

## React or Be Killed

### The History of Policing and the Struggle against Anti-Black Violence in Salvador, Brazil

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and Fábio Nascimento-Mandingo, with Amy Chazkel*

In Salvador da Bahia, Brazil's third largest city, Reaja ou Será Morto / Reaja ou Será Morta formed in 2005. Horrified by the mounting number of deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands of police officers and death squads that effectively enjoyed impunity, combined with the malign neglect of Black communities, the group mobilized around the idea that anti-Black violence is not incidental but is part of a systematic attempt to end Black lives. The organization is unequivocal about the police acting as an arm of the state in its ongoing project of white supremacy, transecting hundreds of years and multiple periods of history. Prompted by the question "How can history help us to imagine a world without police?" members of Reaja sat down with one of the coeditors of this issue in July 2019 at the Escola Winnie Mandela, their community school in Salvador, to consider the reach and limits of both the radical imagination and real-world, militant activism.

**Fábio Nascimento-Mandingo:** We are much more concerned with real questions; things become complicated when we begin this exercise in "imagination," right?

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**Andreia Beatriz Silva dos Santos:** We're being invited to imagine a world without police, and here's why that bothers me. We—people who are Black and who live this control in our skin, in our souls—are being asked how we would imagine such a world. We might imagine a beautiful world, where we are in the shade, by the sea, everyone frolicking around wearing white, everybody happy. But it's completely different if you ask us if we think it is actually possible to construct a world without police. If we were to ask the children in our school how they might imagine such a world, what would our day-to-day life be like without police, they would draw you a beautiful picture. But if you ask them if it's actually possible, they will cry, they will tell sad stories of what they have gone through. So, just like in academia: a research question that's poorly formulated will lead to errors. And that is what this question ends up doing. Maybe that's the reason why when you ask that question, people tend to answer by depicting a utopian world, even if that was clearly not part of what was being asked.

The first thing that I think of when we approach this topic of a world without police is how we need to take a step back and think, and only then begin to address what Professor Fábio [Nascimento-Mandingo] has said: When and why did the police arise in Brazil, and what have the police in Brazil been doing?

We need to ask why the police exist in the first place, and why we have two different police forces in Brazil despite a recommendation from the United Nations that the country's military police be eliminated, in light of how many atrocities they commit. So, this is the first exercise that we need to engage in. What we in Reaja think, the history that we are interested in recounting, is that the military police came about in the nineteenth century to fight against a [runaway slave community called a] *quilombo* that was headed by a woman named Zeferina. This *quilombo* was a space of freedom, of becoming free, of a community of Black people living together that even welcomed numerous indigenous people, as well. The police sought to destroy this *quilombo*, thinking that it had grown too large. We discuss this with the children in our school. So, as the police emerged with the destruction of *quilombos* as its mission, it developed strategies and approaches, and we even know that the police were proud of this history, of having decimated this *quilombo*, having destroyed this city. It's really important for us to understand what the possibilities are for a world without this police force that has this mission at its origins, and whose *modus operandi* remains unchanged and continues to act with the same objective. It's no coincidence that one of the tools that we use in our struggle is an annual international march against the genocide committed against Black people. This march begins in front of the headquarters of the Bahia state military police, in a historical building in Salvador called the Quartel dos Afritos. Our demonstration departs from that site with everyone wearing black T-shirts, with our war cries, speaking out against the genocide of Black people. We will not step back. So, first we have to raise this question: How did the police come to be?

**Fábio:** I think that it's really important to be clear that for us, for the Afro-Brazilian population, history is about continuity from the colonial period. We are still living under that government, and not under *our* government. What we have suffered because of the Brazilian state's public security policies is a continuation of public security in the colonial period. Brazilian history can be divided into the colonial period; the postindependence period called the Empire that went from 1822 to 1889; and a republican period in which we are still living today. Throughout these three periods public security was something imposed on the Black population, who needed to be controlled and restricted. Security was never conceived of as something *for* the Black population; public security in Brazil was always *against* the Black population. When the struggle for Brazilian independence took place, which was in 1823 here in Bahia with important participation of the Black and indigenous populations, in contrast with other Latin American countries, slavery persisted after independence. It's in this context that Dr. Andreia refers to the rise of the military police as a way to contain [people of African descent], because the whole Brazilian Empire (1822–89) was a period of Black revolts: here in Salvador, you have the uprising started by Muslim slaves in 1835 called the *Revolta dos Malês*, and there were also numerous other revolts, including the *Cabanagem* (1835–40) [in the northern region that is now the state of] *Pará*, the *Balaiada* in the northeastern province of *Maranhão*, and the *Sabinada* in Bahia (1837–38). Public security in Brazil was meant to contain both rebellions that were directly linked to the struggle against slavery and urban revolts. In this period, then, public security was being conceived as a way to contain the Black population, which was already the majority. Then in 1889, you have the proclamation of the Republic, a political system based on European ideas about race. It was a eugenicist and racist republic. In this transition in Brazil from constitutional monarchy to republic, the Brazilian state's concern was: what do we do with the Black population? There are countries in South America, like Argentina and Uruguay, where the Black population was decimated, suppressed. In Brazil, since the Black population was much larger than in those countries, it could not be restricted or segregated like in the United States, and so the Brazilian government decided to finance European immigration on a massive scale, mostly Italians, Germans, and Poles, who populated the southern and southeastern parts of the country, and in 1890, the first Penal Code of the republican period imposed two measures that were extremely important for the Black population: the prohibition of *capoeira*, which is an African martial art developed in Brazil, and the criminalization of vagrancy, resulting in the arrest of individuals for not working. So, right when around three million Europeans arrived in Brazil to take the place of Black laborers, merely not working became a criminal act. At the same time as jobs were being taken from the Black population, unemployment was criminalized. The twentieth century had two dictatorships, one under President Getúlio Vargas, and the period of military rule that began in 1964. Throughout this

time, the Afro-Brazilian population was seen as public enemy number one and was the target of policies that led to its criminalization. We also have to remember that at the outset, the Republic was based on ideas coming from eugenics and the theories of Cesare Lombroso, which held that Black people had a natural propensity for committing crimes. It was on these pseudoscientific doctrines that the politics of public security in Brazil were based throughout the twentieth century, and today we're still reading about similar things in the news, like the military police academy that uses a Black man as the ideal suspect for them to apprehend. And the recent modernization of the prison system has turned it into something extremely lucrative, involving contractors, food service, and uniform companies. We don't know just where all this money flows, but we do know that each month the government spends much more to maintain an imprisoned person than on any other public service, whether it's a school or healthcare. So, with this historical context in mind, we can think about what is going on now.

You raised the question of prison abolitionism, which I think came to Brazil around fifteen or twenty years ago mainly from reading the work of Angela Davis and from the dialogues between her and Black Brazilian organizations. But now in Brazil, one is living through state policies that aim to privatize the prison system, very similar to what has been happening in the United States for a few decades. This state project aimed at Black men and women has also resulted in lowering the age of penal responsibility and so draws Black children into this prison system. It's now become a prison industry, which is not only horrible but also is lucrative. So, this is still a very long way away from being able to imagine a society without police.

**Andreia:** Célia Maria Azevedo wrote a book called *Onda Negro, Medo Branco* that describes this trajectory.<sup>1</sup> She speaks of this horror long before the creation of the military police. This white fear, above all on the part of masters, came from these concerns. After having committed so many atrocities, having separated families, having caused a degree of humiliation and suffering never before or after seen in human history, how are we possibly going to live side by side with these people going through the process of emancipation, which we know took place not because of human kindness but rather because the market demanded it, right? England said, "Hey, we need a market for our products," with the Industrial Revolution coming and so, "Let's end this slavery business over there and exploit labor, because we need money." Azevedo says that before the formal end of slavery in Brazil, about two-thirds of the population in Brazil was made up of Africans and people of African descent, and only one-third was whites. So, the desperation [of the white population] took hold. These instruments of control always filled this function.

**Fábio:** . . . to think about the Black problem in Brazil.

**Andreia:** That's right. Something occurred to me while you were speaking: The problem of projecting a world without police isn't a problem for Blacks. It's really a problem for white people who use the police as a very important instrument to protect the territories they see as their own and to control Black people, since we live here every day with problems that we do not use the police to resolve. We Black people don't enjoy the same security that white people need and live with in their neighborhoods. It's not the same in our communities. When, for example, for some reason the police see a young, Black person walking and carrying a backpack on his back, or they see a child or a Black man walking down the street, the police will stop him; they see him as a potential suspect. Police emerged to control the Black population; we had what happened in Haiti [with the revolution]; Black people took control of the state. Here we have a Black person who caused a massive problem for whites in Latin America, saying, "Gee, and what if this idea coming out of Haiti actually works out? So, let's suppress the Malês [the Muslim slaves who led an uprising in Salvador in 1835], suffocate them, because, well, if this comes to anything—and forgive the anachronism here—if we have all these revolts and it becomes impossible to exert control over the population . . ." Those mechanisms created and strengthened to maintain control exist until the present day. So, if our problem has been that these policies were meant to control us, whites have the same problem, only bigger, I think; for them it is, "How are they going to live so well without police?" Maybe the question posed for this issue of the journal could have been this one, right? "White people: How are *you* going to live?"

And we could expand the question to include Brazil. We could consider what happened with lots of Black men and women, just like what happened to Oscar Grant, with Michael Brown, with Sandra Bland. In all these cases, there was a police stop, and then death. Here in Salvador, a massacre happened in 2015 in a neighborhood called Cabula, the result of a police stop, with twelve people dead. Within this world where police serve only to control us, historically we have several possibilities, like capoeira. There are several institutions and practices that were successful—and this concept of "successful" for us is related to what history has left us, which serves as an example and that lends continuity to our lives and struggle. And we have a great example: *terreiros de candomblé*, centers of Afro-Brazilian religious practice and Black community organizations, which survived even in the face of so much brutality and police invasions. Maybe some of you are too young and don't remember, but I lived through the end of the era when you needed official permission even to throw a party. In [the southern state of] Rio Grande do Sul, for us to be able to hold a *batuque*, we had to go to the police station and request authorization.

**Fábio:** If I'm not mistaken, that was the case until 1967.

**Andreia:** [You needed permission] for these parties to take place. If they arrived and said the party was over, it was over. I remember people at that time saying, "Hey,

let's have a party. We have to get an authorization at the police station." Nobody even knew from whom, there was no special police station [*Delegacia de jogos e costumes*] any more. So we have to ask first, "Why did the police arise?" and second, "What have they always been used for?" We don't benefit from the police. I don't know if there was ever a moment in history when the police protected us and affirmed [our existence].

**Fábio:** I think that we need to be very specific here in reflecting on how the marginalization and criminalization of the Black population in Brazil was also an important part of the project of the Brazilian state throughout its history. This is no coincidence, and it's thoroughly documented. Government documents from the 1920s and 1930s debate how to solve the Black problem, how to remove [Black Brazilians] from the job market and from their residences in the city centers. This is a process that you in the United States know as *gentrification*, which here in Brazil has been extremely intense, because the republican government also believed that to sanitize city centers meant to remove the Black population from them. Lots of neighborhoods in Salvador were formed by this process.

**Amy Chazkel:** I'm thinking about how the police, since their beginnings in the nineteenth century, assumed this role of serving basically as a private security service [for white elites]. This is related to the struggle over the balance of power between police and slave owners. For example, masters, at least in Rio, sent their enslaved workers to the city jail to be punished by flogging, they paid a fee for the state to perform this service for them. It seems that was the first step en route to passing the monopoly of violence on to the state.

**Fábio:** Well, this is the most "annoying" part of the work of a historian; trying to compartmentalize everything, right? Political transitions in Brazil were always driven by ideas. So, you have the process of independence, pressed on largely by ideas from the French Revolution. Even before then there was the *Revolta dos Búzios* (1798–99), which happened in Brazil very close to the Haitian Revolution, with its ideas about liberty, equality, and fraternity. When Brazilian independence happened in 1822, this idea about modernizing the state and making it into something similar to postrevolutionary France arose. And with the transition from the Empire to the Republic in 1889, came the question of Auguste Comte.

**Andreia:** Positivism.

**Fábio:** Yes, positivism was the philosophy followed by most of the Republican military and political elite, who also believed in constructing a European-style Brazil. In the transition from colony to independent monarchy as well as in the transition from monarchy to a republic based on liberal ideas, Brazil's Black populations were not included in state-building projects. Black Brazilians were part of the independence

process only in that they were to remain enslaved. At the time of independence, there were numerous debates about whether or not to retain slavery. When the First Republic was proclaimed in 1889, slavery had already been abolished, but the nation-building project excluded the Black population, and included them only as a problem. “What are we going to do with Black people?” was at the heart of the politics of “hygiene” and eugenics, the construction of a prison system, and the exaltation of racial mixing and “whitening.” Within these racist theories, the Brazilian state came up with the idea of bringing a large number of foreigners to Brazil, thinking that the combination of racial mixing and competition would bring about the disappearance of the Black population in Brazil. In 2014, if I’m not mistaken, it was the hundred-year anniversary of when the Brazilian government, in a convention in Europe, promised that in a hundred years there would no longer be any “mark of the Black stain on Brazil.” So this has been Brazil’s national project: the politics of public safety and the police, as the arm of the state, in all of its political and historical processes in Brazil excluded the Black population, or included it only as a problem. And the police always served this function.

**Andreia:** I just remembered about the First Brazilian Eugenics Congress in 1929, in São Paulo. This was exactly the debate there: “We need to devise a national project in Brazil that keeps the country pure.” One of Lombroso’s most important disciples was a Brazilian, Nina Rodrigues, who states this in his book *Os africanos no Brasil*. He imagined that because of racial mixing, Brazil would only have mixed-race or lighter-skinned people; things weren’t so awful, since there wouldn’t be any darker-skinned people left.

**Fábio:** What Andreia said is important, because the politics of eugenics in Brazil became state policy. Ministers of education were members of the Eugenics Society, and so were ministers of state, who dealt with immigration policy. The top echelons of the Brazilian government were made up of members of the Eugenics Society. Brazil now has three extremely important sets of policies that follow these principles; the first is the reduction of the age of penal adulthood. . . .

**Andreia:** The Criminal Code of 1830 gave criminal responsibility to fourteen-year-olds. Slavery was officially abolished here in 1888, and two years later in the Republic’s first Penal Code, a nine-year-old could hold partial criminal responsibility, depending on the judge’s assessment. And who were these people who were being criminalized? In this postslavery era, you have the pauperization of Black people, people tossed out in the streets, with no rights to anything, without possessions or possibilities. And under these conditions, the Penal Code criminalized them. For this reason, to think about the possibilities of a world without police first we need to flee the naïve notion that injustice is only about the police, in and of themselves.

**Fábio:** Yes, absolutely. You touched on a point here that is fundamental to our discussion.

**Andreia:** The police are part of an infrastructure of ideas, practices, projects, interests. They have exercised their role in society throughout their history and until today precisely in a way that allows them to control a people, to reduce their possibilities, to surround them, to eliminate them. Why do the police kill so many people in Brazil? Who are these people? What do they have in common? The police arose imbricated within a certain model of how the state operated. Throughout all of Brazil's historical phases—the colonial period, the Empire, and the Republic—we see the continual resurgence and strengthening of this instrument of control. It oscillates here and there, but the police have always been at the service of the white population, of white supremacy, exercising its role of imposing control. And this is not a question of class and of economic resources. In Brazil, despite slavery, there were Africans who were well off. But even so, the police exercise this role [as an arm of white supremacy] all over the world.

**Fábio:** Exactly. And responding directly now to what you raised earlier about the relation between this transition in power: this transition comes out of a process of the modernization of the state. Here it would be useful to return to the three policies I began to discuss earlier, the first being the reduction of the age of penal adulthood. Brazil has the third largest population of incarcerated people in the world, coming only after the United States and China. In numbers, I think it's 600,000.

**Andreia:** Today in Brazil, we don't know just what the prison population is. The last census in 2016 told us that the combined number of people who have been deprived of liberty (in different degrees of incarceration) totals 726,000 people. And adding all of the 300,000 arrest warrants not carried out for lack of resources, we would have more than one million people incarcerated in Brazil. Then we'd jump from fourth to third place in the world's incarcerated populations. Today, the ranking is: United States, China, Russia, and then Brazil. But these data are imprecise, and Brazil has been fluctuating between third and fourth place. And who are these people who get arrested? They are Black men and women—who amount to around 70 percent of the total population—who are young and have little education.

**Fábio:** So, then getting back to the reduction in the age of penal responsibility: this increased the size of the incarcerated population in Brazil. The privatization of the prison system intensifies this whole situation, as does the so-called war on drugs, which is the principal instrument of criminalization and incarceration of Brazil's Black population. So, the government's twenty-first-century public security project is based on these three measures. The prison system is transformed into a lucrative industry, even with foreign capital; you reduce the age of penal responsibility, expanding the market; and you create a completely artificial criminalization process,

the war on drugs, which is used as a pretext for the criminalization of Black-majority neighborhoods and for the anticipatory criminalization of any Black person who happens to be arrested for anything.

**Amy:** I'd like to bring the quilombos back in here. When we're thinking about the possibilities that have actually existed in the world, do you think that quilombos can be thought of as spaces without police? I realize that very little is known about the day-to-day life of quilombos, but do you see any use in this idea?

**Fábio:** So here is what's known about the history of quilombos. Some of the records of the quilombo at Palmares suggested that those who recently arrived might have had their freedom restricted, and some people were taken to Palmares against their will, which is a similar process to one in Africa: not exactly imprisonment but rather permanent surveillance. Archaeological evidence has never uncovered any physical structure related to torture or physical punishment, nor any space that historians can say, "this was the quilombo's jail."

**Andreia:** Given what we know about the role that the police have played since their very beginnings, which we've been discussing, it's practically impossible that inside a quilombo power would be exercised in that way with those same objectives. It would be as if we were saying that white people from the same group, let's say two Germans, could be racist against each other. Racism is the practice of denial and exclusion based on membership in a different group or people. Policing in the way we are talking about it having developed in Brazil would have been practically impossible in quilombos, given the purposes police have served.

**Fábio:** That's right, and no archaeological research has ever uncovered, for example, any restraining device, like a pillory, that might have been used for physical punishment, or handcuffs, in any part of a quilombo. [Archaeologists] did find chapels, storage sheds, gathering spaces, but they never found any space meant for the deprivation of liberty, which I believe would have been an integral part of policing, or a prison; police and prisons in Brazil were always interrelated.

**Amy:** I'd like to raise another topic: there are places in the contemporary world where abolitionist movements, where community-based organizations have been mobilizing locally to perform the role of "public security" that is normally reserved for the state. The idea is to resolve conflicts before they become "criminal acts," to resolve conflicts within communities.

**Andreia:** First, I want to return to that "tripod" of ideas that Fábio brought up, which are fundamental for thinking about the possibilities that we create. As Black people, we need to protect ourselves from the police. A really important example is how the Black Panthers formed and, following a practice in Malcolm X's movement, they started walking around with cameras and asserted their right to document

police stops. And the Black Panthers, I believe at the height of their struggle, defended the idea of being armed, their right to self-defense—even more than that, to “protect” themselves. The question being posed is whether we organize ourselves without police. Our reading of the situation in light of the emergence of this model of policing is that we don’t need the police. All of our organizing efforts have been aimed at protecting ourselves from the police. And so the experiences that we are putting into practice are related to the issues Fábio mentioned earlier: the reduction of the age of penal majority, the privatization of prisons, Black incarceration, and the war on drugs. For us, what is this world without police? Today, for Reaja, this world exists right now. And right now, you are inside one of the institutions that thinks of and brings about a world without police. We have this huge problem here of poor-quality schools. We thought we had to have an institution that respected our rights, preserved our identity and our history, that strengthened and recovered, to use an expression from the great philosophy professor Jairo Pereira, the “re-ontologization” of what it means to be Black. We were not born with slavery; we came from a time long before that. So to think about and carry out in practice a world without police is to speak of what we were before. From here on, to construct subjects who have this perspective of the world from an African point of view, from a world long before all of this—this is one of the first things we have to think about.

Another of our approaches is to take action inside the prison system. We go there to say, “brothers, sisters, there is a genocidal project against Black people that aims to wipe us out.” We do need to break down these walls; we are an organization against prisons. But until we can break down the prison walls, we need to recover our dignity and the humanity of people who are being deprived of their freedom, and to connect them with their families, with our people, Black people. We go there to discuss politics, the genocide of Black people, anti-Black racism, the role of the police and how they emerged. We take literature with us, we talk about history and film, and we discuss the possibility of seeing a world without the police that white people constructed to control us. We talk about how we should be organizing ourselves, and what are alternatives to the war on drugs, and how to work against the instruments of control used against us. For example, we’re combatting this booklet about tattoos, which was created to criminalize African-based religions, saying that these people are predestined to commit crimes. These are some of the examples that come up when we think about a world without police.

In this context, resolving our own conflicts is a path we have always taken. Priestesses of Afro-Brazilian religious practice, called *mães de santo*, the meeting places for *candomblé* (Afro-Brazilian religion), and African-based religions have a fundamental role here in resolving everything from health problems to spiritual crises, to issues specific to Afro-Brazilian communities. My father was an example: a Black man recognized in our community as someone who could help families and

the community to resolve many problems. To placate, discuss, propose, and resolve these conflicts. We hold an annual march, we don't need the police, we put three thousand, or even ten thousand people on the streets. We don't use the police thinking they are going to protect us; we worry that the police are there to create problems for us. I don't know if we have ever used any of those approaches that you mentioned to resolve our problems. Our conflicts have to do with the negation of our right to exist, our right to be. Many of us were raised in communities where you go out into the street and a neighbor kept an eye out for you, someone looked after you. When a mother went out to work, there were no day care centers. What did we do? We'd ask someone, "Hey, can you look after my son?" That was the kind of conflict that we had: not having schools for the children. And this is the same conflict that we have here in Engenho Velho de Brotas: the schools are bad. We need schools that meet our needs as Black people. So what can we do? We gather the community, we organize a school that has a high standard to attend to our needs. So, yes, we are attending to our own conflicts, which have to do with the lack of education. Our conflicts are the result of anti-Black racism and its consequences. We are living the aftermath of a long-running race war; we are simultaneously living with both its consequences and its cause. What we have is like the medical concept of *sequela*: a pathological condition that is the result of a prior injury or disease. The concept of *sequela* usually implies that the consequence can only exist after the original cause ceases. Yet the anti-Black racism that we experience and the genocide of Black people continually renews itself, along with its consequences; the incarceration, illness, exclusion, and pauperization of Black people are both causes and consequences of our genocide. I call it *sequela continuum*.

It would be naive to say that this will resolve all of our conflicts. And most of our conflicts are like this, where some intervention is needed. Our conflicts arise from unemployment, from a lack of education, from a lack of basic sanitation services, and from the poor quality of our health care. We don't have a public space for our political culture. This is a problem. The only thing that we are able to see, if you go into any neighborhood in Salvador, is a large number of bars, which offer illicit drugs, which make up the gathering places for white people, which are always full and are spreading all over our neighborhoods, with or without licenses. These are the places that we have in our communities, instead of cultural gathering spaces. Trash collection is limited, and there are no institutions that guarantee high-quality services that respect our traditions, our history.

**Fábio:** I think it's important, Andreia, for you to emphasize that you're speaking out against all this. Historically, Black communities, and not just in quilombos, were always almost completely self-sufficient. "I have my *candomblé*"; or, "I have to build a house. I'll make a pot of beans, and everyone can come by and help me build the

roof.” Or, taking care of each other’s children, and also in the resolution of larger conflicts.

**Jéssica Nere (member of Reaja):** The women in the community can show us the way—especially the mothers. An older mother might be managing a family with numerous members, taking care of the children, of nieces and nephews, of grandchildren, and she is the voice in that space. So, if you have a conflict that becomes a dispute, an argument, and if in some people’s imaginary it’s the police who would come and resolve that conflict, we understand that when the police arrive, they are going to create a much larger conflict for us. So, people in a community prefer to figure this out for themselves.

**Fábio:** When we were little, we didn’t like this kind of thing. “Who’s this old lady telling me what to do?” But this was a structure of care that worked for everybody, even for people’s health. Even today, a group of people in my sister-in-law’s neighborhood have worked out this rotation to visit other people of the same age who are sick. And thinking about the historical dimensions of this, I’m reading a book by Beatriz Nascimento where she really works with this idea of the “*paz quilombola*”: what the quilombo was like when not at war. For those twenty or thirty years when Portugal and Holland were at war with each other, the quilombos grew. Some lasted for fifty years. Then there was a process of falling apart. This is really crazy, because Black communities were always being dismantled, but this process intensified very recently. Things used to be different. “Hey, nobody better rob auntie!” or “Let so-and-so by, he’s a student,” or, “Hey, stop with the drugs while kids are passing by.” Then for the last thirty or so years there was a resurgence of misery in Black communities. This is actually a bit contradictory to say, because we were always marginalized and criminalized, but for the last thirty years there has been this process that nobody recognizes unfolding in our neighborhoods. And this is also political and is part of a state project, and that is what we are dealing with right now.

**Andreia:** I’m trying to find a word to substitute for “abolitionism,” but I think that we have to reflect on the question more, to find a better expression, because in reality we’re speaking about different things. I even think that the very concept of “abolitionism” comes from a certain historical moment. For me, it is really very connected to the liberal perspective, and so for us, it really doesn’t work very well. [I’m a] Black woman who understands the role of the prison for my people. . . . How could penal abolitionism reflect what I think, what I feel, what I am living with respect to the meaning of prisons for my people? I want [to end prisons] a lot, but we’re not talking only about destroying this whole system that has created the police that, through the ages, has the same role in upholding white supremacy. As much as we respect white people who are against prisons, we think about prisons

in a different way. But as long as we can't think of a replacement, I guess "abolitionism" will do.

**Fábio:** The word is really not much.

**Andreia:** That's right. It's not that I don't want to get rid of them, I do. But for them to cease to exist, there has to be some other project, in which these police don't exist, it has to be something thought out.

Before we're done, I just want to remember one more thing related to what we were saying earlier about resolving conflicts: about the fundamental role that Black women play. Women are the caretakers; they create life; they are the ones that show up when the police come. We have numerous moments in history, like apartheid in South Africa in the 1950s, when there were women who went out into the streets because the men had to stay hidden to avoid arrest. We have to remember Black women like Winnie Mandela, Josina Machel, Ericka Huggins and among so many other women who took and take care of their Black communities. Today we are living through the same thing. There have been demonstrations where we wore black shirts and went out into the streets, because men and other Black women cannot be exposed, since they are grabbed by the police, they are fundamental in the control of the Black people. So, Black women assumed positions in the "vital command," giving life and care. It's the Black women who go to the morgue to search for bodies when their sons and daughters or their husbands and wives disappear. It's Black women who are in the majority in prison units, visiting the men and women and keeping them alive, it's the Black women of the communities that put their bodies on the front lines when the police come, and so the Black women are the ones who manage what might be called conflict, who fill this fundamental role, at this moment. Black women experience the sequela continuum that I mentioned earlier—the continuous, cyclical impact of anti-Black racism—especially intensely and severely. The results are immeasurable and not always tangible, but if health is complete biopsychosocial well-being, the impact of the sequela on Black women's health is truly fundamental.

**Fábio:** It was always like that, Andreia.

**Andreia:** It always was and still is.

**Fábio:** It's important for us to mention that what we have here is a conflict of civilizations. Africans and Afro-descendants are living through their own civilizational process. Meanwhile, under colonialism, we are seen not as participants in civilization but rather as problems to be solved. When Andreia spoke of the importance of women just now, in the context of the chaos that we are living through now, it's important to realize that this is something that has been with us for millennia.

**Figure 1. “Projeto Ururu”: Black women forming a protective barrier around men at a protest against police brutality, “Fourth International March against the Genocide of Black People,” organized by Reaja ou Será Morta / Reaja ou Será Morto, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, August 2016. Photograph by Lena Azevedo.**



**Amy:** In the United States now, we are living through a terrible public health crisis of maternal mortality among Black women. It's extremely serious and has been radicalizing many women.

**Andreia:** Here we have the idea of “maternal lethality,” which has to do with the negligent care that the mother receives just before and just after birth, because she is Black. But we have also been discussing the long-term consequences of a health condition. For instance, someone suffers an accident, she has a spinal injury, the injury heals, but she has a limp. For Black women, as a result of this process of genocide, we have something that goes beyond this, because even though what started this whole process for us was slavery, which supposedly ended, we continue to live with the complications of all of this. For example, let's think about the massacre that took place in Cabula that I mentioned earlier. A police stop happened on February 6, 2015, the police killed twelve Black youths who were from fourteen to twenty-seven years old. The police said that there was a confrontation with these twelve young people. From the youths' position, someone fired a shot. From the police's side, 143 shots were fired. Eighty-eight struck the bodies of these youths. They had broken jaws, arms, gunshots all over their backs, and the women of the community still today suffer the consequences. They suffer from depression, they've attempted suicide, had heart attacks, strokes, some of these kids' parents have become alcoholics. The consequences for the lives of Black people are immeasurable. We are not speaking about the elimination of life. What we're talking about is beyond mortality. We had the opportunity to meet Michael Brown's mother. What happened in the life of that community, there is just no way to measure it. There was an emblematic case in Rio de Janeiro, of a mother whose sixteen-year-old son was executed by the police. Less than a year after her son's death, she died. She developed depression, had anemia and various other health complications, and then she died. One might simply

say, she died one year after her son. White society cannot see a causal relationship. We do, and in addition to seeing this connection, we live this connection in our flesh, because it has a direct effect on how we live, on how I think about my son when he goes out into the street, how he will relate to his children, how a mother treats her children, the way a mother calls from another state to see if her son is okay.

**Amy:** I wonder if we might return to the problematic use of the word *abolitionism*, because I found what you said incredibly interesting. I've been thinking about how in the United States the use of the word intentionally invokes the abolition of slavery but carries the liberal implications of that history. So, after centuries of simply being an unquestioned part of life throughout the Atlantic world, there was this key moment when slavery started to be challenged. This is obviously really problematic, because the enslaved themselves never accepted slavery. To relate the movement to end African slavery with prison and police "abolitionism" is to consider how a society that didn't question this institution can come to question it. And it's to postulate a "post-" society, without that institution but perhaps without anything in its place.

**Andreia:** I'm not sure how you historians think about the "post-." For me, it would be impossible to think, "okay, this era is over." That's never the case, right? People now talk about the "decolonial." For us, colonialism never ended. It's really a case of resignifying the same thing, which in reality never ended.

**Jéssica:** In this disgraceful situation that we are living through now, we try to give a name to any transformation, but this does not mean that we have entirely transformed social structures, or that the problems that we've always had don't continue to reappear in updated forms. I believe that if we were to think about a world without police, we'd still have lots of problems other than the police to resolve. Independently of our questioning of the police, we need to think about what methods we'd use to resolve our problems. Lots of conflicts that the police supposedly try to resolve in our society were produced by factors that are beyond the policing institution itself. Even if we were able to eliminate this institution, we would still have lots of other problems. I think it would be naive to think that a world without police would resolve our problems. This is especially hard for us to think about, since the police have no effective role in our community.

**Andreia:** This is why we started thinking initially about when the police emerged, with what models, and in what context. We're not talking only about the police but also everything related to them, like prisons. We're not talking only about dismantling prisons. It would be the same story: "Let's do away with slavery." "Ah, great." But wait, what are we going to do now? How are we going to organize ourselves? So, to abolish prisons would be an important step, but what we want, what we think, discuss, do, and think about is everything, and not just prisons. If for some

people abolition would resolve everything, for us there are many more questions involved. And so, returning to this question about how to think about a “post-” situation, I don’t know how to construct a post-something in the face of a phenomenon that has consequences in the present day.

Slavery ended, but I’m living in the same fear as someone who lived through slavery. We live in a state of alert. We take certain positions for that reason. And because of this, we ask, what does it mean to be a *quilombista*? It means to recover this whole structure, this practice, this idea not of claiming but of seizing. We have our schools, we have to organize our own institutions. I’m not saying that it’s easy. What I’m saying is that we need to invest in our own people here, from this quilombista perspective, we need to reclaim what is our greatest legacy, of having organized ourselves in the face of the police and of the necessity to resolve our own conflicts and resume doing what women do, what quilombos do.

**Fábio:** The heart of our problem is white supremacy. I don’t think that any of us are naive enough to think that we could have a society without problems, but we know that the cause of the worst problem in the system is the white supremacy under which we have been living since 1535 here in Brazil, in some places in Africa before that. We know that white supremacy is at the root of our problems involving health care, land, housing, criminality, and incarceration. We live under the control of another people, and this takes the form of exploitation that is physical, territorial, psychological, educational, and involves public services and incarceration. And when you free yourself from this control, you’re arrested. This is something that Marcus Garvey said. Reaja uses the Garveyite flag, and his image is one of the first things that you see when you enter the room. We believe in the “post-” in the imagination, based on our historical past as Africans, as residents of quilombos, as part of the diaspora. We believe that we can build a society much better than this one. Even if we don’t succeed, we prefer to handle our own problems. The Jews know this; so do Arabs, Japanese, Chinese, Chechens, Basques, Irish, Indigenous Americans—all peoples know this.

**Andreia:** I think that another form of control that white supremacy has imposed, as part of this civilizing process, is the necessity to produce truth in the world. The United States has played a fundamental role in this, in constituting what truth means. This is an enormous problem.

**Fábio:** Even when it comes to liberation, right, Andreia? Because white supremacy even offers us a definition of what correct liberation should look like.

**Andreia:** Yes. “We are going to free the world of Muslims.” “We are going to save the world from capitalism.”

**Fábio:** They cause the disease and then sell us the cure.

**Andreia:** I was just remembering the case of Tuskegee, of that large study of treatment for syphilis. In the United States in the 1930s–40s until the 1970s, they subjected Black men to a placebo treatment. The medical researchers produced several articles, which were published. “Oh well, that was bad, let’s punish them.” And that was it. We know that this even had consequences for the subjects’ descendants, it wreaked havoc on their families. For me, this is all part of this package, of control and of the production of truth. And so, institutionalizing our way of seeing the world, of reading what has happened in the world, to read our history from the departure from Africa, this is all fundamental to breaking away from all this.

**Amy:** . . . and hence the power of the school [Winnie Mandela] to change all this.

**Andreia:** Since 2005 we have been denouncing, struggling, and helping people, giving health care. We need to have an infrastructure. Matheuzza, the director of the school, says, “This is African territory. Everyone who sets foot here is free.” So, we need this as a point of departure, to begin to construct other possibilities that are our truths, that are our history. That’s why we have a teacher who comes here and tells these stories. That’s why we have so many other people who share our understandings of what we want to do in the world.

**Amy:** On your point about the production of truth, I want to add that policing creates police files, which end up in documents that are ultimately used to construct criminal profiles and a racist truth. In my own research, I saw people who were labeled as criminal just because they had been arrested before.

**Andreia:** We have that problem here. The first thing is the question of how the police characterize, how they differentiate between who is a drug dealer and who is a drug user, and this has to do with the phenotype and not with the quantity of drugs involved; it’s very subjective. The district police chief will define what the drug traffic is. So a person can have three joints and, just because he or she is Black, might be considered a dealer, whereas a white person considered a user would be released. Once he is considered a drug dealer, he might end up incarcerated, and this can really follow him for the rest of his life. Once arrested, and once he enters prison for being a drug dealer, a snowball starts rolling, and it’s very difficult to get out of it. There is one policing practice in which the person is stopped, photographed, and the police officer saves the image on his cell phone. The next time the person is stopped, the police scroll through their phones and say, “If you’re in here, I’m arresting you.” This is not official, but it’s done.

**Fábio:** Another policing practice is to photograph someone with drugs and arms and to threaten to go to the newspaper.

**Andreia:** The person is not given the countervailing right, a person’s right to defend one’s self and to prove one’s innocence until proven otherwise.

**Fábio:** The Brazilian government has established a supposedly democratic state under the rule of law under a federal constitution. From the establishment of legislation, to criminal procedure, the educational procedures, in reality none of this is carried out. In acting against Black people, the state systematically violated the very legal structures that it, itself, created. For example, there is an ongoing debate about demilitarizing the police. Why should the police obey a different body of legislation and not civilian law? I'm not saying that civilian police are ideal, but at least they respond to a minimal degree to civilian legislation, like other citizens. So the police don't follow the law in making arrests and in all of the steps that they follow in taking someone into custody. So the state not only acts with prejudice against a part of the population, it also systematically and deliberately disobeys its own laws. This is really fundamental and cannot be forgotten. This failure to follow the law is in fact one of the fundamental targets of Reaja's activism: to point to the state and to call upon it to abide by its own legislation; to show how the state disobeys the law in acting against the Black population.

**Andreia:** To reflect like this is an exercise, but in light of what we are actually living through. I had never thought this before. It's good to have a historian here. To think more systematically about how, through the ages, nothing has changed for us is fantastic. If we don't have structures like these in moments that allow us to think, a Black person who is conscious of his or her racial identity and history, in the face of so many atrocities, would not be able to bear to live knowing all of this. We need to be able to understand that this deliberate state project against a people and the police that arose from this project are committed to not recognizing our humanity. They do not even deny it. Given this state project, the police are going to be this way, and our health, our culture, everything else will be impacted by this reality.

**Fábio:** We are speaking of Brazil, because we're here. But it's not different in the United States, in the Caribbean, in Black neighborhoods in France, in England . . .

**Amy:** These ideas are also mobile. One country inspires the other.

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### Notes

Translated from the Portuguese by Amy Chazkel. The issue editors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Pedro Guimarães Marques in transcribing the audio recording of the conversation.

1. The reference here is to Azevedo, *Onda negra, medo branco*.

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