the morning, with notes attached to them reminding the locals who is in charge; mutilated bodies thrown into rivers, which make the rivers themselves all too unwilling victims of forced disappearances; and the clear-stated messages that there is no point in resorting to the police, as they are under the control of “*milícia* groups”: “My name is Nico, I’m charge of Pedra de Guaratiba and the entire West Side, and there is no point in ratting me out me because I’m inside the Police Station, and I’m inside the Army Headquarters, I have the entire police of Rio de Janeiro under my thumb”, read one of such warnings.

All this vastly varied repertoire of actions and *modi operandi* refer to a particular configuration of a “culture of terror” and “space of death” (Taussig, 1987), which constitutes itself in the deeply interwoven relations between markets, terror, and torture; between logics of extraction and dispossession and policies of disappearance, where forced disappearance is in itself a crime of dispossession that imposes itself on bodies and territories as a symptom of the neoliberal project (Robledo Silvestre, 2022).

A “culture of terror and of the space of death” feeds on – and is itself fed from – a “pedagogy of cruelty”, which, in Rita Segato’s terms, corresponds to all acts and practices that teach, accustom, and program subjects to transmute the living and its vitality into a thing. The “pedagogy of cruelty” teaches something that goes far beyond killing: it teaches how to kill by imposing a deritualized death, a death that leaves only residues in place of one who is deceased (Segato, 2018).

This pedagogy of cruelty expresses something akin to what Taussig termed as the “hallucinatory quality” of terror. In this particular configuration of the “culture of terror and of the space of death” explored ethnographically in the excerpts presented here, the hallucinatory trait of terror seems to reside in its ability to shuffle the ordinary and extraordinary dimensions of life (Taussig, 1987), to the extent that a device of death moves forward by swallowing up territories, bodies, futures, imaginations, wealth, and daily life (Reguillo, 2021). This scenario is part of a historical moment marked by the existence of a project aimed at the extreme exploitation of life, rooted in subjectivities, in vital natural processes, in the economy, and in governments (Reguillo, 2017).

Taussig's analyses on the actions of the death squads that exterminated and led to the disappearance of thousands of people during the armed conflicts in Colombia are very useful and apropos to investigate the scenario of the Rio de Janeiro *milícia* activities addressed in this article. In light of Walter Benjamin's theory of the constant state of emergency, Taussig argues that there was a situation in Colombia that was both violent and sinister, and that its sinister quality depended on the strategic use of uncertainty and mystery that the language of terror exhibits and to which it insistently resorts. Since chaos is an everyday factor, what is supposed to be chaotic is order, not a deviation from the norm. In a politically strategic sense, it is a disorderly order as much as an orderly disorder, which oscillates between clarity and opacity.

To take this constant state of emergency into consideration is, according to Taussig, a starting point for comprehending the flow of power that connects the language of terror to the use of disorder by means of murder and disappearance. This normal character of the abnormal, a normal state of emergency, with its language on terror, imposes violent and unexpected ruptures to the state of consciousness. But this disturbance of the state of consciousness is not so much a psychological as a social and cultural configuration and it goes to the heart of what is politically crucial in the notion of terror as usual: a social configuration of contradiction in which one goes spasmodically from accepting a situation as if it were normal to immediately feeling the impact of panic or shock of disorientation caused by some incident, hearsay, rumor, spectacle, something explicit or implicit, something that, although requiring a normal frame of reference to rattle us, comes to destroy it (Taussig, 1992: 17-18).

Rita Segato also questions the legibility/illegibility of violence as a new language affecting the Latin American map. The author begins by problematizing the very word "violence", which by itself neither explains anything nor does it contribute to explain a mode of social conflict linked to forms of exploitation and dispossession. The development of the "exception" as rule and the multifarious diffusion of fear as a device of general social control, regulating the mobile boundaries of reality, are the characteristics of this new mode of social conflict, wherein the forms of construction of authority and territory definitely no longer take place under the monopoly of the State (Segato, 2013).

According to Segato, all traits of these conflicts gravitate around a global mode of appropriation and government of wealth whose *modus operandi* consists in regulating the production of value by subtracting it from the collective fabric of the production of life and subjecting it to *financial* valorization. Moreover, these conflicts are marked by an expressive violence that encompasses and relates to determined relations between bodies, people, and social forces of a given territory. To express that one holds the will of others in one's hands is the telos and purpose of expres-

sive violence. Dominance, sovereignty, and control are its semantic realm, and it should be noted that these functions can only be exercised before a community of the living, having more in common with the idea of colonization than with the idea of extermination. In a regime of sovereignty, some are destined for death so that their bodies may bear the marks of the sovereign power and represent to others the drama of domination. As Segato (2013: 21) points out, only the power of colonization allows for the display of the power of death to those destined to live.

There are elements of this terror scenarios, described by Michael Taussig and Rita Segato, inscribed into the actions of the *milícia* groups that operate in the condominiums of the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* Program, which are narrated in the ethnographic fragments that I have explored in this article. A form of coercion and exercise of authority centered on terror, with the aim of controlling and subjugating territories and populations to economic and political interests, in an overt association between terror and markets. In this dynamic, the body occupies a prominent place as the “quintessential instrument of terror” (Blair, 2005: 58); a field of operation of power and terror that destroys the symbolic order of bodies and death, changing them into “vehicles of representation” (Blair: 2005, 48), into “terrifying texts” (Uribe, 2004: 101).

Extraction of profit, of life, of bodies. Wakes and sutures of wounds opened up by terror. Terror that eludes and exceeds the partial truths of archives, documents, and colonial and neocolonial government processes. Terror that challenges a history that is written against the grain to bestow meaning to silences, absences, and modes of (dis)appearance.

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