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From the “Margins of the Margins” in Brazil: Black Women Confront the Racial Logic of Spatial Exclusion*

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FROM THE “MARGINS OF THE MARGINS” IN BRAZIL:
Black Women Confront the Racial Logic of Spatial Exclusion*

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“O MURO”

eu bato contra o muro
duro
esfolo minhas mãos no muro
tento de longe o salto e pulo
dou nas paredes do muro
duro
não desisto de forçá-lo
hei de encontrar um furo
por onde ultrapassá-lo

English translation:

“THE WALL”

I beat against the wall
hard
I scrape my hands on the wall
I try to jump over it from far away
I bang against the wall
hard
I don’t give up trying to force it
I must find a way
that I can get through it

(Oliveira Silveira 1982, translated by Keisha-Khan Y. Perry)

**Introduction**

In Brazil, marginalization of the Black community accompanied the abolition of slavery, while miserable living conditions made the Black man a “declassified” citizen (Abdias do Nascimento, 1989 [1979]). “O muro” (The Wall), a 1982 poem by Afro-Brazilian poet Oliveira Silveira, embodies various meanings for the black majority of Brazil who often face social and economic barriers. The term “muro” may allude to the thick glass ceiling in the job market, the
culturally biased university entrance exams, the police barricades, the gated communities, or even the man with the metal detector at the bank. The wall is a metaphor for understanding the gendered racial and class inequality that govern Brazilian cities. Finding a hole in the *muro*, or even attempting to climb over it, becomes a life-long struggle for black people, and even more so, for poor black women.¹ Moreover, breaking down the *muro* is potentially dangerous and is likely to lead to injury or even death.

In this essay, I focus on the actual wall that separates Gamboa de Baixo, a black coastal community located in the center of Brazil’s northeastern city of Salvador, from Morada dos Cardeais (House of the Cardinals), a 37-story luxury apartment complex built in 2005 by the world-renowned Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. Concrete walls, I argue, signify racial boundaries, legitimate and illegitimate ownership, and segregation. Walls evince exclusion as much as invoke inclusion. They result in the “production of included and excluded bodies” (Razack, 2002, p. 10). Conflicts surrounding the building’s construction and current challenges to maintaining positive neighbor relations provide a glaring example of the social, physical, and economic segregation between rich and poor, and black and white residential communities in Brazilian cities.

These conflicts must be understood within the context of current policy debates in Bahia surrounding the Direct Plan for Urban Development (Plano Director de Desenvolvimento Urbano, or PDDU), the plan for future urban development that many social movement activists argue privileges coastal and vertical construction (high-rises) for white middle- and upper-class Bahians. Although blacks have composed the majority of the coastal population since the slavery period, critics of the PDDU argue that the “*orla será para quem pode* (the coast will be for who can)” (*A Tarde* 3/15/07, emphasis added by author). In Bahia, the euphemism “*quem pode* (who
“can)” means those who can afford to pay for it. “Who can” are rich and white, while those “who cannot” are poor and black. Restructuring the city of Salvador threatens to expel poor black coastal communities from coveted lands along the Bay of All Saints as well as encourages self-segregation among Bahia’s white elite behind physical walls surrounding luxury condominiums.

Walls, whether physical or symbolic, I argue, push women and blacks to the margins in the urban landscape, making them disposable subjects. Walls are the first visible signs of the disposal of black coastal neighborhoods during urban redevelopment processes. In Salvador, the marginalization of black communities operates simultaneously with urban removal, which involves arbitrary demolition, forced expulsion, and displacement. A police presence is central to constructing, maintaining, and disposing of black marginalized landscapes and the people who occupy them. As Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007, p. 3) state, “black and poor subjects are disposable precisely because they cannot easily move or escape.” Black marginal subjects, then, are “declassified citizens,” who in the words of Abdias do Nascimento (1989), do not belong in the city center, and have no legal rights to the coastal lands.

From the vantage points of black women who live in Gamboa de Baixo and lead the ongoing neighborhood movement against land expulsion and for land and housing rights, this paper will argue that community relations during urban renewal and land redistribution throughout the city is more fraught with racial tension and violence than may be apparent. According to Kia Lilly Caldwell (2007, p. 135), black women, especially those living in the poorest urban neighborhoods, have traditionally been consigned to a “de facto status of non-citizens,” occupying not only the spatial margins of cities but also the socioeconomic margins as the poorest of Brazil’s poor (Carneiro 1999; Silva 1997). This study advances the assumption that geographic margins should be understood as deeply connected to gendered and racialized
socioeconomic status and marginality. This essay represents one aspect of my broader research concerning how black women’s resistance in Latin America and throughout the black Diaspora emerges from the urban margins, echoing Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2002, p. 16) claim that, “a geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice” and bell hooks’ (1991, p. 449) assertion that, “this space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult but necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.” I consider Gamboa de Baixo to be one such community of resistance and claiming urban space and land rights constitutes a key political issue of black feminist struggles in Brazil.

**Below the Asphalt**

For the government and the big businessmen, poor people and blacks cannot nor should stay in the center of the city, much less along the coast. You may not notice, but we live in a very coveted paradise (paraiso cobiçado), that is worth a lot to us and attracts the fat eyes of big businessmen, that want to earn rivers of money from our homes at the cost of our misery and suffering

(Gamboa de Baixo community meeting flyer, 1997, my translation).

Physical barriers such as walls, gates, fences, and bars on windows are not unusual in urban communities, nor are they unique to Brazilian urban design (Caldeira 2000; Davis 1992). Walls demarcate boundaries and protect private and public ownership of property. Two main wall structures define Gamboa de Baixo’s geography on the urban coast and have been the focus of modern urban restructuring in Salvador. On the western shores of Gamboa de Baixo lies the São Paulo da Gamboa Fort (built in 1722 and named a Brazilian heritage site in 1937). Historically, Salvador was known as a “fortress city,” constructed in the mouth of the Bay of All Saints to function as a military and commercial port linked to other Portuguese transatlantic routes (Castro, 2002. p. 210). It marked the expansion of the Portuguese empire and the
intensification of the transatlantic slave trade. Salvador was and is the capital of Portuguese America. The municipal government’s recent proposal to restore the São Paulo da Gamboa Fort is an effort to revive this colonial heritage (minus the memory of the terror and genocide of slavery and conquest) and to develop the coastal lands for maritime tourism. The restoration of historic monuments such as forts throughout Salvador, particularly in the center of the city and along the coastline, became the object of urban renewal during the mid-1990s (Perry, 2004, 2005). In most cases, the revitalization of these monuments has led to the forced removal of their black and poor residents on the land on or surrounding them. As Radhika Mohanram (1999, p. 150) says in The Black Body: Women Colonialism and Space, the predicament faced by marginalized communities during these historical revitalization processes exemplifies the ways in which “the colonizer is authorized to remake colonial spaces in the image of the mother country and to occlude extant, local history in the re-narrating and remaking of places.” Consequently, the state’s remaking of the history of the São Paulo da Gamboa Fort rendered invisible the history of the black families who have traditionally occupied the area as well as threatened the neighborhood’s permanence on the land. However, the Gamboa de Baixo community has resisted this displacement of local residents, some living inside the ruins of the fort, during and after the restoration process.
The construction of Contorno Avenue by the technocratic and military government in the 1960s has also shaped the neighborhood’s identity within the city and solidified socio-spatial hierarchies. The avenue segregated the Gamboa neighborhood; it created a literal wall between Gamboa de Baixo (Figure 1) and the upper-class neighborhoods of Gamboa de Cima (Upper Gamboa), Banco dos Ingleses (English Bank), Campo Grande, and Vitoria where the Odebrecht building is located. Gamboa de Baixo became a neighborhood “below the asphalt” of the avenue, and this moniker labels the neighborhood as a separate urban underworld marked by immoral and illegal activities and obscured from the public view by the modern Contorno Avenue.

Official descriptions of Gamboa de Baixo typically portray these poor neighborhoods as disorganized spaces where black people reproduce poverty through sloth and immorality, as the
following newspaper article demonstrates. Describing the Gamboa de Baixo slum that lived underneath the newly constructed Contorno Avenue in 1969, it claims that,

Dirty and shady men populate the place, a community formed by thieves, prostitutes, and the feeble-minded. The families who reside on the streets down at the bottom [near the ocean] complain about that sub-world [near the street]. One of the last victims of the marginais (criminals) was attacked in plain daylight. It was the case of an elderly woman, of approximately 70 years-old, injured by a crook. Before a man approaches, the women initiate a series of love invitations, almost dragging the victims by force to the malocas (huts/shacks)

(A Tarde, October 4, 1969, my translation).

In addition to exposing some internal class tensions and biases, this journalist declared the homes in Gamboa de Baixo as unfinished, unsafe, and unhygienic. In particular, the article condemned the women of the neighborhood as active participants, grabbing unsuspecting victims and dragging them into their supposed submundo (urban underworld) underneath the street.

Many Bahians I have talked with have claimed not to know where Gamboa de Baixo is located while simultaneously claiming to know that the neighborhood is violent, drug-ridden, and full of prostitutes, or a place where marginais (criminals), both male and female, of the worst kind live. Thus, in the public imagination, Gamboa de Baixo is both visible and invisible, in plain view and out of view, a socio-spatial divide created by the avenue that serves as a wall above the predominantly black neighborhood.

Until the 1990s, and before the fruits of the political struggle led by a grassroots black-feminist movement had ripened, the neighborhood “below the asphalt” was forgotten, abandoned by city officials, and lacking in basic services such as potable water, electricity, and sewage removal systems, which were standard features due to urban development throughout the rest of the city. When the municipal government proposed to forcible removal of the local black population to create a recreation park around the São Paulo Fort, the neighborhood suddenly
became hyper-visible, figuratively and literally. Neighborhood mobilization against relocation threatened the modernist design aspirations of urban architects and engineers, who discussed the development potential of the coastal lands without the participation of local residents. State agencies used the underdevelopment and supposed marginality of the area to justify a massive moral, social, and physical “clean-up” and “renewal,” initiative - a strategy used to remove poor black residents from the Historic Center and Agua Suja neighborhoods previously (Collins, 2008; Dunn, 1994; Espinheira, 1989; Filho, 1999). Like these displaced urban populations, many Gamboa de Baixo residents share a collective memory of living on the coast and in the city-center since the colonial period.

**The Fortresses Within**

As black women in Gamboa de Baixo have fought to stake their claim to the land below the asphalt and on the land around the historic fort, another wall has emerged as a popular feature of neighborhood housing design. In recent years, the number of homes in the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood with enclosed verandas and front door *grades* (metal bars) or with walls around their perimeters has increased significantly. For some local residents, the walls and the *grades* protect them from both internal and external threats, specifically from the drug traffickers and the police who many residents believe contribute to the increase in violent crime and a create generalized culture of fear.

One longtime resident, Simone, who is currently completing construction on a large two-story house, decided to build concrete walls around the perimeter of her property. I joked with Simone during a recent tour of her future home, “Are you building a mansion or a fort?”
We both laughed and blurted out simultaneously, “A Forte da Simone (Simone’s Fort)!”

“You wait until I put broken glass on top of it,” she said still laughing, “not even the rats will want to climb over that wall!”

However, Simone was less worried about the rats; her concerns about the possibility of theft, the use of her backyard as an escape route for police fugitives, and the fear of gunfire flying through the atmosphere, were very real. The need for the wall as a barrier became even more crucial when during this past January during a police raid, when the police fired directly into the unfinished concrete walls of the home’s interior. “Imagine if the house had been finished and we had been living inside?” Simone said.

I could not imagine. I touched the hole where one bullet had lodged into the wall. “It looks like you’ll need a concrete roof too.”

Rubbing her thumb against her index and middle finger, a local expression to signal that she will need money for that, she nodded, “certainly.” For Simone and many of her neighbors, the wall is a matter of life or death.

Urban theorists have given little attention to precisely how poor people perceive fear and how they are also building “fortresses” and other mechanisms of security around themselves. Fortresses are no longer limited to the colonial past, modernist urban designs, or to elite residential communities. The assumed safety of a small, everybody-knows-your-name seaside community has disappeared. The focus on walls and grades within the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood illustrates the fear that poor black people experience, but also shows that in this instance, residents demonstrate their preference to stay put and not translate that fear into what development agents have argued is the “inevitable removal” of its residents from that area of the city. Gamboa de Baixo residents, albeit with limited resources, continue to build homes and the
security mechanisms necessary to protect them as a way to remain on the urban land where they have claimed property rights. In other words, they build the walls and the grades as a way to contain themselves as a practice of self-inclusion on the coastal lands rather than exclusion from it; they do not envision living anywhere else.

**Spatial Entitlement and Exclusion**

[T]he territoriality of power is key to understanding racism (Gilmore, 2002, p. 22). Residents’ views of the walls of the São Paulo da Gamboa Fort, Contorno Avenue, and the walls of Gamboa de Baixo offer insights into how residents view the wall that now divides Morada dos Cardeais and the Gamboa de Baixo communities. For anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2000), Brazilian cities such as São Paulo have become “cities of walls” where “residents from all social groups argue that they build walls and change their habits to protect themselves from crime” (p. 297). In residential high-rises, the basic elements are “security, facilities, services, and location” (p. 257). Caldeira also argues that, “fortified enclaves confer status. The construction of status symbols is a process that elaborates social differences and creates means for the assertion of social distance and inequality” (p. 258). These “fortified enclaves” exemplify the modern ideal of city living. Urban theorist Mike Davis (1990, pp. 225-226) similarly describes Los Angeles as a “fortress city,” where magnified perceptions of the threat of violence from the so-called “criminal underclass” (young black men and poor Latino families) dominate the white middle-class imagination. This fear mobilizes middle-class communities to self-isolation in residential “fortresses” equipped with security systems aimed at keeping out the criminal poor. This fear has less to do with the crime rates than with status, for as Davis argues, poor people in cities worry just as much about violent crime as do rich people (p. 224). Furthermore, in cities such as
Salvador, black women like Simone in Gamboa de Baixo, head their households and lead social networks in their communities, as well as serves as the main decision makers about housing design, which increasingly incorporates physical forms of protection.

A low wall constructed by the Archdiocese of Bahia, the previous landowner, existed on the eastern perimeter of Gamboa de Baixo before Odebrecht bought the property. Odebrecht extended the height and width of the wall before the construction of Morada dos Cardeais even began in 2003. Gamboa de Baixo residents, who subsequently lost significant access to space in their backyards, greeted the wall with suspicion. The previous wall of the Catholics did not extend to the oceanfront, while the new Odebrecht wall made growing vegetables and fruits on the land impossible, and one Gamboa home was demolished during the process of building it. The extension of the wall from Contorno Avenue to the beach was just the beginning of the numerous problems that surfaced as a result of Odebrecht’s acquisition of the coastal lands for construction of the luxury apartment community.

Figure 2: Photo of the eastern perimeter of Gamboa de Baixo and Morada dos Cardeais taken by author.
As Odebrecht completed construction of Morada dos Cardeais in 2005 (Figure 2), the international religious community paused to mourn the death and commemorate the life of the revered “people’s pope,” John Paul II, whose death added further historical significance to the land and the former house of the Catholics situated on its grounds that had housed some of Brazil’s most important cardinals for almost a century. The pope had also visited the home in 1980 and 1991. When urban architect Diogenes Rebouças designed Contorno Avenue, he opted not to demolish the historic mansion and built a viaduct underneath it. The house still remains on the land, and the historical site was restored as part of the new apartment complex. Ironically, Gamboa de Baixo activists negotiated with the Catholic Church for several years for ownership of the part of the land their community occupies. The archdiocese never transferred collective ownership to the community, and instead sold the former Catholics’ house and the land that included an area where Gamboa residents continue to live. This transaction between the Catholic Church and Odebrecht occurred without the knowledge of the community, exemplifying years of strained relationships between the community and the Archdiocese of Salvador.

Ana Cristina, a Gamboa de Baixo activist critical of the Church’s history of land usurpation, affirmed that with the construction of the new wall, Odebrecht physically reinforced what existed symbolically. Though the previous wall hardly posed a barrier to residents, and the cardinals who resided inside had no security mechanisms at their disposal, the previous wall also served as a marker of spatial and social separation between the elite house of white cardinals and the poor and black Gamboa de Baixo fishing community. As an Odebrecht representative confirmed (personal communication, 2004) during meetings with Gamboa de Baixo activists, “Priests don’t sell anything for cheap.” This statement supports community activists’ claims that the land sale to the corporation contradicted popular and global discussions of the Church’s
defense of marginalized black and indigenous groups in Brazil. In this sense, a wall is a wall is a wall, and Ana Cristina asserts that although they previously moved freely about the coastal lands, as their black and indigenous ancestors had done prior the Church’s occupation, without land titles, they now have little claim to it. The wall remains a constant reminder of this lack of collective entitlement, a crucial exclusion from property rights that James Holston (2008, p. 113) argues has “fatal consequences for Brazilian citizenship.”

The women of the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood association used media reactions to the luxury development project to force Odebrecht to make important decisions regarding land distribution. Local journalist Mary Weinstein (A Tarde, August 4, 2004) published a controversial article entitled, “Realidade Concreta da Gamboa (Concrete Reality of Gamboa),” highlighting the problems surrounding the construction on Contorno Avenue and projecting the problems the Odebrecht building would pose for Gamboa de Baixo residents, such as land usurpation and the privatization of the local beach. Weinstein’s critiques reflected ongoing debates about the government’s urban development practices as outlined in the current Direct Urban Development Plan, which in addition to privileging the city’s minority white elite also compromised the environmental stability of the land. She also questioned whether the coastal lands could permanently support a 37-story concrete structure and whether Odebrecht could build the pier without much destruction to the vegetation, the bay’s ecosystem, and the land on which Gamboa de Baixo residents lived.

During these debates, Odebrecht never publicly suggested that they had planned to displace the Gamboa de Baixo population from the land, but representatives admitted that as a result of the political organization of the neighborhood, they had to change some of their original construction plans, which had included the destruction of several more Gamboa de Baixo homes.
However, the erasure of Gamboa de Baixo in the marketing information that Odebrecht distributed to potential wealthy buyers piqued the interest of neighborhood activists. In an enlarged photograph of the future building that spanned four pages in the booklet, Odebrecht deleted some of the area where Gamboa lies and replaced most of the neighborhood with an image of a flush green landscape that includes the São Paulo da Gamboa Fort and the restored homes of the Solar do Unhão neighborhood. As one resident stated, “the design plans show all of this full of trees. When the buyers come to live here they will see that it is not so green” (quoted in Weinstein, 2004). The Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood is also typically visibly absent from the “revitalized” landscape in state urban development brochures. For Gamboa de Baixo residents, the marketing materials represented a state-supported ideal for the land, a place for the white elite to live and play without black and poor neighbors, which reflects broader urban development efforts to “cleanse” the area of this “marginal” population. This exemplifies the contradictions of urban redevelopment evident in a statement made by state agents during negotiations with Gamboa de Baixo residents in the mid-1990s: “Gamboa is the face of Bahia,” but “it is not an area for black and poor people (pretos e pobres) to live” (personal interview, January 2007).

For Gamboa de Baixo activists engaged in a decade of struggle against forced removal, and for land rights and participatory urbanization, Morada dos Cardeais meant the heightened threat of displacement of traditional black fishing colonies from the coast. “Gamboa de Baixo is on very delicate line [in terms of public space],” one activist affirmed in a meeting with Odebrecht representatives. Another added, “We have to be alert. Alert to everything, because….they [the State] have the revitalization of the Commercial District; they have the revitalization of the Historic Center. Gamboa is in a dangerous zone. And just because it’s
Odebrecht doesn’t mean we are not going to think about these things… We know what has been the history of residential removal in the violent form that we have had to deal with it” (quoted in Weinstein, 2004). The Gamboa de Baixo community is effectively under siege from all sides. Both state and private urban developers envision a lush green landscape below Contorno Avenue, the restoration of a fort accessible from the Bay of All Saints, and the consumption of coastal luxury. In fact, concrete walls (and not black people) have now become part of the “ideal” natural coastal landscape.

**Visibility and increased surveillance**

With the introduction of infrastructural services and mechanical transports, there is no longer the necessity of the constant presence of poor people and blacks, now that it only interferes with the idealization of the “white” city and its European appearance


In the apartments of Morada dos Cardeais reside some of Bahia and Brazil’s wealthiest people, and even boasts a celebrity in Axe music singer Ivete Sangalo, who lives in the penthouse. This elite group of residents cannot only afford to live there, but they can also afford to purchase the goods necessary, such as yachts, to take full advantage of the available amenities, such as the modern pier accessible by cable car. Protection by sophisticated security systems installed on the property represents a necessary aspect of the luxurious lifestyle. In addition to working inside the building, armed security guards work on the pier 24 hours a day to regulate the approximation of Gamboa de Baixo residents. However, local residents have resisted any attempt by Odebrecht to privatize the waters around the pier.
These security guards discourage any type of physical contact with the piers by using buoys to demarcate their territories within the public waters. As Angela, a professional diver who is a board member of the neighborhood and fishermen and fisherwomen’s associations, recounted, “they think that we are pirates, that we will jump out of the water to rob them, and then row our boats back home” (personal communication, 2003; Figure 3). Angela motions the
act of frantically rowing, as she tells me of the frequency of violent encounters between these
security guards and Gamboa de Baixo fishermen and women, which expresses what she
considers to be the “ridiculous,” yet systemic criminal assumptions about black men and women.
Angela also tells me the story of how a yacht almost killed her and another female diver when
boaters ignored them in the water. As many residents have affirmed, they feel increasingly
displaced from the previously unregulated land and waters of the bay by the white elite, who act
as if they are the only ones entitled to it. These sentiments of entitlement are widespread enough
for these luxury condominiums to invest significant resources into keeping Gamboa de Baixo’s
black residents out of public waters. Teresa Caldeira (2000, p. 4) writes, “privatization,
enclosures, policing of boundaries, and distancing devices create a public space fragmented and
articulated in terms of rigid separations and high-tech security: a space in which inequality is an
organizing value.” As the experiences of Gamboa de Baixo residents with privatized policing
show, gendered, racial, and class inequality govern “fortified enclaves” in Bahia (Caldeira,
2000)—and, it might be argued, in other cities such as Miami and Los Angeles. Of course, no
state security mechanisms are in place to regulate these kinds of illegal private security practices.

The Bahian elite’s preoccupation with security in this coastal region is the direct result of
public stigma of violence attached to Gamboa de Baixo, and poor black neighborhoods in
general. As activist Ana Cristina states, “everyone ‘below Contorno Avenue’ is considered
criminal” (personal communication, 2004). The media is the primary contributor to this negative
view of the neighborhood when they report crimes committed along Contorno Avenue. If a
crime occurred in a neighborhood above Contorno Avenue, they report that it took place in
Gamboa de Baixo and that Gamboa de Baixo residents committed it. For example, a murdered
man was found more than a kilometer from Gamboa de Baixo in 2004, but the newspaper
reported he was a victim of criminal activities in the neighborhood. The man neither was a resident of Gamboa de Baixo nor was his death related to anyone in the neighborhood. As one resident claimed at the time, “a man dies in Campo Grande, what does that have to do with Gamboa? Why do we have to pay the price for crime in the entire city?” As a newspaper reporter recently affirmed, “all black people continue being perceived as potential bandits or drug dealers without justification or explanation” (*A Tarde*, June 9, 2008).

Gamboa de Baixo residents believe that the construction of Odebrecht’s wall and the installation of security apparatuses demonstrate the broader public’s disparaging sentiments about their community and the people who live there. As some residents have stated, part of the ongoing political struggle is to prove that “somos gente também (we are people too)” (quoted in Weinstein, 2004), and that in Gamboa de Baixo, there are people who work and raise healthy families in an environment they have enjoyed for generations prior to the white elite’s urban redevelopment interests. In fact, poor blacks have always occupied coastal lands, when those areas of the city were considered undesirable places for the elite to build their homes. As another resident affirmed, “every one has to live her life. If they are *barões* (barons or rich boys) and just defend their rights and want everything to themselves, that’s not going to work. They have to think about others too” (quoted in Weinstein 2004). Gamboa residents, it appears, do not plan to leave the land, and are demanding that their neighbors share the land, the beach, and the waters of the Bay of All Saints. The “barons,” as Gamboa de Baixo residents refer to the wealthy residents of the high-rises, may want everything for themselves, including the *paraíso cobiçado* (coveted paradise) of the coast, but as Gamboa de Baixo community leaders and local residents reassure them, “that’s not going to work.”
Residents’ demands to share the “coveted” coastal landscape have meant that, despite the private security and walls, the wealthy white residents of Morada dos Cardeais must also grapple spatially with daily state military policing in their neighborhood. In fact, some Gamboa de Baixo residents believe this increased policing is directly related to residential class and racial shifts in the coastal landscape (Weinstein, 2004; personal communication, 2008). The public police serve to protect not Gamboa de Baixo residents, but the elite who live around them. Some local residents wonder whether these white elites have not come to expect public police reinforcement in the area in addition to the private security they can afford.

Many Gamboa de Baixo residents now view violence, specifically police violence, as a spectacle for residents of Morada dos Cardeais, who look down from the 37 stories onto the residents who are living the systemic violence. In essence, both communities experience policing differently: in Morada dos Cardeais, the wall and private police protect their residents, while in Gamboa de Baixo, “fortress homes” like those of Simone cannot isolate them from the violence of state military police forces. Thus, the wall alone does not account for the spatial difference between the communities; the actual height of the Odebrecht building becomes an inherent geographic difference in how the two communities view each other. In everyday life, especially during moments when ordinary policing in Gamboa de Baixo become extraordinary events, Morada dos Cardeais residents enjoy a unique view from above. Thus, the act of witnessing violence is shaped by marked spatial inequalities in the landscape. From below, Gamboa de Baixo residents can never access the everyday lives of those who live above them in the high-rise apartments (unless they work as domestic workers or doormen, but no Gamboa de Baixo resident works in Morada dos Cardeais) nor can they experience the privilege of spatial protection.
Gamboa de Baixo residents cannot climb over the wall, whether real or imagined.

This spatial difference in protection became evident during the December 2007 violent police raid and the first violent police raid of 2008 in January (Figure 4). Police operations in Salvador’s black and poor communities increase before carnival festivities in the city. Known as “operação pente fino,” or “operation fine-tooth comb,” the police comb these black and poor neighborhoods for so-called criminals whom they perceive to pose a threat to the lives of tourists who flood the city. These actions are not unlike those of New York City’s “zero tolerance against crime” policies under the Giuliani administration or those in Mexico City or in Rio de Janeiro neighborhoods before 2007’s Pan-American games, which led to the massacre in the Complexo do Alemão (Smith, forthcoming). M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), Joy James (2000), Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007), João H. Costa Vargas (2005), among many others, have written on the globalization of aggressive policing and the dehumanizing impact on African descendant populations. In Brazil, as police raids on black communities led to
increased incarceration rates, black movement and human rights activists increasingly criticized state proposals to keep poor blacks in flotation prison tanks in the middle of the Bay of All Saints until after carnival in February.

In this context, these December and January police actions are examples of the everyday police force in Gamboa de Baixo, but as in the case of the “floating prisons,” they also represent extraordinary moments in urban policing. On December 28, 2008, local residents witnessed the unprecedented use of helicopters flying low around the perimeter of Gamboa de Baixo with officers rappelling out of helicopters and onto the local beach, which some residents claimed, “appeared like a scene out of a war zone” (personal communication, 2008). It was the first time that elite SWAT teams, equipped with firearms and machinery were sent to, as residents imagined, “demolish and to eliminate (kill)” (personal communication 2008). In this type of urban war, the police “shoot first, ask later” (personal communication, 2008). Morada dos Cardeais residents watched the “war” from the safe confines of their balconies.

The January 4 police raid was another such scene from the “war zone.” Speculations about the entire operation dominated conversations within the neighborhood for days afterwards. Bullets penetrated the roof of one elderly resident’s house, who later recounted to neighbors and the news media that, “the police arrived here firing gunshots. I had to hide underneath the bed” (A Tarde, January 5, 2008). Her dog had hid with her. From the walls of Contorno Avenue to the walls of the fort, the neighborhood, all agreed, had been “terrorized.”

For Gamboa de Baixo residents, the increased presence of luxury apartment communities on the coastal lands of Salvador directly leads to the increased public policing of the area. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1998, p. 51) points out that blacks’ heightened “visibility can bring increased surveillance.” Classed racist-sexist ideologies mark them as “not quite”
legitimate” citizens whose lives are expendable (McKittrick, 2006, p. 62). Black Brazilian sociologist and feminist militant of the black movement Vilma Reis (2008) wrote a few days after the January operation in Gamboa de Baixo that, “in Salvador, second largest black city on the planet, where to be black is still synonymous with dangerous, undesirable, out of place, and fundamentally, descartável (disposable),” violence against poor black people has become routine, and for some, an expected element of urban governance (see also Maravalho, 2008). Black neighborhoods such as Gamboa de Baixo are portrayed as fora de controle (out of control) morally, socially, politically, and spatially. Many residents feel they are being unfairly criminalized, such as Nicelia, a 28-year-old black woman, who often says, “não sou marginal,” to insist that she is not a criminal. As another resident, Camilo, explains how his experiences with police abuse and the general criminalization of Gamboa de Baixo connect with the police’s racialization of local residents:

It has to do with the fact that I am black, that I live in a neighborhood like here that has its highs and lows, negatives and positives. Here has a good side and a bad side…The negative side is the drugs, and they think in their point of view that everyone that lives here have some involvement with drugs, something that is not true. Because they are many pai de família (family men) hard-working, like they have everywhere, even in the big mansions of rich neighborhoods

(personal interview, December 2003).

Contrary to public perceptions that the police are doing their job of cleansing the area of criminals as a necessary part of the process to socially improve the urban landscape, local residents understand that they are undeserving of such inhumane forms of violent treatment; the entire neighborhood is being marginalized, criminalized, and destroyed simultaneously.
The Racial Logic of Spatial Exclusion

This perspective bridges the theoretical gap between analyses of the violence of unequal urban development and the violence of urban policing. By emphasizing the overlap between the two processes, I encourage readers to think about the emergent need for black social movements in Brazil and elsewhere to combat the image of “collective pathology” (Gilmore, 2002) while struggling to gain access to vital urban resources such as housing, land, and basic sanitation. Gentrification, urban redevelopment, urban revitalization, urban renewal, whatever the term we use to describe these modern urbanization processes, reveal that for black communities, urban clean-up campaigns can be radically exclusionary and dangerously violent (Dávila, 2004; Hoffman, 2008; Pinheiro, 1999). In Brazil, the naked truth of urban renewal exposes the contradictions of modernity: the national desire to align Brazilian cities with other global cities such as Paris, New York, and Frankfurt, and the growing black urban population who must fight against state and private developers to belong as landowners and citizens in a robust new and developed city (Pinheiro, 1999). The black struggle for citizenship constitutes an urgent demand for racial inclusion in development, expanding discourses and practices to take urban grassroots anti-racism strategies seriously.

One concern of my ongoing ethnographic research has been to examine how the modernizing project in Salvador is a racial project\(^5\) posing damaging effects for poor black neighborhoods caught in between their own desire for improved living conditions through inclusive socio-economic development and urbanization and the bulldozing private and public enterprises that seek to forcibly remove them. I assert that urbanization practices illustrate the racial and gender consciousness of the State and the ways in this form of race-based knowledge determines socio-spatial ideologies and concrete actions. This recognition exemplifies what João
Costa Vargas (2004) terms the “hyperconsciousness/negation of race dialectic,” which defines social relations in Brazil. Vargas claims that, on the one hand, most Brazilians negate the importance of race in structuring institutions, shaping social relations, and determining the distribution of resources and power. On the other hand, Brazilians are “acutely aware of racial differences and utilize those to (often tacitly) justify, think about, and enforce behavior and social inequalities” (6). This hyperconsciousness/negation dialectic is useful in understanding how Bahians are simultaneously hyperconsciousness of the racial aspects of urbanization policies while also negating the salience of race in the new socio-spatial order. However, the black communities that are most negatively affected by the forced displacement from the “better” parts of the city understand that gentrification shapes racial, class, and gender landscapes of the city. As a Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood association activists wrote in a press release more than a decade ago, and which still has political saliency as the Direct Urban Development Plan advances and more buildings like Odebrecht are constructed around them, “the dissemination of this culture of exclusion…principally towards the black and poor population, distances it farther and farther from the so-called privileged areas of the city” (p. 1996).

For Gamboa de Baixo, the new building further threatens not only the neighborhood’s permanence, but also the livelihood and collective safety of its resident black majority. Morada dos Cardeais is a private development project that Gamboa de Baixo activists consider to be part of ongoing state-sponsored efforts to revitalize the coastal lands along the Bay of All Saints for tourism and luxury real estate. Such development further reproduces gendered racial and class hierarchies, heightens private and public security in the region, and contributes to the criminalization of the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood. Salvador’s “racial state’s aggressively
punitive stance” (Gilmore, 2002, p. 21) on combating urban crime has created a state police apparatus that “formalizes inequality” (p. 21) and deepens racist justifications to demolish this poor neighborhood and relocate its black residents to the distant periphery of the city. The context of daily acts of violence as well as systemic police operations signifies the “policy effect of producing” (p. 21) entire neighborhoods as marginal and criminal. Policing black neighborhoods such as this one represents not only a politics of spatial containment, but also a politics of absolute spatial exclusion in the simultaneous State actions of demolition and police abuse. By examining policy-driven misconceptions of Gamboa de Baixo and its residents as inherently violent, unhygienic, and morally bankrupt, we are better able to understand how enduring public gendered racist images of both black women and men shape the politics of disposability and demolition during urban renewal processes. In this dominant view, Gamboa de Baixo, as a whole, is not just dangerous, but also it does not belong on the coastal lands; in essence, it threatens urban progress.

**Conclusion: Spatial Justice**

I have been locked by the lawless.
Handcuffed by the haters.
Gagged by the greedy.
And, if I know anything at all,
it’s that a wall is just a wall and nothing more at all.
It can be broken down


On February 29, 2008, I received news from Salvador about the disastrous floods of the night before. Muddy water had invaded the home of neighborhood activist Adriano, and another
activist Ana Cristina had been trapped in an overcrowded bus on her way home from the university. When she arrived in Gamboa de Baixo at around 2 a.m., wet and exhausted, she was summoned to the eastern side of the neighborhood that shares the wall with Morada dos Cardeais. A landslide at the apartment complex had torn down a portion of the concrete wall. When a young woman had heard the wall collapsing onto her house, she jumped on top of her children to protect them. While her children escaped unharmed, she was hospitalized with severe head injuries. Gamboa de Baixo activists contacted Odebrecht representatives, who immediately took responsibility for the cleanup and reconstruction. This kind of dialogue between both communities results from the past few years of struggle, during which Gamboa de Baixo residents have demanded respect as residents who preceded the luxury apartment building on the land. Since the beginning of construction, they have insisted that attention be paid to the environmental safety of the landscape, as journalist Mary Weinstein (2004) also wrote in her article criticizing the project. As many have argued about the failed levees in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, events such as landslides are not just “natural disasters” (Hartman and Squires, 2006), The South End Press Collective (2007), but rather as some Gamboa de Baixo residents have rightfully expressed, are man-made. Landslides and the collapsing of concrete walls are the consequences of environmental shifts during mass vertical construction on the coastal lands in Salvador. In this instance, the wall between Gamboa de Baixo and Morada dos Cardeais failed both communities miserably.

Gamboa de Baixo remains intact and still fights for land rights and improved infrastructure, but residents face the constant threat of land expulsion and relocation to Salvador’s distant periphery. We must rethink the process of gentrification, to include private development, which is tantamount to the criminalization and victimization of poor black
neighborhoods. The everyday experiences of black women activists, whose definition of violence is an array of interconnected processes of state dominance, teach us that the violence internalized in black communities cannot be understood as separate from the violence of class-based spatialized racism, such as the construction of walls around luxury apartment communities. Race overdetermines urban redevelopment projects and the private and public police’s relationship with the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood – effecting the enactment of “spatialized justice,” which Sherene Razack (2002) defines as the “values that deem certain bodies and subjects in spaces as deserving of full personhood” (p. 126).

My exploration of the walls and urban policing that Gamboa de Baixo residents experience has raised my awareness of how black communities come to signify “spaces of violence,” undeserving of citizenship rights, such as land entitlement and public security. Police terrorism in poor, black, urban neighborhoods is routine, using the most sophisticated techniques of urban warfare that resemble those used by SWAT teams in Watts or those deployed against Mexican-American farm workers movements, or those that were used to demolish the Black Panther Gang. Black communities of resistance, led by black women who defend collective rights to the city, reflect and respond to the everyday forms of spatial violence that affect their abilities to organize the community and resist white violence. Resistance is ritualized in the act of breaking down real and symbolic walls and recasting the margins as oppositional spaces. As black feminist Bell Hooks (1984, p. 151) writes,

“The struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin within one’s segregated, colonized community and family. So I want to note that I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of that space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressor as ‘pure’. I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance.”
As racial marginality is reproduced in terms of displacement and spatial removals, David Goldberg (1993) concludes that resistance will come from the margins. He writes of the case of South African apartheid:

“One emergent alternative is the assumption of ‘given’ peripheral places as sites of affirmotive resistance—in much the way that ‘black’, say, has been assumed affirmatively as a designation of resistance. It is in the final analysis only on and from these sites, the social margins, that the battles of resistance will be waged, the fights for full recognition of freedoms, interests, claims and power, for the autonomy of registered voices, and the insistence upon fully incorporated social institutions, resources, spaces” (p. 205).

As Gamboa de Baixo’s black-feminist neighborhood organization demands spatialized justice when they shout in street protests, “a nose resistência vai ficar aqui (our resistance is going to stay right here)” (personal interview, 2000, my emphasis), their grassroots struggle for land rights undermines “hegemonic spatial practices” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007, p. 7) of urban land expulsion and segregation. This form of organized urban resistance reaffirms the need to examine how black communities mobilize around spatial politics as an important anti-racism stratagem that might positively transform black neighborhoods in Salvador, in Brazil, and throughout the black Diaspora.
Black women represent the largest segment of unemployed workers and those living in poor urban living conditions (Morais, Cruz, and Oliveira, 2005), and they earn 40% of the average salary of white men, while black men earn 46%, and white women, 79% (Roland, 2001, p. 7).

As one newspaper article noted, 61% of household incomes of residents in closed condominiums are greater than 20 minimum salaries (20 x 300 reais; 1U$ = 1.7 reais) while 42% of residents in neighborhoods like Nordeste de Amaralina are classified as poor (A Tarde, March 15, 2007). Activists in Gamboa de Baixo argue that the poverty index in their neighborhood exceeds 50%.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted primarily in the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood and throughout the city of Salvador since 1998, and is part of larger project that provides a feminist analysis black women’s leadership in urban struggles for land rights. Kia Lilly Caldwell’s recent book Negras in Brazil (2007) offers rare ethnographic and theoretical insight into black Brazilian women experiences and politics.

I am borrowing from Angela Gilliam’s (1992) descriptive “a slave is a slave is a slave” to speak of black and white racial hierarchies and the deplorable social conditions of Afro-Brazilians. According to local Gamboa de Baixo activists, the exact height of the wall matters very little and is still a wall nonetheless.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) define racial formation as “the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55). Linking this process to hegemonic processes, Omi and Winant argue that a racial project is “an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56). Racial projects connect discursive dimensions of racial formation with the ways in which race organizes social structure and everyday experiences (p. 56).
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