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Barbarians on the beach: Media narratives of violence in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract

This article examines Brazilian media reports on two incidents in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, arguing that reports on these events were turning points in the emergence of a discourse of crime that has come to shape how residents of Rio de Janeiro understand and experience violence. Newspaper and magazine articles on a 1992 beachside mugging incident and the Brazilian army's 1994 occupation of several of Rio's poor neighbourhoods are examined as cultural texts through which violence becomes culturally imaginable and new discourses of social difference emerge. The article shows how reports on crime came to constitute a neo-racist discourse centred on images of infection and the creation of social stigma according to spatial, and not primarily racial, criteria. The key shift in this discourse of crime is from a hegemonic national narrative that celebrated mixing and transgression to one where social and urban boundaries are increasingly impermeable, and transgression is seen as dangerous and threatening.

Key words

Brazil; crime; favela; race; violence

The violent atmosphere in Rio demands that serious measures be taken. From omission to omission, drug trafficking has installed itself in the favelas [squatter neighbourhoods] and organized crime has extended its tentacles throughout the entire state. Gambling, killing, shooting, robbing, all of this occurs without any limits that would reduce violence to a reasonable level. (Jornal do Brasil, 1994b)

INTRODUCTION

In this article I analyze media reports on crime in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as cultural texts through which violence becomes narrativized and new discourses of social difference

emerge. I argue that news stories about two events – a mass mugging incident on the beaches of Rio in 1992, and the army's occupation of several of the city's *favelas* (or squatter neighbourhoods) in 1994 – are key moments in the emergence of a new media-driven discourse on violence that shares many features of what Balibar (1991) has termed 'racism without race'.

Violence does not exist independently of culture and symbolic systems, nor is it merely an instrumental means to an end. Warren (1993: 3) has pointed out that such approaches 'fail to question the ways in which cultural and political practices mediate the experience of violence'. If violence is not external to culture, then it must be analyzed as 'a discursive practice with symbols and rituals' (Whitehead, 2004: 2). The narratives used to describe it often constitute violence: it is a 'fictional reality' (Aretxaga, 1996).¹ And media images are one of the main sources used to create understandings and experiences of violence.

In this article I will analyze the sea-side muggings and the army's occupation of several of the city's favelas (known as Operation Rio) as they were reported in the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper and *Veja* magazine as one window into the emergent discourse of crime and 'insecurity' in Brazil.² Pursuing a deliberately inter-disciplinary approach, I have juxtaposed an intensive reading of news reports on these two events with broader social history and social science literature on Brazil, and with my own ethnographic experiences conducting intensive fieldwork in a favela in the northern part of Rio over a year and a half. What I seek to do here is not a quantitative documentation of media reporting. Rather, I present an ethnographically grounded critical reading of media reports which were one crucial source for the production of a new non-racist form of racism which has come to shape how many Brazilians understand crime.

Caldeira and Holston (1999) have argued that urban violence in Brazil generated a 'talk of crime' in which the repetition of stories about crime produces feelings of fear. Fear, in turn, leads people to restrict their movements and exacerbates violence by encouraging illegal responses to perceived criminality, such as supporting death squads and violent policing (Caldeira, 2000). This spiral of fear and violence, Caldeira and Holston (1999) argue, has a profoundly negative impact, producing a 'disjunctive democracy' where rights such as freedom of expression and assembly are largely honoured, yet rights such as freedom from torture, summary execution or arbitrary arrest are routinely violated (see also Pinheiro, 2000; Soares, 2002).

Expanding upon this analysis, I will argue that media reports on the 1992 beach-front mugging (dubbed the *arrastão*, or drag-net, in the Brazilian press) and the army's 1994 occupation of several favelas provided citizens of Rio with a new way of depicting, and hence thinking about and experiencing, crime and urban insecurity. The reports on the 'drag-net' muggings and the army's Operation Rio generated a new discourse of crime by deploying two elements that Balibar (1991) argues are central to neo-racist discourses.

First are images and metaphors that centre upon the danger of 'infection' and which advocate the need for 'prophylaxis'. Infection was depicted in two ways: the 'invasion' of beaches in the white southern zone by poor favela youth, and the 'infection' of the police and the state through their corrupt dealings with drug

traffickers. Fear of infection, as I will show later, is a useful synecdoche for broader fears about the transgression of established social norms. Along with the fear of infection comes the reification of complex social problems that come to be seen as 'threats' to the body politic. These 'threats' then become the targets of measures aimed at demarcating, controlling, and segregating urban and social space, to 'protect' the body politic.

The second element of discourses of neo-racism is the creation of social stigmata that do not draw directly from biological markers of racial difference (Balibar, 1991). I will argue that the central matrix for organizing this new sense of social difference is spatial: stigmatized social subjects, and objects of fear, are those that are 'out of place', violating the 'proper' organization of Rio's space. Reified as the product of a 'violent atmosphere', crime is feared not simply because it exists, but because it has 'extended its tentacles' into a space from which it was previously excluded.

The discourse of criminality and urban violence that emerged in Brazil in the mid-1990s is not organized according to explicitly racial criteria, but according to images of criminality and transgression. As a result, it does the work of racism while appearing non-racist. This shift marked both a major re-orientation in how Brazilians could define and think about crime and a novel way of thinking about the connections between crime, race and the social order. As Paul Gilroy (1987) has noted, discourses of crime and criminals (be they 'muggers' in the UK or favela youth in Brazil), often arise at moments of deeper national anxiety. In Brazil I will argue, the new discourse of crime which consolidated itself with the beach-side muggings arose at such a moment of national concern with public safety and deepening anxieties about democratization. Nevertheless, despite the many similarities to media discourses elsewhere, it is essential to note how this neo-racist discourse on crime differs from ideologies of race in the USA and the UK and from prior Brazilian racial formations.

In his analysis of media reports on crime in the UK, Gilroy (1987) argues that mugging came to be a racially coded crime, symbolizing Britain's crisis and making it 'intelligible' in racial terms. The end result, Gilroy argues, is that 'anxiety about black crime has provided hubs for the wheels of popular racism' (p. 110). For Gilroy, popular racism provided the underlying discourse which then recoded muggings as racial crimes. Fear of 'mugging', in turn, reinforced racist discourses. Unlike in the UK, in the case of Brazil, the procedure was almost the reverse: the criminalization of non-white favela youth produced neo-racist ideologies of social difference and exclusion. Racist discourses (though they existed, even if they assumed different shapes than in the UK) did not racialize the supposedly criminal behaviour of poor youth. Rather, concern with crime, and the criminalization of poor youth, produced a new non-racist form of racism.

Unlike in England or the United States, Brazilian national identities are oriented neither around notions of racial exclusivity, nor around respect for the law. At least since the writing of Gilberto Freyre (1945), Brazil's national self-image has often extolled racial mixing and hybridity (though this ideology is by no means non-racist). Rather than being built upon racial exclusivity, Brazil's hegemonic racial discourse extolled the virtues of miscegenation. Notions about the importance of obeying the law also

differ from those in the USA and UK. Indeed, many have argued that Brazilian national identity is expressed in the '*jeitinho*' – dodging of universal rules by appealing to personal ties and social hierarchies – and in the artful improvisation displayed in Brazil's favourite pastime: football (Da Matta, 1991; Barbosa, 1992). The new non-racist racism which began to emerge in Brazil in the mid-1990s, though, marks a profound shift in attitudes about both racial and legal transgression: from extolling transgression and racial mixing, the new discourse of crime reflects deeper anxieties about patrolling boundaries and maintaining socio-racial divisions.

As Gupta (1995) has argued, while newspapers do not have a privileged relation to truth, they are nonetheless 'a major discursive form through which daily life is narrativized and collectivities imagined' (p. 385). Crime and violence are defined in newspaper and magazine accounts according to various independent, but not mutually exclusive, symbolic schemes. These interpretive schemes are used to define particular situations and individuals as violent and, in turn, are then available to the readers of these papers for their own use. Like felicitous speech acts (Austin, 1975), these news accounts do things with words: they help constitute that which they seek to describe – violence – and generate a climate of diffuse fear.

Since the return to democracy in 1985, Brazil has seen the rise of a notoriously aggressive and outspoken press. It would be unfair to fail to point out the wide variety of opinions and analysis offered in the *Jornal do Brasil* and *Veja*.³ And as Jock Young (2003) has argued, humans inevitably alter and reinterpret the information that they receive (see also Cohen and Young, 1981). Yet the heterogeneity of media depictions – a torrent of recommendations, calls for political reform, and outraged criticism – is organized according to several common tropes and repeatedly evokes similar images. Taken together, media images of the beach-side muggings and the army's invasion of Rio's favelas constituted key moments when a new discourse of crime and insecurity began to emerge. Key symbols such as the *marginal* or criminal, the *bala perdida* or stray bullet, the reified favela or squatter neighbourhood, and the *funkeiro* or funk-music fan, and central images – in particular the fear of transgression of social, spatial and legal boundaries – became available as a lexicon and grammar that residents of Rio can use to fashion their own narratives about crime and insecurity.⁴

VIOLENCE AND A CITY AT WAR

Rio's high levels of violence have led observers to say that the city is experiencing a situation similar to a civil war. According to a study by Viva Rio, for instance, in 1999 there were more deaths by firearms in the municipality of Rio than in Colombia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan or Israel-Palestine. The Viva Rio report concludes,

Despite the fact that Rio de Janeiro is not in a state of war, such extreme levels of armed violence are generating numbers of firearm-related deaths in the city of Rio de Janeiro that are comparable, if not greater, than the number of conflict-related casualties found in many major armed conflicts. (Dowdney, 2003: 117).⁵

The perception of Rio de Janeiro as a violent city is fed by the Brazilian media's almost compulsive comparison of Rio's murder rate to that of other supposedly 'violent' cities. According to a report in the *O Globo* newspaper in 2002, an example taken from a wide variety of such reports, Rio's homicide rate in 2000 was 45.5 per 100,000 residents, higher than Buenos Aires (5 per 100,000), New York (9) and Miami (23.3).⁶ The article notes that the city's young men are particular targets of this violence: in 2000 in the state of Rio, the homicide rate for 15 to 24 year-olds was 107.6 per 100,000 (*O Globo*, 10 May 2002).⁷

These statistics are often matched by tropes that picture the city as an urban war zone. For instance, news reports about shootings of cars on a highway that traverses the city's poor northern zone have taken to calling this part of Rio the 'Gaza Strip'. Maps that accompany such articles frequently divide the city into 'risk areas' and areas that are supposedly 'safe'. Figure 1 is a map from the *O Globo* newspaper article on 14 April 2004 and highlights nine 'risk areas' – all favelas – and their locations next to major routes through the city. The rest of the city, significantly, is depicted as the blank, 'normal' background to the 'risk areas'.

The *arrastão* and Operation Rio were pivotal moments in the construction of the idea of a city at war. But the images involved in these reports were not a radical rupture with the past and did not entirely substitute the older Brazilian 'prejudice of having no prejudice'. Rather, their power comes from how they draw upon earlier images of crime and criminality, and earlier discourses of urban difference. The key shift that begins with reporting on the *arrastão* and is consolidated in reports on Operation Rio, is from celebrating transgression and mixing, to fearing it; and the central objects of fear, and hence repression, are those who are depicted as violating older, more established patterns of cross-class and cross-racial interaction.

THE ARRASTÃO

The beaches have always belonged to all of Brazil, without any distinctions of skin colour (cor) or social class of the people who frequent them. They constitute, in reality, the centre stage for the display of Brazil's internationally celebrated racial democracy . . . Now it's just a question of mapping the problem in order to get to its origins, with the due punishment of those responsible, so that the beaches of the southern zone won't be transformed, by next summer, into territories that are off limits to decent citizens. (Jornal do Brasil, 1992e)

Hordes of criminals (marginais), like a plague of locusts, swept away everything in their path, in a wave of looting and vandalism that generated panic and despair for the people who had come to the beach to enjoy one of the last leisure options in this Marvellous City . . . On the weekends why don't they just shut down the bus lines that connect the poor suburban neighbourhoods to the southern zone? Why not block the tunnels [which connect the poorer northern parts of the city to the wealthy southern zone] on those days? (Jornal do Brasil, 1992i)

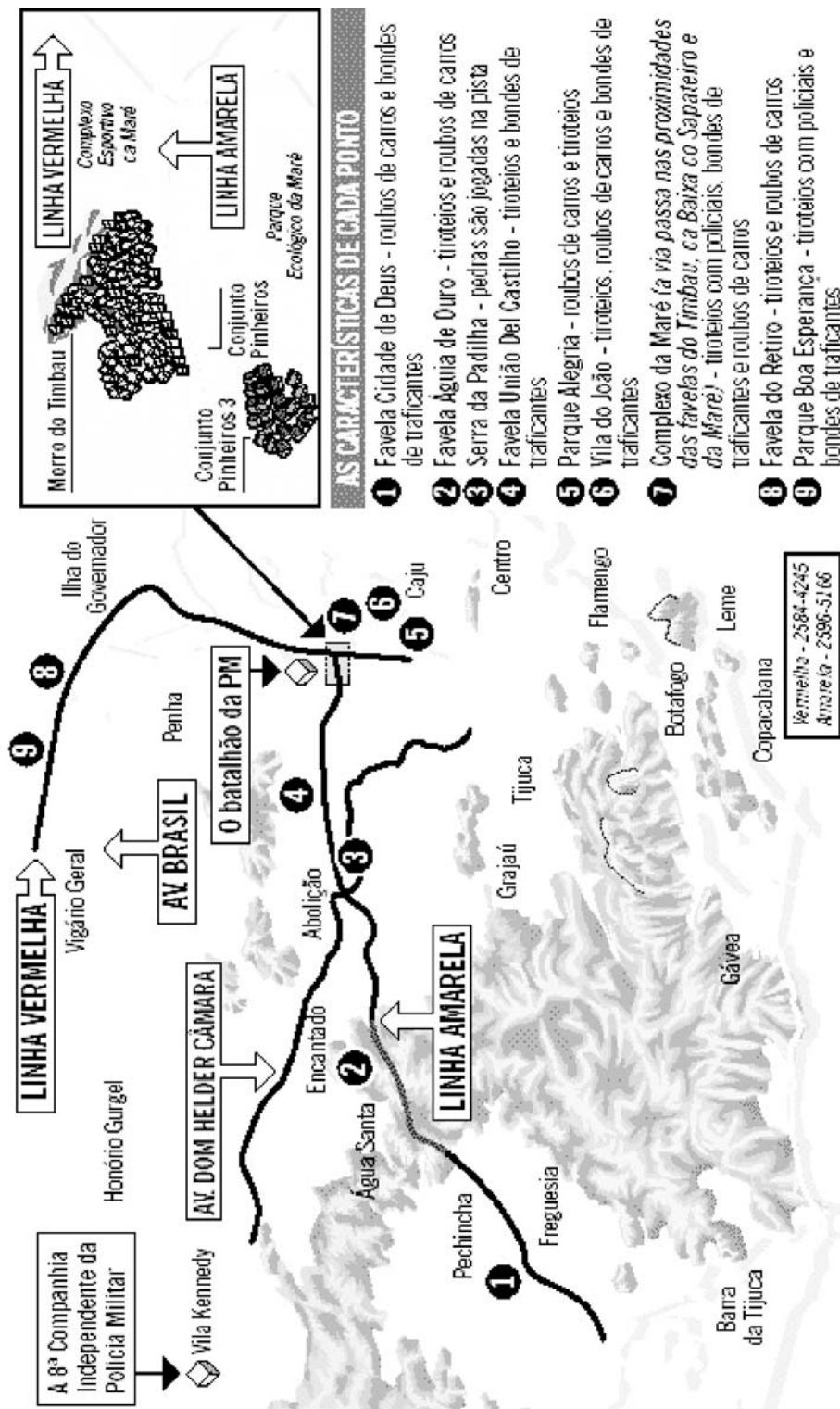


FIGURE 1 Map of Rio de Janeiro

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After an unseasonably warm Sunday in October 1992, Rio's newspapers reported that gangs of male teenagers had 'invaded' the beaches of the wealthy southern zone, carrying out mass muggings that caused the sunbathers to panic (see *Jornal do Brasil*, 1992a). The newspapers blamed gangs of *funkeiros*, or fans of Brazilian funk music, which came to the beaches on buses from neighbourhoods in the poorer areas of the city. Initial reports linked the gangs to Rio's main drug trafficking organizations, the Comando Vermelho and the Terceiro Comando (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992c). These reports raised the spectre of well-organized attacks by Rio's poor adolescents against their wealthier neighbours, implying a state of near-civil war.

In the hysteria of the reporting and of the reaction to the 'muggings', any evidence of attacks was irrelevant. The *Jornal do Brasil* (1992a) reported that the only injury it could confirm was a bystander who was hit in the head by a policeman. Only two robberies were reported to the police. Yet statements by the police that there was little crime met with outraged scepticism in the letters pages of the newspaper: why would anyone believe police statistics, one reader wrote, when no one who is mugged ever reports the incident to the police (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992i)? Thus the *arrastão* was a mass mugging without any official victims!

Though the news reports in the *Jornal do Brasil* backed off of the initial tone of hysteria, the coverage of the *arrastão* and the reaction of the public and state governments, crystallize several key ingredients in the news narratives of violence. Of central importance to these reports is how they coded geographical space. With the *arrastão*, the poor northern zone was depicted as 'invading' the southern zone.

Reactions were immediate. Rio's mayor stated that although the city's beaches were not the privilege of one group of people, there simply was not enough space on the beaches for everyone who wanted to enjoy their sand and surf (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992d). The mayor suggested that in order to preserve 'order' and avoid the 'accumulation of criminals who seek out the beach to cause chaos', it was necessary to limit the circulation of cross-city buses. Letters to the *Jornal do Brasil* were more explicit: the city authorities should cordon off the wealthy neighbourhoods during the weekend. Subsequent news reports followed this lead: maps in the *Jornal do Brasil* (1992h, 1992i) showed how the police planned to section off and control particular parts of the southern zone beaches.

The news reports also spent a lot of ink detailing exactly who the *funkeiros* were. The geographical concern about controlling the southern zone was mirrored by the attention given to the geography of the funk *galeras*, or 'crew'.⁸ Each gang, the *Jornal do Brasil* (1992k) explained, came from a particular neighbourhood, and had extensive loyalties to its location. Upon arriving on the southern zone beaches, the different gangs would occupy different parts of the beach, corresponding to inter-neighbourhood rivalry. This space was also depicted as militarized: the *Jornal do Brasil* showed which part of the beaches each *galera* occupied, then highlighted which drug organization corresponded to each funk *galera*. The violence, the newspaper argued, occurred when one *galera* tried to 'invade' the territory of another.

The news reports also described Brazilian funk music as exotic, foreign, dangerous and imminently new. Here the concern was with the breakdown of cultural structures.

Despite the interjections of anthropologist Hermano Vianna (1996) and interviews with several funkeiros, funk was presented as inherently violent. And although Brazilian funk has its origins in an appropriation of US black music by Brazilians in the early 1970s, funk was depicted as a new phenomenon; unlike samba and *pagode*, more traditional musical styles, funk seemed to break with older patterns of inter-generational and inter-class contacts.

A crucial article, in this regard, reported that a teenager had his stolen surfboard rescued from the funkeiros by a group of surfers from the Cantagalo favela (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992b). Cantagalo is a favela located within the southern zone, and surfers who lived there were presented as opposed to the 'foreign' funkeiros from the northern part of the city. The implication was that the Cantagalo surfers, unlike the funkeiros, took part in a shared cross-class beach culture of surfing, soccer, samba, and conviviality. The funkeiros were new, threatening, and did not take part in the traditional forms of relationships that structure the relations between the poor and the wealthy. Indeed, a newspaper report stated that surfers from Cantagalo would fight to defend their beaches against the funkeiros (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992e).

The causes and consequences of the *arrastão* were also represented according to class and racial schemes. As many observers have argued, racial categorization in Brazil is not organized according to the dichotomous white/black distinction in US racial systems, but around a spectrum of intermediary categories, such as *mulato* and *moreno*. Racial classification in Brazil also relies upon criteria such as facial features and hair texture, and can vary according to the perceived social class of the person being categorized, so that higher-class people are often placed into 'whiter' categories.

Newspaper photos of the funkeiros reflect the complexity of this classification: in most photographs funk fans are black or racially mixed, but non-white, with class markers – such as a lack of tee-shirts or 'poor' clothing – reinforcing racial schemes. In this way, race often operates as an unspoken, but key signifier. For instance, in the article about the teenager whose stolen surfboard was recovered by youth from Cantagalo, the surfer was not described in the article by any of the Brazilian racial terms for white. But a photo emphasized his light skin and blond hair, as a sign of his relative wealth and the relative poverty and dark skin of the favela youth who 'saved' his surfboard.

As this example indicates, in many of these stories, implicit racial codes functioned hand in hand with more explicit class and geographic codes. For example, on the weekend immediately after the *arrastão*, the police restricted the access of buses from the northern zone to final stops near Ipanema's Arpoador beach. Youths getting off the buses were stopped and searched, and those without tee-shirts or identity cards were temporarily detained (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992d, 1992g). The lack of tee-shirts, in particular, reveals the class codes at work, signaling that a lack of 'appropriate' clothing was taken as an indication of potential criminality and favela residence. These codes, though, were not always so covert. One article quoted a 16-year-old boy who complained that, after getting off a bus, he was searched by the police because of the colour of his skin while his lighter-skinned friends were left alone (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1992m).

Throughout these reports there is a constant oscillation between parallel discourses of non-racist democracy and freedom, on the one hand, and discourses about the need to segregate city spaces to protect public security, on the other. The beaches, for example, were open to all but order had to be maintained and everyone had to be aware of their 'proper' place. Rio's beaches were an example of racial democracy but not for everyone, and those who were black or poor had to be searched 'for their own good'. Throughout the reports, objects and bodies which broke the accepted geographic, cultural and racial categories were highlighted as dangerous and threatening. Figure 2 shows the cover from *Veja Rio*'s 18 October 1999 edition and depicts funkeiros as menacing and disorderly. The headline reads, 'Laying Siege to the Gangs: Who the Funkeiros Are, Why They Fight So Much at Parties and at the Beach, and How the Justice System Wants to Punish Them'.

Funkeiros, in this sense, were a triple threat. First, they violated Brazilian racial ideologies that exalt racial mixing while denying racism. Instead of listening to samba – often seen as the quintessential Afro-Brazilian music, mixing African-derived rhythms with European melodic sensibilities (see Vianna, 1995) – funkeiros listened to music that emphasized blackness as a positive, and exclusive, signifier. If funk refused incorporation into 'traditional' Brazilian music then, by implication, funkeiros were refusing traditional hierarchical racial categories. Second, they were from the northern zone and were 'improperly' on southern zone beaches, violating the unstated organization of social space. Third, they had no tee-shirts or documents, violating the attempt to restrict their presence to their homes in the northern suburbs and favelas.

OPERATION RIO AND THE FEAR OF LOST BULLETS

The situation in Rio has become so desperate because of a few of the city's peculiarities, among them the city's geography and topography. Situated along the seashore, the city does not have four directions in which to expand, and because the city is mountainous, criminals who live in favelas have been forced to live alongside wealthy neighbourhoods. (Veja, 1994a)

Crime (bandidagem) has come down from the hillsides to the concrete, and has now reached the seashore . . . At its base, it is the supreme omission of the state that has done away with the borders that divided the areas dominated by the drug traffickers from those of the southern zone, the stronghold of the middle class. (Veja, 1994b)

Tired of hearing shoot-outs and, not rarely, being caught in the line of fire of confrontations with traffickers, many residents of areas near favelas agree that it's best to experience a confrontation and resolve the problem, rather than to live with stray bullets – the second most frightening type of violence for residents of Rio, according to a survey conducted by the Instituto Databrasil. (Jornal do Brasil, 1994b)



FIGURE 2 *Veja Rio* cover with funkeiros

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The second key turning point in media discourses on crime was Operation Rio, the army-led 'occupation' of several of Rio's favelas. Operation Rio began after the police killed 13 residents of the Nova Brasília favela in October 1994. This killing brought to a head concern about the corruption and inefficiency of the state-controlled police. As a result, during Operation Rio, the federal Army assumed control over the state's police forces (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1994a; Human Rights Watch, 1995). The actions by the military, however, quickly shifted from responding to police corruption to acting against drug-dealing gangs in favelas.

The media-driven discussion and depiction of Operation Rio made clear elements of the discourse of crime that were less obvious in earlier reports. Whereas in reporting on the *arrastão*, dark-skinned youth on wealthy beaches were the 'threat', now favelas themselves came to be seen as dangerous. In this twist on the earlier fear of transgression, two elements of the narrativization of crime become even more apparent. First, fears of 'contamination' or corruption, and arguments about the need for 'prophylaxis', become more explicit. Favelas become associated, in a blanket manner, with drug trafficking (though only very few of the hundreds of favelas in Rio were occupied by the police), and they were reified as dangerous entities, spreading their 'tentacles' throughout the city.

Second, concerns with the supposed breakdown of older social relationships generate new markers of social stigma. Particularly significant here, is the prominence in news reports on favelas such as Borel and Mangueira, both associated with famous and 'traditional' samba schools, and, in the case of Borel, a favela located in a middle-class neighbourhood. From being favelas characterized by complex cross-class relationships – as middle-class people and favela residents came into contact through work, spatial proximity, or involvement in samba schools – these two favelas now come to be depicted as dangerous and sharply divided from, and even threatening to, their wealthier neighbours.

The new markers of social stigma, then, depend upon the spatial division of the city into favelas and 'regular' neighbourhoods, and the assumption that those who live in favelas are real or potential criminals. Favelas were seen as the 'targets' for military action, and news reports about the 'imminent' Army searches of the favelas (which took almost a month to execute) presented, once again, maps that divided up the city, showing the favelas as black marks topping the hillsides and separate from the supposedly 'peaceful' areas of the rest of the city (see for example, *Jornal do Brasil*, 1994h).

This concern with the control of social place also, not surprisingly, found an echo in the military's plans. For several days, the *Jornal do Brasil* ran stories on how the military was flying helicopters over the city to map the favelas. Mapping the favelas was the first step to imposing order, almost the first move towards transferring the favelas from the realm of 'nature' to that of 'culture'. Media reports represented the favelas as 'unorganized' areas of the city; as the earlier quote demonstrates, the favelas were seen as the 'inevitable' result of over-population and the vertical topography of Rio de Janeiro. These are academically debunked myths about the 'anomic' status of the favelas (see Perlman, 1976). But their persistence is intriguing.

Favelas, or unofficial squatter neighbourhoods, often located on hillsides close to Rio's downtown, were the objects of fear and fascination since they first emerged on Rio's urban topography in the late 19th century. Early images of favelas were often quite explicit in their racist imagery: press reports from the early 1890s, for example, often made reference to the 'persistence of Africa in the midst of civilization' (Abreu, 1994: 40). Decades later, favelas were often depicted through tropes that combined fears of rampant lawlessness with concern about public hygiene and disease. By the 1950s, the major discourse targeted against favelas and their residents aimed at encouraging capitalist discipline.

Yet images and policies towards these neighbourhoods were also deeply ambivalent. While favelas were often despised, they were just as often romanticized as the home of samba, carnival and 'traditional' Afro-Brazilian culture. Indeed, it was the possibility that favelas were imagined to offer for living outside the rigours of a capitalist economy that evoked both derision and envy. If favelas were a backward and black Other in the heart of Rio de Janeiro, they were also, in some ways, the city's 'true' Brazilian soul.

With the emergence of the new neo-racist discourse of crime, though, this ambivalence was radically altered. From having been depicted, in the 1930s as 'the musical laboratory of Rio, the great workshop of samba' (Zilberberg, 1992: 97), favelas came to be seen, by the time of the reporting on Operation Rio in the 1990s, as neighbourhoods at war. Crucially – and here again there are similarities to the issues raised by the *arrastão* – what was worrying was not the favelas themselves, but that they were 'spreading' into wealthier neighbourhoods, violating the traditional boundaries separating the poor and 'marginalized' from the wealthy.

A central symbol of the city at war, emphasizing the fear of the crossing of geographic and social boundaries, is the stray bullet (in Portuguese the *bala perdida*, or 'lost bullet'). Prior to, and during, Operation Rio, the *Jornal do Brasil* and *Veja* published several articles about individuals injured or killed when bullets fired by drug dealers went 'astray'. Many of these stories featured neighbourhoods caught between two feuding favelas, or wealthy neighbourhoods on the edges of favelas.

Veja magazine, for example, interviewed people who lived in high-rise apartments in the southern zone that abutted favelas. These people had taken various measures to avoid becoming victims of stray bullets, including placing bulletproof covers over their windows. The article reported that bullets had been found at an elementary school located 2 kilometres from the nearest favela. This was proof, the article stated, that the drug dealers' weapons 'do not respect distances' (*Veja*, 1994b: 64). Clearly these are very real concerns. Yet it is only bullets that stray outside favelas that attract attention and produce fear. Bullets that 'respect' boundaries and remain within the favela seem to attract little media attention.

As with the *arrastão*, these representations also drew upon racial and class codes. Along with the stray bullet, another central icon of urban violence in Brazil has become the hooded dark-skinned youth, usually pictured against a favela alleyway, holding a high-powered automatic weapon. In an article on crime in Rio, for example the magazine *Veja* (1994b) showed two dark-skinned youths, their faces covered by

white tee-shirts, one of them holding two 9mm pistols. Behind them is an 'anonymous' favela scene: a paved alleyway winding up a hill with homes perched on the steep hillside. The hoods and tee-shirts draw attention to the dark skin of the youths and they depersonalize them, making them anonymous and therefore that much more threatening.

The reporting on Operation Rio was also disproportionate to the actual operations themselves. For two months there was daily coverage of the operation. Yet the military only began to actually move into the favelas at the end of November. The army temporarily blocked the access to seven favelas, searching all who entered or left the neighbourhoods, and briefly occupied five of these seven. Army sweeps of the favelas resulted in very few arrests and the apprehension of minimal amounts of drugs and weapons. Yet as with the *arrastão*, the evidence was beside the point. The official military spokesman for the operations stated that the psychological effect was crucial: formerly out-of-bounds spaces had come under the authority of the state, manifested through the presence of the army (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1994e).⁹ Nevertheless, the *Jornal do Brasil* reported that drug dealers had merely moved their operations or temporarily ceased business. Operation Rio was simultaneously successful, and not successful; racially based, and yet not racist; singled out poor neighbourhoods, and yet was even-handed; was militaristic and yet 'peaceful'.¹⁰

POLICE AND THIEVES IN THE STREET: CORRUPTION AND THE STATE

In the same way that the favelas become mixed into the life of the city, the dividing line between law and crime is equally fragile . . . The promiscuous relationship between drug traffickers, the heads of the illegal lottery (bicheiros), the police and politicians set the stage for the decadence that has extended to other sectors of society. (Jornal do Brasil, 1994c)

President Cardoso Says That Rio's Police Are Contaminated. (Headline in the Jornal do Brasil, 1994c)

One of the aspects of violence that the press reports on Operation Rio highlighted was the extent of police involvement in corruption and crime. Though the main focus of the Army's operation was to combat crime in the favelas, the initial justification for intervention was corruption in Rio's police force. In this regard, newspaper articles continued to emphasize the dangers of 'infection' and the need for prophylaxis as it depicted the police as dangerously mixed with crime and the local authorities unable to protect the population.

Central to these representations were medical metaphors. The Rio de Janeiro police force were described as 'infected', and what was needed was a sanitation operation (a 'saneamento'). These metaphors, it is important to notice, not only naturalize corruption but remove any agency from the corrupt police officers themselves: they were 'infected'. As the favelas had 'invaded' the city, so had the line between law and

crime been blurred; the police had entered into what was described as 'promiscuous relations' with criminals.

Here there is a palpable sense of nostalgia about what was seen as a more peaceful, if not necessarily law-abiding, past. Rio de Janeiro's police force has long been abusive to average citizens, and corrupt. Holloway (1993) has emphasized that the police's role in the 18th and 19th centuries as a disciplinary force within the institution of slavery had a powerful legacy: 'much of what members of the police did falls under the rubric of disciplining agent, whose actions were intended not only to be the eyes of the state watching for those who broke the state's laws . . . but to discipline transgressors directly' (pp. 281-2).

Despite clear continuities, there are two crucial points at which this 'traditional' pattern is seen as having been broken. First, the codes that once governed relations between police and criminals are depicted as having broken down. News reports in *Veja* and the *Jornal do Brasil* highlighted how the police, 'seduced' by the easy money that comes with drug dealing, were led to extort money from drug dealers. It is common lore that Rio's police force long turned a blind eye (if it was accompanied by a full pocket) to 'traditional' forms of lower-class criminality such as the city-wide illegal numbers lottery. In reporting on recent corruption, though, it is as if the formerly amicable, but corrupt, relations between traditional criminals and the police have been broken by narrow, capitalistic greed that respects few 'traditions'. The traditional *malandro* (a rogue, or hustler) who lived outside the law but respected community norms and conducted himself with style and flair is replaced by the coldly calculating, and decidedly non-stylish, corrupt police officer or amoral drug dealer. In the process, the boundaries between the police and organized crime fall away.

Second, the press reports highlight the extent to which the police have recently failed to respond to the citizens' complaints about crime against their personal property (see *Jornal do Brasil*, 1994f). If the police often were, as Holloway (1993) argues, the strong arm of the elite, the main complaint here is that the police are failing to fulfil even this role. As Caldeira (2000) has argued, in this situation, police abuse of poor criminal suspects is tolerated – and perhaps even encouraged. The police, as mediators between the elite and the poor, are depicted as having fatally crossed the line and improperly associated themselves in 'promiscuous' relations with criminals.¹¹ Police corruption and the extortion and shooting of residents of the favelas are reported, but the emphasis is on corruption in Rio's police force. Favelado victims are examples of police corruption, not a story in and of themselves.

CORRUPTION AND TRANSGRESSION

In the news accounts about the *arrastão* and Operation Rio, the hinge upon which the discourse of violence turns is corruption, which can be seen as a synecdoche for a broader concern with the breakdown of earlier patterns of social order. The state, and particularly the police, are repeatedly depicted as unable to address the 'crisis' of public safety or, indeed, are described as complicit in it. A 'corrupt' Brazilian society is depicted

as no longer able to contain its own contradictions. I am aware that writing about corruption in Brazil threatens to place me in the dangerous (though shallow) water of comparing the developing world's supposed 'backwardness' with the more 'advanced' nations of the West: seeing their present as our past (Fabian, 1983).

Newspapers in Brazil do, in fact, sometimes argue that Brazil is not sufficiently 'modern'. But what is important to note is how corruption serves as a rhetorical device to construct images of 'the state', crime and criminals, and the public. As Gupta (1995) has argued,

The discourse on corruption turns out to be a key arena through which the state, citizens, and other organizations and aggregations come to be imagined. Instead of seeing corruption as a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations, I see it as a mechanism through which 'the state' itself is discursively constituted. (p. 376)

Newspaper reports about corruption not only discursively construct the state, but also construct 'the public' which is seen as responding to corruption. In the case of reporting on crime in Brazil, though, the process is even more complex: discourses about corruption in urban Brazil are about the state's inability, or unwillingness, to directly confront 'crime', thus leaving the 'citizen' defenceless. In this way, discourses of corruption help depict not only the state, but also 'crime' and the supposedly 'honest' law-abiding residents of Rio.

Persistent talk about corruption must also be seen in the context of broader concerns about the power, danger, and attraction of transgression and the breaking of boundaries. In this sense, corruption is only one aspect of a much broader media meditation on transgression and new objects (and subjects) which are seen as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966): poor dark-skinned youth on 'wealthy' beaches; crime-ridden shanty towns 'expanding' beyond their limits; and stray bullets which did not respect their 'normal' trajectories. As Mary Douglas's (1966) classic analysis argues, such transgressive objects and subjects are simultaneously feared and reviled, yet are also seen as powerful and dangerous.

In newspaper accounts, the *arrastão* symbolized the disruption of a Rio de Janeiro increasingly divided between the wealthy southern zone, on the one hand, and the favelas and poor neighbourhoods of the northern part of the city on the other. Operation Rio was largely the culmination of the fear generated in the minds of the middle and upper classes by the *arrastão*. The 'neo-racist' discourse that emerged was, in turn, the glue that connected two communities: the 'honest' citizens of Rio, on the one hand, and the dangerous 'criminals' on the other. If, as Young (2003) has argued, media depictions of violence were usually divided between depictions of 'legitimate' violence (acts carried out by the state) and 'illegitimate violence' (acts carried out by poor youth), Operation Rio signalled a key shift: the legitimate actors (the police and army) were now seen as deeply complicit with the 'illegitimate' actors (favela-based drug traffickers).

In this new discourse, older divisions between non-white and white, state and non-state, and legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, were seen as dangerously blurred. As the favelas and poor neighbourhoods came to be seen as threats that

defined containment, the sense that Rio was at war with itself grew (see Zaluar, 1995). As historian Paul Gootenberg (1999: 8) has argued, 'Naturalized notions of "good" and "bad" drugs and narcotics "control" . . . might well be about containing other things'. The question, then, is what new things and new forms of containment were being generated through the panic about bodies and objects 'out of place'? In this new discourse of anxiety and fear, itself a reflection of larger concerns of the breakdown of earlier patterns of social order, a new enemy, the *marginal* (or favela-based criminal), emerged as the main culprit.

CRIMINALITY AND 'RACISM WITHOUT RACE'

Since it is not white, my biotype is often confused with that of the criminal (marginal).
(Comedian Hélio de la Peña, quoted in Veja, 1994c)

As Hélio de la Peña's sarcastic comment highlights, in media reports about crime and criminality, criminals become a new neo-racial category. The target of both policing and media stereotypes is the *marginal*, or criminal, who occupies a position in the media's folk taxonomy of crime which resembles the position of the darker-skinned inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, but is somehow not quite the same. And, as with the racial coding of the *arrastão*, it is the 'not quite the same' which is crucial: persecution of marginals is not seen as equivalent to the persecution of non-whites, nor are crimes simply racially coded in a way that one element (blackness) necessarily implies the other (criminality). If criminality is the marked category, non-whiteness is a corollary, though unmarked, category.

Thus the fight against drug dealing is not depicted as 'racist', or even as organized around explicitly racial criteria. Instead, it is merely a sad coincidence that black and non-white youths, in the favelas or on the beach, share certain characteristics with criminals. In an indication of how police operations connect the parallel discourses of race and criminality, the president of the residents' association of the Dona Marta favela noted that during Operation Rio the Army 'searched blacks just as much as they did whites' (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1994g).

In all these cases, what is highlighted is not simply the phenotype of funk fans, or favela residents, or members of drug-trafficking syndicates, or the people who pull the trigger of the guns that fire stray bullets. Instead, what is repeatedly emphasized is how these 'dangers' violate formerly well-established boundaries and categories. Funk music fans listen to 'foreign', African-American inspired music, not to Brazilian samba, violating the symbolic incorporation of black and non-white Brazilians into a larger national culture. The favela grows beyond its 'natural' boundary with the middle-class neighbourhood. The drug traffickers no longer respect the borders that place them within the poor neighbourhoods, but threaten to expand their 'tentacles' throughout the city and into the realm of the state.

In all of these cases, the threat of transgression provokes a call for prophylaxis: for the federal army to impose 'order' in favelas and 'sanitize' the corrupt police, for bus

lines that bring funk fans to the beach to be closed down, for bullet-proofing to protect middle-class apartments from stray bullets. If the danger is that of the transgression of former social and urban boundaries, then the new marker of social stigma, in this case, is oriented around spatial criteria such as being in a favela or carrying the symbols of being a favela resident.

CONCLUSION

Rio de Janeiro no longer exists. This city is now a battlefield. We're all afraid. Going out onto the street is a risky adventure. Buses have become sites of robbery and murder. The sidewalks are similar, and also have shacks that house the miserable poor. Filth. Fights. Screams. Panic. Beatings. Crimes. (Jornal do Brasil, 1992j)

What we are living through is just a taste of how unprotected we are in this city that once was marvellous. If the authorities do not address the problem, it is time for the people to unite and demand security for all. (Jornal do Brasil, 1992k)

The Federal government has to take care of Rio, because Rio is the culture and expression of Brazil. We have to have specific policies for the city. (President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, quoted in Jornal do Brasil, 1994e)

I have argued that a new discourse on crime and violence emerged in Brazil in the mid-1990s. This media-fuelled discourse shares many of the features of what Balibar (1991) has termed 'neo-racism', especially in its repetition of images of the dangers of 'infection' and in the creation of new types of social stigma that do not draw directly from markers of racial difference. This discourse creates new affects (fear, panic), new notions of community (the 'honest' people attacked by the 'marginals' on the one hand, and the people who live in favelas on the other), and new practices (army mobilization and attempts to militarily 'contain' favelas).

These media reports feed off, and generate, a fearful and increasingly outraged audience. One of the more important ways that this fear is generated is through the naturalization and reification of crime. The *arrastão*, for example, was described in the press and in readers' letters as a 'wave', as a 'plague of grasshoppers'. Letters talked about how the increasingly warm climate 'produced' more violence and hostility. Similarly, favelas are naturalized as the inevitable by-products of Rio de Janeiro's topography, not the product of its social contradictions.

These naturalized forces are often endowed with a life of their own. Violence becomes an animate object, 'infiltrating' Rio and spreading its tentacles throughout the city. As violence and crime are reified, they become pervasive forces that cannot be contained, and those who actually carry out violent acts, be they the police or drug traffickers, are merely smaller segments of a larger entity. In this discursive space, the 'reality' of crime and violence is proved by its invisible pervasiveness. Media narratives are generated by particular events, but the narratives eclipse these empirical realities. Rio de Janeiro is dangerous not because of crime statistics, though these are plentiful,

but in spite of them; in fact, it is so dangerous that the statistics themselves are irrelevant.

This fear in turn provides a 'vocabulary of motive' (Young, 2003) which can be used to justify two further forms of violence: increasingly segregating social space and augmenting the control over the poor. The discourse of crime also generates a particular subject of police repression: the *marginal*, or criminal, and more broadly, residents of the city's favelas. In the process of this neo-racist subject formation, older racial ideologies do not disappear. But discourses of exclusion are organized primarily around images of criminality and barbarism that take place of residence and the fear of transgression as their main organizing criteria. Race continues to be an ingredient in images of criminality, but equally importantly, discourses about criminality and violence become one of the main ways that neo-racist ideas of social difference are constituted.

The discourse of crime is not monolithic nor does it go uncontested. Other discourses – especially ones that call for greater involvement of civil society in a transformative project that could create peace in the city – are available and often used. And residents of the city's favelas and poor neighbourhoods, the targets of this interpellative structure, often resist the discourse, consistently pointing out its 'hidden' racial component, and complaining about how violence and media stereotypes create them as permissible objects of violence and attempt to 'contain' them within limits of favelas. Fear and anxiety are also symbolic weapons that the city's drug traffickers have learned to use to their advantage, by defying their 'containment' to poor neighbourhoods (see Penglase, 2005).

And fear of violence and criminality are not the sole concerns of Rio's inhabitants. Far from this: fear is increasingly routinized, cordoned off and ignored as much as possible. Articles about drug violence in the favelas share equal space with stories about the latest international surfing championship, or reports on how full the beaches are. What is generated is a split image of the city itself: Rio is divided into two, the beautiful city of hills, blue sky and white beaches, and the dark underside of crime, violence and corruption (Ventura, 1994).

Perhaps so much has been vested in media reports about urban violence in Rio because the city is still seen as the quintessential image of Brazil; as former President Cardoso put it in the earlier quote, Rio is the 'culture and expression of Brazil'. Rio held out the promise of a tropical culture, one in which the moral sanctions of Europe could give way to a sensuous, pleasure-filled, mixing of races, sexes and classes. Rio was devoted to pleasure, to joy and longing, and to the possibility of transgression. Samba, carnival and the city's beaches, were zones where class, racial and gender lines could, and perhaps should, be crossed.

The reports about urban violence, though, consistently demonstrate how Rio has fallen from this state of grace. Urban violence has invaded paradise; the city of the graceful navigation of contradictions is now the city of the lost bullet. The crossing of what in Europe or the USA would be 'hard' lines of racial, class and gender difference, in a uniquely Brazilian pursuit of pleasure and a more 'flexible' national identity, is made difficult in an urban landscape with far less permeable boundaries. Transgressing the city's social and urban boundaries is now increasingly seen as dangerous (when

those transgressing boundaries are the wealthy) or inherently threatening (when the transgressors are poor and non-white).

Discourses about criminality do not only create new subjects (the '*marginal*'), emotions and practices, but as Gilroy (1987) has argued, they also act as symbols of a broader anxiety about national decline and crisis. The media's fixation on crime arose in Brazil in the 1990s, as the country was emerging from over 20 years of military dictatorship, was facing the economic free-fall of Latin America's 'lost decade', and as Brazilians debated the costs and benefits of globalization and neo-liberal reform. In this sense, the oddly nostalgic sense of anxiety that fills indignant letters to newspapers – decrying the end of a city 'that once was marvelous' – can also be seen as a reflection of larger anxieties about how Brazilian lives are being reshaped not just by crime, but by global economic forces that are making daily life more and more of a 'risky adventure'.

Notes

- 1 Violence is not merely imagined; its effects and consequences are quite devastatingly real. But the physical side of violence has often led to ignoring how violence is also culturally shaped.
- 2 The *Jornal do Brasil* (one of Rio's two main daily non-tabloid newspapers) and *Veja* (a national weekly news magazine) both target a middle- and upper-class audience.
- 3 Two other issues, which can only be touched upon here, are how the media is imbricated in larger political structures, and how it is part of a transnational flow of images of violence. I chose the *Jornal do Brasil* because at the time of these events, the owner of its main competitor, the *O Globo* newspaper, was engaged in a political battle with the governor of Rio.
- 4 I am drawing here from Foucault's (1970) archaeological approach: the aim is not to uncover the truth, but 'to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on what basis of historical a priori, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear' (pp. xxi–ii).
- 5 There were also more firearms-related deaths in Rio than in the USA: in California in 1999 there were 9.2 deaths by firearms per 100,000 residents; the same year in Rio, the rate was 46.5 per 100,000 (Dowdney, 2003).
- 6 In September 2000 alone there were 586 homicides in the state of Rio.
- 7 Less frequently mentioned is the uneven distribution of homicide rates. In 1996 the homicide rate for young men in the wealthy neighbourhood of Leblon was 12.7 per 100,000 while that of working-class Bangú was 120 per 100,000 (Cano, 1997).
- 8 Viana and others have shown that media reports on funk contain many inaccurate and problematic assumptions (Vianna, 1988, 1996; Herschmann, 1997; Cecchetto, 1998).
- 9 What was not reported was the army abuse of some favela residents. According to Human Rights Watch (1995), in the favelas of Borel and Chácara do Céu, troops tortured detainees with electrical current, near drowning and severe beatings.
- 10 Perhaps not coincidentally, the *Jornal do Brasil* called the operation a 'white intervention' (or '*Intervenção branca*') in Rio's security forces.
- 11 What was not reported is as crucial as what was: during November there was no press coverage concerning investigations into the police killings of 13 people in the Nova Brasilia favela in October 1994, and 21 residents of Vigario Geral in August of 1993.

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