Micro/Macro Racial Aggression, Antiblackness and Community Responses to State Terror

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ABOUT CURRENTS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This research report does not intend to speak for or represent the official vision of the organizations that I have worked with. It is rather a contextualization of my work with these organizations within a broader research agenda. I thank Mariana Mora, Emma Mullaney, Roos Cardena, Diana Ojeda, Joy James, Tatagathan Ravindran, Aurora Vergara, Vicenta Moreno and Yanilda Gonzalez, and many others for "setting the tone" of our collective institutional efforts to bring the mothers together.

Introduction

Enduring and new configurations of racial violence in countries such as Colombia, the United States, and Brazil asks for a radical non-compromising political lexicon. How best to name these new/old dynamics beyond the soft and palatable lexicon of mainstream society that turns what is experienced as *racial antagonism* into interpersonal and psychological aggression? How do we hold institutions and civil society accountable when, within this lexicon, racism takes the guise of cultural incompetence and individual accountability? While open and disguised rhetoric of hate, bigotry, and countless everyday practices of *microaggression* are surely manifestations of racism, this conceptualization falls short when the word *antiblack* is added to this equation. As an Afro-Colombian activist put it, "is it a hate crime when a mining company destroys our rivers?"[1] Within the current context of this antiblack world, civil society's limiting approach to racism is made evident, for instance in its scandal over Brazilian and US presidents Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump's openly racist and xenophobic remarks against blacks and immigrants, despite widespread silence over mass incarceration and police terror.

Racism as Microaggression

In their influential article "Microaggressions in Everyday Life," Sue et al. propose the most current working definition of the term, which is "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (2007, p.273)." According to the authors, at least three forms of racial microaggressions exist: *microassaults* (verbal and nonverbal inferiorization), *microinvalidation* (erasing of one's identity through the invalidation of one's experience), and *microinsult* (the subtle and hidden desqualification of an individual's skills/humanity). Common features of these practices include their unintentionality and invisibility. Most of the perpetrators may indeed be well-intentioned, open-minded people who may respond with surprise and great defensiveness when called out on their aggression of a person from

1. Approximate translation provided as the oral statement was made during a meeting of the Hemispheric Network Against Racism (RAIAR) that I attended in Guatemala, October 2014.

a minority group (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275). Authors under this approach do not downplay the role of overt racism in defining minority groups' experience (life chances, well-being and so on). Rather, they highlight the hidden and cumulative effect of everyday microaggressions in dehumanizing (and thus paving the way for further violence against) individuals from marginalized racial groups.

Minikel-Lacocque deploys Critical Race Theory (CRT) to propose the term "racialized aggression" rather than "microaggression," mainly to avoid lumping together unintentional and overtly racist practices and to avoid downplaying the systemic role of racism in sustaining power dynamics as if some "actions and words are somehow less egregious than those racist acts not classified as micro (2013, p. 455)." Minikel-Lacocque's critique seeks to address a potential downfall of limiting the definition of racism to microaggressions which creates an extra burden to the *aggressed* (who is quite often accused of being "oversensitive" or playing the race card) to prove the intertwining dimensions of their structural and everyday conditions of oppression. In response, other scholars have proposed a definition of racism that takes into consideration the voices of direct victims, or their "lived experience" – what Fleras calls a *claim-making process* (2016) – as the base for conceptualizing and facing contemporary racism.

While this literature highlights everyday acts of violence that affect the lives of minority groups,[2] it still relies on a conceptualization of racism as a lack of cultural competence or racial awareness, and thereby involuntarily ends up reinforcing individualized notions of race-based systematic oppressions. Although racism as microaggression is well-placed to unveil subtle and everyday forms of violence based on ones' identity, even as it promises to deliver an understanding of racism situated within larger power structures, the adjective "micro" limits its political currency. Even more troubling is when we situate antiblackness as an ontological, paradigmatic, diffused, and systematic form of dehumanization that informs subjugation at large. As Joao Costa Vargas contends, "antiblack racism structures not only social outcomes, including well-beings, but fundamentally how we culturally think about and relate in and to the social world. (…) it creates a hierarchy of

2. Admittedly, my citations here are only a partial list that is not representative of the large body of literature on microaggression and everyday racism. For a critical reference see, among others, Halley, Eshleman, & Vijaya, 2011.

value; it renders humanity unattainable for the Black (2018:27)."[3] Informed by this perspective, I ask: can we engage theoretically and politically with mainstream definition of racism without falling into a (neo)liberal perspective voided of a radical critique of its productive logic in promoting antiblack racial privilege and racial dispossession?

My work seeks to intervene in this conversation from two distinct yet convergent perspectives. Theoretically, it engages with a political economic conceptualization of racism and racial violence – much beyond the liberal framework of *race crime* and *prejudice* – to include what scholar Ruth Gilmore has conceptualized as "the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production of vulnerabilities to premature death (2007, p.28)" and that some have repositioned through the lenses of *black social death* as *structural antagonism*.[4] Politically, it aligns with claims by direct victims of antiblack racism, who frame their encounters with police and civil society's everyday assault on their bodies not as "*micro*aggression" but rather as genocide.

Context

My research is part of a long-term and multi-layer project that aims to map, denounce, and fight the *genocidal continuum* of the African Diaspora (Flauzina, 2008; James, 2009; Vargas, 2010). Throughout the Americas, black activists have deployed a common "racial language" (Mattos, 2017) to denounced black genocide as a persistent and cumulative experience of oppression. The project aims at denouncing their social suffering and locating their practices of resistance. The mothers of deceased black youth in places like Sao Paulo, Brazil and Cali, Colombia, for instance, have denounced what they call concerted *política de muerte* or politics of death that is comprised of residential segregation, political marginalization, incarceration, and police killings. In the United States, this *politica de muerte* is

3. Vargas recuperated Lewis Gordon's seminal work on *Bad faith and antiblack racism* to argue for the use of *antiblackness* or *antiblack racism* rather than *racism* to demark the "incommensurability" of the black experience vis-à-vis racial oppression against people-of-color in societies of the African Diaspora such as Brazil and the United States (see also Alves and Vargas, forthcoming
4. The contention is that while many groups (people-of-color) may suffer racism, antiblackness is a paradigmatic form of oppression founded on the ontological violence of slavery (see Hartman 1997; Sexton 2010; Vargas, 2018).

well pronounced in the "astronomical scale of social death" produced by mass incarceration (Rodriguez, 2010, p.25). If the United States has the highest rate of mass incarceration of black individuals – with blacks incarcerated at a rate 5 times higher than that of whites (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2016) – Brazil is the world leader in police killings, and Colombia is the country with the highest internally displaced black population in the world. Blacks comprise 13% of the 6.5 million (and counting) internally displaced Colombians (Internally Displaced Monitoring Centre, 2019). With the second largest black population in Latin America, Colombia's war has created environmental tragedies, massacres, and massive displacement toward marginal urban areas where blacks are subject to further political marginalization, residential segregation, discrimination in the job market, and police violence. All this conjures a particular kind of racism that, in the words of sociologist Vergara-Figueroa (2017) can be better described as "uprooting" from the land, from the world of citizenship, and from the world itself. While no reliable race-based statistics on killings by the police in Colombia exist (in a country in which the national census itself has serious limitations in reporting racial demographics), predominantly black territories along the Pacific coast have borne the brunt of legal and extra-legal violence within the context of the long-running armed conflict (see Human Rights Watch, 2014). When added to the deaths from malnutrition, as well as lack of access to health services, potable water, and so on, the state is implicated in the victimization of blacks not only by failing to protect these Colombians but also by directly violating the human rights of black Colombians, as they are directly affected by state abandonment, military crossfire and counter-insurgency tactics.

Statistics on police violence in the United States reveal that 4,536 individuals were killed by the police from January 2015 to August 2019 (Washington Post, 2019). While killings by the police are pervasive in the land of the brave, black men and black women are disproportionately affected by this particular form of state terrorism in the home of the free. Among women, for instance, a study by Crenshaw and Ritchie reveals that in a given year (2013) black women accounted for 53% of all women stopped by the police in New York City. They also call attention to the unquantifiable mental suffering and long-term trauma caused by police brutality on black women (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015). A more recent study also reveals that at some point over the course of their lives, 1 in 1,000 black men will be killed by the police (Khan, 2019).

Killings by the Police in the United States

2019	602
2018	992
2017	986
2016	962
2015	994

Data source: The Washington Post (2019)

The Brazilian police kill at least 14 individuals every day, of which 70% are black. In 2018 alone, the police killed as many as 6,160 civilians. Between 2016 and 2018, the police killed 15,607 individuals (G1, 2019). Human rights activists now expect an exponential increase in the body count, given that the misogynist, homophobic, and antiblack political coalition that governs the country is proposing a reform in the penal statute to incorporate a broad set of emotional factors as fear, surprise, or intensive emotion as legal excuses to officers to kill (see Camara, 2019). If we consider the astonishing number of killings by the police that go unpunished or that are justified as collateral damage, one can only imagine the new degree of atrocities likely to come in from already out-of-control police force.

Cartographies of Resistance

My research focus on denouncing antiblack violence and locating practices of resistance. It encompasses multilayered, long-term, and ongoing initiatives that not only expand our understanding of racism beyond the framework of microaggression but also seek political responses centered in the urgency of protecting black lives. Black grassroots organizations in Colombia (Grupo Interseccionalidades/Casa Cultural El Chontaduro), Brazil (Maes de Maio and Amparar), and more recently

Global Network of Mothers in Resistance/Casa Cultural El Chontaduro.

the collective effort to create a Hemispheric Network of Mothers in Resistance from both countries and the United States, have been part of this activist research endeavor. This also includes collaborative work and inter-institutional alliances (with Joao Costa Vargas, at the University of California, Riverside) that will result in "Cartographies of Antiblackness," a long-term project of mapping patterns of antiblack violence in the Americas.

Despite the difficulties and tensions that emerge from organizing underfunded, culturally diverse and grieving communities in a transnational context,[5] these initiatives have proven to be very important as a mobilizing strategy. The ongoing

5. The internal dynamics of the Network of Mothers in Resistance was in itself a self-educating process as we scrambled with the difficulties of conducting activist scholarship that matters in a complex context. For instance, tensions emerged from cultural differences in terms of the uses of grief as a political tool, the role of activist scholars (particularly black men and non-black women) in the network, language barriers, funding, and the (non)centrality of blackness as the main focus of the debate.

network of mothers of black youth incarcerated and/or killed by the police is a case in point. Although my engagement with some of these organizations supersede this research, since 2016, black mothers from Brazil, the US, and Colombia have organized themselves in a transnational effort to call the attention of global civil society to the systematic killings of black children and to the need to demilitarize the police forces in their respective regions. Their shared experience and their political labor organized fractured black communities offers a different way to conceive of the African Diaspora: as not only a zone of social death but also a geography of resistance. Within contexts of despair and fear, this process of resistance may take the form of self-care and mutual support to cope with loss. In April 10, 2018, Debora Silva - the leader of Maes de Maio (Mothers of May) and mother of Rogério Silva, a 29-year old black man killed by the Brazilian police - paid a visit to grieved mothers in the marginal community of Aguablanca, in Cali/Colombia. As we walked through the streets of the barrio, she reminded me of the need to push forward a hemispheric campaign to demilitarize the continent. At the community meeting, Debora invited her peers to "not be afraid" and fight against the "terrorist state" and connected their experience with her own, as a childless mother. She also invited the mothers to "defender o morto [defend the dead]" and shout several times the motto "our dead have a voice." Debora's insistence to "defend the dead" and to "demilitarize the police" has become an urgent call that my research hopes to continue engaging with, even more now under "new" configurations of assault on black people in places such as Brazil, her country.

In fact, in several instances of my research, black activists have drawn connections between their experience and current global regimes of domination. In one of our meetings at the College of Staten Island, in New York, she confronted the American audience: "we have to demilitarize the police in the whole Americas because everything is connected. It was the money of American taxpayers that financed the bullet that killed my son."[6] This statement was in reference to the defense technology deals between the Brazilian and the United States governments, whereby the Brazilian state has signed several security deals with its US and Israeli counterparts since 2014. The US-Israeli defense technology deployed to police and used to destroy black and brown lives at home and abroad is thus likewise

6. I Internacional Meeting of the Network of Mothers in Resistance, College of Staten Island of the City University of New York, June 1, 2016.

used to patrol Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* (James & Alves, 2019; Vargas 2013).

These military connections have not been overlooked by black Colombian activists, who have long drawn connections between the US-backed war on drugs and war on terror and the violence against blacks in this war-torn country. Black activists denounce that the black population has been "cannon fodder" for the intertwining war between rebel groups, state/paramilitary forces, and *narcos* in their dispute over traditional black territories. The multitude of Afro-*desplazados* – legal category for the internally displaced black population – the assassination of black activists, and ongoing wars against black youth in urban cities like Cali are all connected to the "ethnocide" facilitated by the US-backed Plan Colombia.[7] An ongoing liberal peace project that activists denounce as a strategy to turn traditional black territories toward agribusiness, has produced even more black deaths. In the city or in the rural areas, Afro-Colombians live under a *politica de muerte* - as denounced by black activists Vicenta Moreno and Francia Marquez (a survivor of several assassination attempts)[8] – that comprises the state negation of basic citizenship rights to the black population, its failure to protect black activists, and its implication in the dynamics of war.

Although activists do not always articulate their experience in terms of antiblack racism, and although they are not always in agreement on the terms of alliance, my research locates a resolute approach to racism that challenge the compromising language of state reform that quite often cannibalizes efforts toward domestication of their struggle. By implicating the state in the "politicas de muerte" or in defining themselves as "ungovernable," they set the tone of political struggle. From the perspective of activist scholarship, sometimes it may mean to avoid the temptation to control the political agenda of the organizations, to not convert their pain into

7. In addition to training Colombian militaries, the Plan's aerially sprayed pesticides and other counter-narcotic strategies to curb cocaine production have had devastating consequences for black territories (see Quiñones, 2016). The Plan Colombia was signed by the Clinton Administration in 2000 and consisted of military and technological support to the Colombian government's counterinsurgency program against the leftist guerrillas. It is also a foreign aid packet against the drug cartels. On the "ethnocidal" scale of the environmental and human suffering produced by the Plan Colombia see among others, Quiñones 2016.
8. For black Colombians approach to the precarious peace-deal and to the ongoing *politicas de muerte* that has followed the accord, see also Alves (2019).
9. I thank Joy James for calling my attention to this particular danger of "sanitizing the language" of grieved mothers in their struggle for justice.

an academic commodity,[9] and to listen to their pressing needs. In the case of the Network of Mothers in Resistance, Debora Silva complained researchers were taking too much protagonism in their struggle. The mothers are the ones that must take up the leadership against the militarization of Americas “because we understand that our pain has no boundaries. If oppression is globalized, we also have to globalize our struggle.” This is an urgent call within the new and enduring dynamics of racial terror in the Americas. Radical solidarity is needed!

Putting Research to Work

While black activists avoid too-easy prescriptions to structural problems, some of these recommendations should be seen as a desperate attempt to protect black lives. The following come from multiple instances of activist research and should be embraced by political allies in academia and beyond.

Public Education

Language matters. Teachers, scholars, policy-makers, influencers, and progressive organizations should reframe liberal (soft) language that renders antiblack police terror as "misconduct," or police killings as "unlawful" killings. Black activists take seriously the discursive aspect of this struggle because it legitimizes the state as the guarantor of peace. It also creates a false dichotomy between "good" and "bad" cops, "good" and "bad" victims, individual and institutional terror, micro and structural aggression. Thus, an important first step in fighting police brutality and antiblackness at large is to speak the language of the oppressed, not the language of the state.

Political Allies

Despite impressive work done by black activists to denounce and fight antiblack racism, most of these grassroots efforts are unfunded. Funding institutions from the global north usually support white-led mainstream organizations that quite often produce useless (and obvious) reports on the diagnostic of racial violence. Critical support for local grassroots efforts should include international campaigns to grant financial and political autonomy for their underfunded projects.

Law Practitioners and Policymakers

Black grassroots organizations in the Americas have carried out legal demands in international forums such as the InterAmerican Human Rights Commission and the UN system. However, legal litigation is costly. Scholars, activists, and policymakers should help facilitate strategic alliances with legal organizations that may assist unfunded black organizations in pressing their demands. In addition, activists in the US should pressure their governments within the legal domain. For instance, US taxpayers should pressure the Congress to revise the US Defense Cooperation Agreements with their Brazilian and Colombian counterparts, as these

military deals invariably endanger black lives domestically and globally.

Protecting Black Activism

Within the current political climate of far-right backlash that exists in most of Latin America and the United States, radical activism has become a dangerous endeavor. Of special concern is the perilous conditions that imperil black activists in Brazil and Colombia, and of which the targeted assassination of Mariele Franco is the most infamous example. Black activists from Colombia have urged global civil society to denounce the US-backed government's lack of support for the Colombian peace agreement and the systematic assassination of its social leaders. They have called for international solidarity to create a humanitarian belt among black territories suffering new levels of assault from multinational corporations and paramilitaries actors. Likewise, under President Jair Bolsonaro, Afro-Brazilian activists have denounced the increasing assault on black and indigenous rights, and political repression.

Future Research

Future lines of inquiry include excavating the meanings of resistance against state violence in contexts where the space of civil society (as an arena for fighting for rights) is closed to black individuals. Likewise, there is a need to consider how racism (and its derivatives, as expressed in terms such as micro/macro aggression, prejudice, and discrimination) is conceptualized, lived, and contested by its direct victims. Identifying pedagogies of resistance among black social movements from seemingly disparate contexts of the African Diaspora may shed light on the limits and possibilities of a hemispheric alliance to protect endangered black lives.

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