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Crime and Violence as Historical Legacies in Brazil: A Study of Amilcar Bettega Barbosa's "Círculo Vicioso" and Marcelino Freire's "Esquece"

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During the 20th century, Brazil experienced a substantial demographic shift from rural to urban areas, resulting in 78 percent of its population living in cities. The country also underwent two periods of authoritarian rule, the second of which stimulated industrialization with funds borrowed from foreign creditors. Although Brazil lived the so-called *milagre econômico*¹ between 1968 and 1973, it suffered the increase of economic inequality and the exponential growth of foreign debt, while also censoring cultural production and the media, and arresting, torturing, and even killing dissidents. Consequently, anthropologists like Teresa Caldeira have understood Brazil's modernization as the result of a "paradoxical combination of rapid capitalist development, increased inequality, and a lack of political freedom and respect for citizenship rights" (43). In this context of urbanization and increasing inequality, contemporary fiction centered mainly on the urban experience, portraying the city as a place of oppression, "traduzindo linguisticamente os códigos da urgência, da violência e do medo que determinam o ritmo da cidade grande" (Pelligrini 33-34). As a result, in the literature of the late 20th century the city came to represent what Tânia Pelligrini describes as *locus horribilis* (Latin for "the hellish place") with violent crime surfacing as a salient theme (34).

When Amilcar Bettega Barbosa and Marcelino Freire published their short stories, "Círculo Vicioso" and "Esquece," respectively, in the early 2000s, there was already a well-established tradition of crime fiction in Brazil, including authors such as Rubem Fonseca,² Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza, Patrícia Melo, and Paulo Lins, whose novel

Cidade de Deus (1997), adapted into a film by Fernando Meirelles in 2002, achieved great box office success worldwide.

Just as contemporary film and literature often brought crime to the center of discussion, so did everyday conversations. In a study conducted by Teresa Caldeira in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous city,³ interviewees talked about crime whenever they were asked about the city's transformations and the economic crisis (20). Part of Caldeira's project analyzes what she calls the "talk of crime," that is, "everyday conversations, commentaries, discussions, narratives, and jokes that have crime and fear as their subject" (19). Given that crime is a ubiquitous aspect of many different spheres of Brazilian society, in this essay, I build upon Caldeira's concept of the "talk of crime," using it to support my study of contemporary Brazilian literature. In dialogue with Caldeira, I propose the inclusion of contemporary crime fiction, including novels, short stories, and film, in the discussion of the "talk of crime." In doing so, I understand the short stories "Círculo Vicioso" and "Esquece," written by Amílcar Bettge Barbosa and Marcelino Freire, respectively, as exceptional cases among the panorama of contemporary crime fiction since they transcend the "talk of crime" by defamiliarizing the reader's typical perceptions of crime and violence. In contrast to the realism characteristic of most of the crime fiction of the new millennium, as well as other instances in which the "talk of crime" is present, Barbosa and Freire's short stories move beyond understandings of violence as a problem unique to the contemporary city, discussing the issue instead as a historical legacy dating back to the colonial era.

Although these two short stories share the same tendency towards experimentation, they are very different from one another in terms of setting and style. While Barbosa's "Círculo Vicioso" travels through Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, moving through multiple temporalities throughout the narrative, Freire's "Esquece," set in a single unnamed city, focuses on the present, alluding to the historical past only in the story's epigraph. Consequently, this essay examines four elements of the aforementioned texts that distance them from the realistic prose prevalent in the crime fiction of the turn of the millennium, which in turn point to the idea that present-day urban violence is in fact a legacy of the past: Barbosa's use of circular time as an element that connects the past and the present; Barbosa's representation of violence against women across time periods, demonstrating

the persistence of patriarchy; Freire's symbolic use of means of transportation in order to connect contemporary crime to slavery; and the oscillation between the roles of victim and perpetrator in Freire's story, which links contemporary urban crime to an inherited system of exploitation and exclusion.

THE "TALK OF CRIME" AND CRIME FICTION

In her research, Caldeira observes patterns in everyday stories of crime told by people of different social classes: although these narratives are often fragmentary and repetitive, the "talk of crime," according to Caldeira, "feeds a circle in which fear is both dealt with and reproduced, and violence is both counteracted and magnified" (19). In this way, the act of repetition carried out as part of the ritual of storytelling not only helps people cope with their experiences, but also reinforces their constant state of fear. Besides strengthening a generalized experience of fear, the "talk of crime" contributes to the social legitimation of private security measures, including the segregation of space through the construction of walls, the increase in rules of exclusion and restrictions, and the support of vigilantism as an alternative to the institution of order (Caldeira 20).

On a more symbolic level, Caldeira argues that the "talk of crime" reorders the world. While the actual experience of crime is perceived as a disruption to the normal flow of life, which in turn disorients the victim, the "talk of crime" reestablishes "a static picture of the world" in more simplistic terms (20). The everyday recounting of experiences of crime comes to influence people's perceptions of the world as being divided between good and evil, eliminating ambiguities by creating caricatures of social groups (28). Furthermore, the "talk of crime" has become a type of linguistic code, used by Caldeira's subjects to express the social decay they notice in their city. Caldeira observes that when people remember and re-tell their experiences as victims, they may distort facts, such as the date or time of the incident, so as to link their personal stories to other major changes in society that may have led to feelings of loss and decay (for instance, the economic crisis of the late 1980s). In other words, by talking about crime, people often express experiences related to larger social problems.

By understanding the crime fiction of the turn of the millennium as an extension of the "talk of crime," it is possible to observe that many fictional narratives reproduce similar patterns to those found in

Caldeira's study. In his analysis of contemporary Brazilian films and television series that he sees as iterations of the "talk of crime," Eli L. Carter argues that such works "ultimately produce narratives that, each in their own way, remain silent with regard to the underlying reasons behind the crime and violence of which they speak" (81). Carter's study reinforces the idea that both the everyday "talk of crime" and most crime fiction, including audiovisual examples, explore notions of disorder being brought into order and create a simplistic division of the world into two opposing sides. In effect, this pattern has an established tradition, one that can be found in the classic detective novels of the English tradition dating back to the late 19th century, as Ernest Mandel observes: "[T]he crime story is based upon the mechanical, formal division of characters into two camps: the bad (the criminal) and the good (the detective and the more or less inefficient police)" (42). In such stories, characters are classified according to two basic literary "types" (the criminals and the detectives or the police), and order is restored with the arrest of the perpetrator by the end of the story.

Crime fiction, in its classic forms, ultimately became known in Brazil through translations of British, North American, and French narratives. During the 20th century, Brazilian authors developed their own brand of crime fiction, closely modeled after hard-boiled narratives, a subgenre that became popular in the late 1920s. Hard-boiled fiction served as an excellent vehicle for Brazilian authors to criticize police corruption and widespread crime due to its emphasis on organized crime in urban settings, the use of graphic violence, and the presence of a detective anti-hero. Additionally, Antônio Cândido notes that among the plurality of genres and styles present in the literature produced in Brazil during the second half of the 20th century, some authors, such as Rubem Fonseca and João Antônio, began to produce a kind of prose that he names *realismo feroz*, emphasizing thieves, prostitutes, beggars, and corrupt policemen (210). The choice for a more "ferocious" realism in crime fiction continued through the end of the 20th century, as evidenced by the works of Patrícia Melo, one of the most well-known followers of Fonseca's style, who began publishing in the 1990s.

Karl Erik Schølhammer reaffirms this tendency towards realism in Brazilian crime fiction, noting that the works from the turn of the millennium are marked by the "penetração da realidade documental

da violência da ficção e da ficção na violência espetacularizada, num coquetel perigoso” (“A violência” 76). Given such representations of violence as spectacle, Schølhammer states that the distinction between reality and fiction consequently becomes increasingly blurred. As an example, he notes the 2000 live television broadcast of the kidnapping of a bus, during which the kidnapper yelled at the television cameras, “This is not a film!” One of the artistic responses to the incident was the creation of hybrid forms of fictionalized documentary (“A violência” 79-80), such as the 2002 documentary *Ônibus 174*, directed by José Padilha. Such films illustrate the normalization of violence in Brazilian society to the extent that real news could easily be confused with fictional accounts, further reinforcing the idea that the crime fiction of the period is in fact an extension of the “talk of crime” studied by Caldeira.

In this context, Barbosa’s “Círculo Vicioso” and Freire’s “Esquece” stand out against the cultural production of the turn of the millennium for their unique approaches to language and form. Furthermore, their works ultimately call for a historical understanding of crime and violence by drawing attention to the link between the violence of colonization and contemporary iterations of urban violence.

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND OF TIME

In “Círculo Vicioso,” Brazilian journalist Roberto Guedes travels to the River Plate region to conduct interviews for an article about the aftermath of authoritarian regimes in the Southern Cone. While in Montevideo, he hears of the murder of a female professor who could have been one of his sources for the article had she not been stabbed to death on a historic street in Colonia del Sacramento. As a result, he decides to visit the town in order to investigate. While in Colonia, Roberto hears the legend of “La Monja,” a Portuguese woman who, in 1706 during the violent Spanish invasion of what was then Portuguese territory, was captured and subsequently confined to a convent along with the physically and mentally ill. As he continues his travels, Roberto visits Buenos Aires and meets Claudia, who goes on to become a professor before she is also murdered on the street in Colonia del Sacramento.

The story, then, presents three distinct time periods that dialogue with one another through narratives of violence: the colonial past, the 1960s to the 1980s, and the turn of the new millennium. While

violence is a constant across each of these periods, it is not of the same nature throughout, rather, violence, as it is represented in the text, shifts from the violence of imperial wars, to the violence of authoritarian regimes, and, finally, to the violence of present-day urban crime. Although each of these periods of violence ultimately culminates in suffering and death, giving the impression of cyclical repetition, the particular nature of and agent behind each cycle of violence take significantly different forms in each case. While the wars of the colonial period represent a struggle over territory by exterior forces aiming to control the bodies, property, and land of the local population, military regimes, on the other hand, function as an internal power that takes control of the nation's government through the exercise of force. Finally, urban crime in Barbosa's story is an anonymous force that once again threatens bodies and property, however, without any identifiable source or foreseeable limits.

The colonial past in "Círculo Vicioso" is set in Colonia del Sacramento, a town founded by the Portuguese in 1680 on the banks of the River Plate opposite to Buenos Aires. Its location was of strategic significance to both the Portuguese and the English, who used Portugal as an intermediary to avoid direct conflicts with Spain throughout the early modern period. Situated at the mouth of the River Plate, the town granted easy access to the English ships that smuggled silver from Potosí to Europe. Although a series of treaties between Portugal and Spain attempted to solve the disputes over the region, including the 1750 Treaty of Madrid, such negotiations ignited the Guaraní War, part of a larger Iberian conflict in the River Plate region that continued until 1777 with the Treaty of San Ildefonso, under which Portugal ceded Colonia del Sacramento to the Spanish. By tapping into the history of Colonia del Sacramento as a site of constant conflict between Spain and Portugal, Barbosa highlights the role of the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers in producing violence through territorial wars in the southern region of the Americas.

Throughout the story, Roberto Guedes observes repeating patterns of violence, surrounded in each case by mystery, which allow him to relate violent events from different historical periods. Roberto notices the first of these connections when he goes to Colonia in order to investigate the death of Professor Martínez. Roberto does not accept the official story that she was merely a victim of the increasing criminal violence taking place in both large and small towns. Given

that Martínez was going to be a source for his article about the dictatorships of the Southern Cone, Roberto sees a connection between her death and the violence of the dictatorship: “[A]quele incidente voltava sempre e cada vez mais vivo à sua cabeça e à sua imaginação, como se estivesse preso a um carrossel de tempo, como se a morte da tal professora tivesse a idade e o peso de todas as outras mortes com as quais ele vinha se envolvendo e revolvendo desde que saíra de Porto Alegre” (30). Although Roberto understands Martínez’s death as related to the violence of the dictatorship, everyone else in town readily accepts the typical story of mugging followed by murder.

Roberto’s reluctance to accept the official narrative of Professor Martínez’s murder encourages the reader to understand contemporary manifestations of violence as part of a greater historical legacy. In contrast to classic detective narratives, Roberto’s search for clues is not so much a pursuit of one sole perpetrator as it is an attempt to connect the professor’s death to state violence during military rule. Roberto’s resistance to accept the official story of her death suggests a belief that someone (or some group) is trying to block access to information about the past. As the protagonist, Roberto’s skepticism guides the reader to also reject the passive acceptance of another crime and follow him on his search for answers.

The second instance in which Roberto connects the present to the past occurs as he strolls through the historic neighborhood of Colonia, arriving at the ruins of the Convento de San Francisco Javier, an experience he describes as a convergence of distinct historical moments: “[F]oi como se uma lufada seca de vento trouxesse a um só tempo a força dos três séculos de passado entranhados nas ruínas mais antigas do Uruguai. [. . .] [E]le sentiu a voz longínqua, [. . .] uma dor como que acumulada no tempo e naquele pequeno espaço” (32). The next morning, Pepito, an employee of the hostel where he is staying, tells Roberto that what he heard or, rather, felt was “La Monja.” Although Roberto does not recognize the female voice he senses, his initial encounter with the ruins calls attention to the architecture of Colonia as an expression of time and history. The ruins, then, come to serve as a material manifestation of historical time.

In “Círculo Vicioso,” the story of “La Monja” represents an urban legend centered around the figure of a nun who casts a curse over the city of Colonia del Sacramento. According to Pepito, “[D]espués de morir, su dolor continuaría vivo en nosotros, y que las

bandas de Colonia se quedariam [*sic*] para siempre una región mediocre, eterno palco para la violencia y la arbitrariedad” (33). This local legend serves as an explanation for the persistence of violence in the region. While the legend reveals a popular preference for the belief that present conditions are the result of magical forces, I propose an allegorical reading of the legend that evidences a historical consciousness. By reading the legend of “La Monja” as an allegory and, as such, acknowledging the significance of the fact that “La Monja” was Portuguese and that the commander of the army responsible for sending her to the convent was Spanish, the Iberian colonizers are ultimately responsible for the “curse” on Colonia del Sacramento, that is, the condition of persistent violence in the region. Thus, the legend serves to connect the past to the present, suggesting the notion of contemporary violence as a historical legacy of the past.

Ultimately, Barbosa constructs a circular time with its center in the space of Colonia del Sacramento, which serves to reveal how violence repeats itself over the course of history. This treatment of historical time differentiates Barbosa’s short story from the Brazilian crime fiction of the turn of the 21st century by presenting a coincidence of events that brings the narrative closer to fantasy, thus moving away from realism. Although Barbosa represents a real city and a series of historical events, he also tells a story that incorporates the fantastic wail of “La Monja” and the seemingly fatalistic coincidence of the professors’s deaths by stabbing on the streets of Colonial del Sacramento. As a result, the story discusses historical events without necessarily attempting to document the historical reality, an uncommon strategy in comparison to other examples of Brazilian crime fiction produced at the turn of the millennium.

Overall, literary critics seem to agree that contemporary Brazilian narrative is, at least for the most part, a reformulation of realism. In fact, Flora Süssekind argues that Brazilian naturalism had three *surtos*, or “outbreaks”: literary case studies of the late 19th century, the social novel (or *romance social*) and memoirist styles of the 1930s and 1940s, and, finally, the non-fiction novel (or *romance reportagem*) of the 1970s (*Tal Brasil* 71-72). Reflecting on the state of Brazilian narrative in the 21st century, Süssekind’s view of the Brazilian novel is similar, reaffirming the prevalence of *neodocumentalismo*, a genre situated between fiction and ethnography (“Desterritorialização” 62). Across these cases, there is a clear intent to document reality closely

related to journalistic writing. While Süssekind's study refers specifically to the Brazilian novel, the characteristics she mentions are also true of the short story. David Jackson affirms this link between the origins of the short story as a genre and newspapers. Consequently, the modern short story is influenced by journalism and often operates as a chronicle of daily life (18). Although Jackson recognizes the existence of a mode of short stories that experiments with less realistic experiences, he states that realistic descriptions prevail regardless in contemporary literary production (16).

"*Círculo Vicioso*," however, goes against realist conventions through its portrayal of a journalist researching Southern Cone dictatorships, which incorporates elements of fantasy, especially in relation to the murders that occur throughout the short story, which share far too many similarities to be understood as a sheer coincidence. As Masé Lemos explains, Barbosa utilizes the fantastic in order to break the dichotomy between reality and fiction, which ultimately serves as "[uma] maneira de questionar a própria consistência do chamado mundo real, organizado e congelado pelo cotidiano. O artista se afasta de um realismo ingênuo e tenta buscar pela linguagem um real impossível de ser representado, pois se dá sempre como criação" (81). Lemos argues that words cannot capture reality, since the "truth" of an event is constituted by interpreting it through the act of writing. She affirms that the narrator of Barbosa's short story, in taking up the task of writing, is therefore a witness to violence and, by extension, historicizes violent events in history, even if they do so through fiction (82). Her analysis suggests that although Barbosa's text uses fantastic elements, it also functions as a historical document, if one expands the concept of history itself. When placed in conversation with the fiction studied by Süssekind, Pellegrini, and Schølhammer, it becomes evident that "*Círculo Vicioso*" brings something new to contemporary Brazilian fiction, namely, its concern with memory and historical consciousness.

THE PATRIARCHAL INHERITANCE

Another element found in Barbosa's short story that traces violence back to the colonial era is the representation of the violence of patriarchy. In "*Círculo Vicioso*," the direct victims of violence are three women: the 18th-century figure of "La Monja," Professor Martínez, and Claudia. Regarded by public opinion as mere victims

of urban crime, Martínez and Claudia were both engaged in academic research on local folklore in Colonia del Sacramento when they were murdered. Both women were also engaged in judicial fights related to the crimes committed by the military dictatorship in Argentina. Significantly, both professors are women who crossed the traditionally feminine space of the private realm in order to join the traditionally masculine public sphere to the point of challenging the state. In this sense, the professors's search for knowledge and justice is comparable to an attempt to open a kind of Pandora's box, potentially containing information troublesome for the official history, and not necessarily sanctioned by the patriarchal society in which they live and operate. These women are ultimately guilty of an unwise curiosity, which Marilena Chauí discusses in the context of patriarchal thought of classical antiquity as "um peculiar 'desejo de saber' catastrófico, uma tentativa para desocultar o oculto, um impulso à transgressão que contrasta paradoxalmente com a imagem da docilidade e da obediência" (28). On a symbolic level, then, these women are punished for their disobedience of the patriarchal boundaries between public and private space and the culture of silence that discourages their own self-expression, as well as, so Roberto seems to think, for going against the patriarchal state in attempting to uncover the hidden truths of the military dictatorship.

This short story also gives attention to the image of the deceased female body, specifically, in photography, recalling a tradition of representing dead or near-dead women throughout the history of the visual arts. In the story, the first female victim, Professor Martínez, has no voice, rather she is reduced to the image of a dead body that appears in a photograph in the newspaper. Claudia, the second victim, has some voice in the narrative through her interactions with the protagonist, Roberto, expressing her views through free indirect speech. Claudia, however, ultimately suffers the same fate as Professor Martínez as she too becomes a photograph in the newspaper. Speaking of Claudia's death, the narrator comments: "[O] que ficou, de concreto, foi o corpo ainda belo de Claudia, apesar da idade e da violência das facadas; o que ficou foi mais uma mancha de sangue junto às ruínas do Convento de San Francisco" (45). Once dead, Claudia remains only the image of a dead body, although marked by its beauty, as the narrator emphasizes. By highlighting her beauty despite her age, the narrator, intentionally or not, in his description

reproduces patriarchal attitudes, further demonstrating how women remain trapped within the patriarchal state, under the male gaze and represented in masculinist language across time.

Moreover, the narrator's comment dialogues with 19th-century literature and art. As Márcia Tiburi states, “[A] principal imagem de uma mulher, bem como a essencial imagem ‘da mulher’ na história patriarcal moderna é a imagem de uma mulher morta” (304). Tiburi explains how the painted image of Shakespeare's Ophelia, for example, specifically the representation of her dead body, has been transformed into an object of contemplation and a clear example of the Romantic ideology that worships the cadaveric woman (303). She affirms: “Não sendo mais nada a contar, mas demonstração, a pintura define a estase do corpo feminino, um corpo sem narrativa, sem história, corpo reduzido à notícia de sua morte; estase que permite sua configuração como objeto, bibelô fetichizado da contemplação que em seu extremo é morte” (315). In this way, although Barbosa represents female academics with some agency, both women end up as beautiful dead bodies in a photograph, echoing popular 19th-century imagery. Consequently, their deaths are a reminder of the perpetuation of patriarchal thought throughout history, as well as in art and literature. What is more, the perceived beauty of Claudia's dead body relates to local popular discourse about the 18th-century figure of “La Monja,” particularly, the story of her capture: “A jovem, que ‘tenia la beleza [sic] de un angel enamorado,’ dizia Pepito já inteiramente esquecido de seu portunhol, fora preservada da violação e levada pelos soldados até o comandante da tropa espanhola como prêmio pelo sucesso da missão” (33). Similarly, “La Monja” is also characterized by her beauty. While the legend says that all of the houses in Colonia were ransacked and all women older than the age of thirteen were raped in 1706 when the Spanish invaded the territory, “La Monja” was saved from being raped by the soldiers because of her beautiful body, turned into a war trophy of sorts to be awarded to the commander. Rather than save her, her beauty simply places her under the control of someone of a higher rank, ultimately leaving her powerless.

When “La Monja” refuses to lay with the commander, she is punished to confinement and her son is taken from her. Although this act represents an instance of resistance on the part of “La Monja,” as small as it may be in the context of widespread war violence, her rejection of sexual objectification ultimately leads to her isolation

and subsequent questioning of her own mental sanity. Her insistent petitioning for her child is said to have been a “ladainha, que mais parecia uma oração” (33), implying extensive and tiring speech. Moreover, Pepito’s recounting of the legend suggests that “La Monja” was considered a madwoman with a nonsensical and repetitive story, who “por sua história sem nexo e a ideia obsessiva, fora mantida enclausurada até terminar o último dos seus dias” (33). In a way, the repetitive aspect of the story of “La Monja” echoes the overall structure of Barbosa’s short story, in which the circularity of time and the persistence of patriarchal thought and institutions contributes to the idea that contemporary urban violence is in fact connected to other manifestations of violence of the past.

MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION AND OPPRESSION

In contrast to Barbosa’s short story, Marcelino Freire’s “Esquece” offers distinct elements that trace present-day crime and violence in Brazil back to the colonial era. Instead of presenting a circular narrative like Barbosa’s “Círculo Vicioso,” Freire’s short story introduces the idea of repetition formally by reproducing the same words in the beginning of each short paragraph. An experimentation with form, the story is composed of a list of affirmations that each start with the phrase: “Violência é [. . .].” Although repetition is a trope consistent with Caldeira’s findings on the “talk of crime,” in this fictional short story, each paragraph represents a reflection on the concept of violence that provides a unique way of understanding the subject that extends beyond the legal concept of crime as a punishable violation of the law.

Throughout the story, the narrator, who doubles as the narrative’s protagonist, provides the perspective of a black person of the lower classes in an urban center. In the text, it becomes clear that he is preparing to commit a crime: robbery. As a result, rather than being narrated from the perspective of a “detective” (or an investigative journalist), as in the case of Barbosa’s story, the narrative is told from the perspective of the criminal. Here, the narrator speaks for a collective group, expressed in Portuguese as “a gente.” The term is ambiguous enough to evoke a larger group of people (“the people”), while still being understood by a Portuguese-speaking audience as “we” or “us,” since “a gente” is often more commonly used than the personal pronoun “nós.” In this way, the point of view presented as the collective perspective of a group is explicitly racialized as black:

“Violência é ele ficar assustado porque a gente é negro” (31). This affirmation is an essential element for the politicization of the story’s statement, which redefines violence as institutionalized racism and redefines urban crime as a historical legacy of the colonial past.

The definitions of violence provided by the narrator, although independent from one another, follow a chronological order that in turn forms a narrative, beginning with a robbery on the street that leads to a black man’s arrest and subsequent incarceration. A key element, however, is the short story’s epigraph, a lyric written by Marcelo Yuka of the Brazilian band O Rappa, which states: “Todo camburão tem um pouco de navio negreiro” (31). This affirmation connects the African slave trade of the past, as well as slavery as an institution, to contemporary police violence against Brazil’s black population, and, by extension, to the rigged system of justice that does not treat white Brazilians and black Brazilians equally. Furthermore, the text’s epigraph also calls attention to means of transportation that in turn represent means of oppression in the hands of those in power, namely, ships and cars, which historically have been used to traffic humans to force them to work against their will in a distant land and to arrest and mistreat a specific group, often without giving them fair trial or treatment.

It is also important to acknowledge that the African slave trade to Brazil started in the mid-16th century and did not end until the 1850s. What is more, slavery did not end when the slave ships stopped crossing the Atlantic Ocean, nor when Brazil gained its independence from Portugal in 1822. In fact, Brazil was the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery, sustaining the system until 1888. By then, the sugar plantation system that had supported the colonial economy had declined, and economic and political power had shifted to the coffee plantation owners of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The elites of the 19th century began promoting European immigration to replace their workforce and “whiten” the population, which was justified by the belief that Brazil was a backward country due to its blackness (Winant 79). Consequently, Brazilian history is tainted not only by slavery but also by the later rejection of freed blacks who continued to be affected by institutionalized racism. It is this history precisely to which “Esquece” alludes through the epigraph, serving to connect the violence symbolized by the slave ship to that represented by the image of the police car throughout Freire’s short story.

Following the epigraph, the story begins with another means of transportation that comes to signify a means of oppression: the rich man's car. In the first paragraph of the short story, a rich man's car becomes an instrument of violence: "Violência é o carrão parar em cima do pé da gente e fechar a janela de vidro fume e a gente nem ter a chance de ver a cara do palhaço de gravata [. . .]" (31). The *carrão*, a slang term for an expensive car, is the new vehicle of oppression in the neoliberal era because it separates the "haves" from the "have-nots," both spatially and symbolically. The main problem for the narrator, however, is the attitude of indifference embodied by the man wearing the tie, who stops his car on top of the protagonist's foot and closes his car's tinted windows to prevent the protagonist from seeing his face. This attitude serves to dehumanize the protagonist as it suggests that, for the rich man, the black man's body has no value and his pain does not matter. By closing his tinted window, the rich man avoids looking at the black man and denies recognition of the figure of the Other as human.

At the end of the story, when the protagonist is in jail, the *carrão* returns as another reminder of his marginalized position in society: "[. . .] pensando em como seria bom ter um carrão do ano [. . .]" (33). The daydream the protagonist has while in jail reflects the contradictions of the neoliberal economy, which excludes and exploits the people, while simultaneously stimulating dreams of consumption that are beyond the reach of those living on minimum wage. Freire's short story illustrates the systemic violence that Slavoj Žižek attributes to "[as] consequências muitas vezes catastróficas do funcionamento homogêneo dos nossos sistemas econômico e político" (10). As opposed to visible violence that has identifiable agents, systemic violence is not only subtler but also sustains existing relations of domination and exploitation (Žižek 18). Moreover, systemic violence fundamentally resides in the impossibility of attributing such violence to concrete persons with evil intentions, given that, at the current state of global capitalism, such violence is anonymous (Žižek 20).

What Žižek does not discuss in his analysis of systemic violence, however, is that in the case of Brazil, as in many other Latin American nations, the concentration of wealth in the hands of white elites has been a part of the country's history since its colonization. Moreover, the unequal distribution of economic wealth has been based in large part on the exploitation of slave labor. As Alfredo Bosi observes:

“na formação do sistema exigiram-se reciprocamente tráfico e senzala, monopólio e monocultura” (26). The system, then, allowed for the distribution of large properties of land to a very select group of people, who produced one crop for exportation, controlled by the metropolis, with the labor required to produce such crops performed by black slaves. Bosi states that this system influenced every area of Brazilian society, not just the economy. In effect, the colonial condition also affected personal and interpersonal existence, including memory, dreams, and ways of eating, living, praying, dying, among other practices and behaviors (Bosi 27).

Bosi also debunks the myth of a racial democracy, a concept widely used by scholars to describe Brazil’s supposed absence of racism due to miscegenation, which circulated during the 20th century and still influences the many ways Brazilians think of themselves. Bosi affirms:

Os vários modos da chamada *assimilação* luso-africana e luso-tupi adquirem, vistos por essa ótica, um revelo tal que acabam deixando em discreto ou subentendido segundo plano os aspectos estruturais e constantes de assenhoreamento e violência que marcaram a história da colonização tanto no Nordeste dos engenhos e quilombos quanto no Sul das bandeiras e missões. (27; emphasis in original)

Bosi questions the idea that certain characteristics innate to the Portuguese colonizers allowed for peaceful racial mixing, interactions and solidarity, arguing that in reality the colonizers appropriated indigenous and African customs and traditions for their own convenience as they adapted to life in the tropics, also using indigenous and African bodies for work and sex (28). Moreover, the myth of racial democracy hides the violence of this appropriation by romanticizing slave/slave owner relations. Although the system inaugurated in colonial times has since been modified, at least on the surface, its general structure has been conserved over the centuries through present-day global capitalism.

In his short story, Freire uses means of transportation, such as the slave ship, the *carrão*, and the *camburão*, to symbolize the problems inherent to this system. The slave ship responsible for forcibly transporting African slaves to Brazil from the mid-16th through the

19th centuries sees its distorted reflection in the Brazilian police car that transports criminals to the station, the infamous *camburão* into which the alleged perpetrator is thrown through the trunk door. Both forms of transportation imply a sense of humiliation, as the protagonist affirms: “Violência é a gente ficar de cabeça baixa em frente à multidão e depois entrar no camburão roxo de humilhação e pancada [. . .]” (32). The protagonist refers to the police’s tendency to treat those who are being arrested, not as a fellow human, but rather as an inferior who is assumed to be guilty until proven contrary. As a literary text, the short story’s statement on violence functions as both a social commentary and a narrative device, conveying to the reader the consequences of the robbery for the protagonist.

The police, then, appear in “Esquece” with similar problems to those represented in other examples of crime fiction in Brazil. Characteristic of the greater national tradition, Brazilian crime fiction has criticized the police since the genre’s origins. Beginning with Coelho Neto’s *O mistério* (1920), considered by many critics to be the first Brazilian detective novel, Sandra Reimão confirms the author’s denouncement of the police’s pact with the ruling classes, subordination to the press and public opinion, use of violence to gather information, and participation in criminal activities (15). Reimão also points out that the issue of impunity is also typical of Brazilian detective novels: “A temática do crime impune que pode ser vista como um espelho ficcional da descrença de todos nós, brasileiros, na eficácia de nosso sistema judiciário-penitenciário se torna mais complexa e a função que acabamos de atribuir-lhe é reforçada se atentarmos para a presença de textos em que temos como desfecho a ‘justiça com as próprias mãos’” (39). As Reimão’s statement suggests, the problem of the police and the judicial system has been an ever-present reality for Brazilians. In “Esquece,” however, the problem is not impunity, but rather unfair judgment and the violation of human rights. Furthermore, Freire is explicit, through the use of language and themes, in his questioning of the police’s relationship with the Afro-Brazilian community specifically. In this way, the story destroys the Brazilian myth of racial democracy and highlights the institution of slavery as the root of contemporary problems such as urban violence.

Finally, modes of transportation in “Esquece,” namely, the slave ship, the police car, and the expensive car, take on another layer of meaning based in the fact that although they represent technologies

that offer mobility, in theory allowing people the freedom to come and go faster and farther, this mobility is not equally accessible to everyone. For the protagonist of “Esquece,” for example, such modes of transportation actually function as means of oppression, producing barriers, humiliation, and stagnation. The modes of transportation represented throughout the short story therefore help to defamiliarize the reader to preconceived notions of crime, as they characterize violence and exclusion as historical legacies of Brazil’s past.

THE VICTIM-PERPETRATOR

Another important element in Freire’s story that distinguishes it from other stories about crime is the oscillation of the protagonist’s position between victim and perpetrator throughout the text. Instead of presenting a simplified division of the world into good and bad, as observed in Teresa Caldeira’s study of the “talk of crime,” the text confronts the reader with a more complex and nuanced view of the world: “Violência é a gente naquele sol e o cara dentro uma duas três horas quarto esperando uma melhor oportunidade de a gente enfiar o revolver na cara do cara plac” (31). In this passage, it is clear that the protagonist intends to commit a crime against someone. Violence in this instance, however, is presented as the fact that his future victim has the privilege of enjoying a comfortable environment, while the protagonist must wait in the sun. By flipping traditional understandings of victimhood, Freire accentuates the issue of inequality. Although this change in perspective is not necessarily convincing to the reader, it juxtaposes two distinct types of violence discussed by Žižek: the objective and the subjective. Žižek states that subjective, visible violence, such as the crime the protagonist is about to commit, is constituted by acts that disturb the “normal” state of things. Objective, invisible violence, however, is understood as “normal” (Žižek 10). Although the fact that some people are able to enjoy comfortable environments while others do not is considered “normal” in Brazilian society, from the protagonist’s perspective it represents a form of invisible violence that serves as a reminder of his marginalized position, as well as an example of systemic violence.

What is more, according to Flávia Merighi Valenciano, “o conto é um ‘desafogo’ diante das notícias frequentes sobre o tema, veiculadas intensamente nos jornais e na televisão, através da lente das classes média e alta” (3). Freire’s story plays with dominant perspectives on

violence portrayed in the media and offers an uncomfortable alternative, recasting the usual victims—white middle and upper-class citizens—as “implicated subjects” in the execution of violence, to use Michael Rothberg’s term. The idea of implicated subjects “describes the indirect responsibility of subjects situated at temporal or geographic distance from the production of social suffering. It helps direct our attention to the conditions of possibility of violence as well as its lingering impacts and suggests new routes of opposition” (Rothberg). This concept is useful for considering the legacies of colonial violence, especially in the Brazilian case. The racial composition of Brazil’s social classes, characterized by a mostly white elite and mostly black and brown lower classes, makes it difficult to deny the historical legacy of slavery as a contributing factor to such social divisions. Consequently, both the rich man and the protagonist of “Esquece” are both implicated subjects in a history of violent exclusion and marginalization, despite any temporal distance from historical antecedents of violence. For this reason, issues of crime and violence must be understood as a collective problem of society as a whole.

The oscillating position of the protagonist, then, shows just how complex such relations are. In fact, the protagonist’s shift between perpetrator and victim throughout the story goes against the simplified and unambiguous world symbolically reordered through the “talk of crime” observed in Caldeira’s research. From the beginning of “Esquece,” the individual relationship between thief and robbery victim deliberately confuses the question of who is robbing whom. This question is further complicated when the police later catch the thief in the act, as the opposition switches from thief-victim to thief-police-state: “Violência é acabarem com a nossa esperança de chegar lá no barraco e beijar as crianças e ligar a televisão e ver aquela mesma discussão ladrão que rouba ladrão a aprovação do mínimo ficou para a próxima semana” (32). Here, the protagonist considers the fact that by being arrested he will not be able to go back to his children and watch television. Even so, the lack of punctuation connects one idea to the next so that what he sees on television is directly related to his house being a poor “shack.” The incomplete proverb “ladrão que rouba ladrão tem cem anos de perdão,” reminiscent of the legend of Robin Hood, ends with the news that the approval of the minimum wage has been postponed for another week. Clearly, the narrator is insinuating that although he may be a thief, he has also been robbed

by the state and by those who hold power. As such, he is motivated by a sense of injustice and the awareness that he has been wronged by society and the state.

On the other hand, the outlaw ideals suggested by the protagonist contrast with the opinions of anthropologist Luiz Eduardo Soares, who affirms that intellectuals and researchers have stopped idealizing the figure of the criminal because the very nature of criminals themselves has changed:

A violência se banalizou e assumiu escalas industriais, com a expansão do contrabando de armas, crescentemente poderosas e sofisticadas. Os laços com a comunidade de origem tornaram-se uma quimera. Hoje, em cidades como o Rio de Janeiro, as relações entre bandidos e população nos bairros pobres e nas favelas, são antes de mais nada tirânicas, apoiadas na difusão do terror. Há muito tempo Robin Hood aposentou-se. (30)

It is a fact that gangs have become huge operations that deal with millions of reals and that the violence generated by the trafficking of drugs and arms has affected the whole population of Brazil, including those living in the *favelas*. Soares does not mention, however, that from the perspective of the people living in the *favelas*, the police and the state are also a source of violence, reproducing racist behaviors inherited from as far back as the colonial era and unfairly targeting the black population.

Conversely, Freire reduces the scale of crime to a one-on-one encounter, calling attention to the issue of blackness in Brazil. Crime in this story, then, is not an organization challenging the state on a large scale, but rather an individual who seeks to speak for other black men living in similar situations. While the protagonist who commits the crime is himself performing an act of violence, he is also aware that the rich man is also carrying out violence through his own fear of blackness. Although Freire raises a complex dilemma by relativizing crime and violence through the figure of the protagonist, he also emphasizes the humanity of the criminal. The oscillating positions of victim and perpetrator in Freire's short story, therefore, serve as a device that challenges typical representations of crime in mass media and other crime fiction of the same period.

Finally, “Esquece” exemplifies Žižek’s understanding of violence. The robbery ultimately falls under Žižek’s definition of subjective violence as it is visible and enacted by a clear agent (9). On the other hand, the victim’s racism against the thief represents an instance of objective violence, which is invisible and part of the greater economic and political system. This system is, in effect, a legacy of the colonial period, when indigenous lands were taken and millions of Africans were brought to Brazil as slaves. Ultimately, the temporal distance from such events does not exculpate those in the present of their complicity in maintaining and adapting such systems to modern technological and epistemological changes, rather it renders such people implicated subjects that have continued to uphold structures that reproduce modified forms of violence.

CONCLUSION

The title and final words of Marcelino Freire’s short story are the same: “esquece.” Highlighting the issue of memory, the word “esquece” is, on the one hand, an oral expression of frustration, generally used when a speaker believes their interlocutor will not understand what they are saying. On the other, the word also suggests the notion that society often forgets its history. Brazilians may have forgotten, or perhaps conveniently ignored, the slave ship that led to the police car, just as Latin Americans may have forgotten the fact that the same systems established by colonial powers in the early modern period still persist in the present.

In effect, what both Amílcar Bettenga Barbosa’s “Círculo Vicioso” and Marcelino Freire’s “Esquece” do is call out for remembrance. The use of circular time in Barbosa’s story connects former and present instances of crime and violence, portraying women as victims of violence throughout history, and, as a result, opens up a discussion of the legacy and persistence of patriarchy in the present. Similarly, Freire’s “Esquece” uses modes of transportation as symbolic reminders of the legacies of slavery, while also exploring the oscillating positions of victim and perpetrator, in order to emphasize the continued presence of systemic violence within society. Through the use of such elements, both Barbosa and Freire offer examples of crime fiction that prioritize a discussion of Brazil’s national history, while also distancing themselves from dominant realist modes of representation that tend to reproduce more simplified views of crime and violence.

What is more, these short stories also transcend the parameters of the “talk of crime” studied by Teresa Caldeira, complicating the world that such discourses tend to simplify. In “Esquece,” the divisions between good and evil are problematized, leading to the humanization of a traditionally criminalized group. In turn, “Círculo Vicioso,” although it fails to break from patriarchal thought, refuses to understand urban crime as entirely isolated from historical legacies of violence. As a result, both short stories challenge traditional ideas about crime and violence present in the “talk of crime,” including representations of crime and violence in mass media and literature, which are often blind to the historical roots of contemporary urban violence. Instead, these texts encourage the reader to remember Latin America’s long history of inequality and exclusion.

Notes

1. During the economic miracle, Brazil’s GDP grew 11 percent per year and the country saw a decline in inflation (Hermann 62).
2. Fonseca is arguably the most important author of contemporary crime fiction in Brazil.
3. Even though Caldeira’s study focuses on São Paulo, many of her conclusions can easily apply to other Brazilian cities, given that currently there are seventeen cities with more than one million inhabitants in the country.

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