
HIP-HOP, PERIPHERY, AND SPATIAL SEGREGATION IN SÃO PAULO

Teresa P. R. Caldeira

In the last two decades, both urban violence and democracy took root in Brazil. Instead of serving to deter each other, violence and democracy expanded in interconnected, paradoxical, and sometimes simply surprising ways. The urban spaces of metropolitan regions, especially their poor peripheries, constitute a dimension of Brazilian society in which we can observe both an inventive engagement with democratization and some of its most dramatic limits. In these cities, violence and fear are entangled with processes of social change, generating new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination. Fortified enclaves – private and privately surveilled spaces for residence, work, and leisure of those who can pay for them – constitute a central instrument of segregation. In the last years, however, a series of new cultural and artistic movements created in the poor peripheries of São Paulo have articulated responses to both urban violence and to the new forms of urban segregation. The most visible and influential of these movements is certainly hip-hop. In this paper, I show that São Paulo's rappers produce a powerful critique of Brazilian society, as they try to articulate a means of controlling the proliferation of violence and death among young residents of the poor peripheries. Paradoxically, though, they also recreate some of the

terms of their own segregation, as they symbolically reinvent the periphery as an isolated ghetto. Thus, they construct a position of self-enclosure that is paralleled by upper classes' practices of enclosure and their protest against their exclusion ends up contributing to the reproduction of segregated spaces and intolerance.¹

Hip-Hop: Speaking from the Neoliberal Periphery

This verse from the rap *Genesis* by Racionais MC's (Rational MC's) summarizes in a nutshell their perspective:

I have an old bible, an automatic pistol, and a sentiment of revolt.
I'm trying to survive in hell.²

The Racionais MC's are the most important of São Paulo's rap groups. They are formed by Mano Brown, Ice Blue, Edy Rock, and KL Jay. Their project is to use words as weapons, to make people think, to be rational, to make information circulate, to denunciate, to build an X-ray of Brazil. Their mission is to take young men out of the path of drugs, alcohol, and organized crime. For them, this is the only alternative in a universe basically without alternatives, the only chance of life.

The Racionais position themselves in the periphery, identify themselves as poor and black, express an explicit class and racial antagonism, and create a style of confrontation that leaves very little space for tolerance and negotiation. Their raps establish a non-bridgeable and non-negotiable distance between rich and poor, white and black, the center and the periphery. Racism is one of their most important denunciations. The members of hip-hop not only are mostly black but also assume publicly and confrontationally their racial identity in a society that has preferred to deny racial categories in the name of an illusory «racial democracy» and in which denunciations of racism have been absent from most forms of popular movements.

1. This paper results from an ongoing research on gender and youth in São Paulo. I have developed the fieldwork for this project between July 2001 and December 2002, and in the summer of 2003. I would like to thank the institutions that have generously supported this research: J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship, Fapesp, Núcleo de Estudos da Violência from the University of São Paulo, and Program in Latin American Studies of the University of California, Irvine. The analysis presented here is part of a larger study on violence, re-significations of justice, and hip-hop that will appear in a volume organized by John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff on «Law and Disorder in the Post-Colony».

2. «Eu tenho uma bíblia velha, uma pistola automática e um sentimento de revolta. Eu tou tentando sobreviver no inferno», *Sobrevivendo no Inferno*, 1997.

The Racionais MC's speak from the periphery about the periphery and to the periphery's residents, especially young males. In São Paulo as in Los Angeles or New York, raps are interpretations of the conditions of life in the deteriorated spaces of post-industrial cities offered by their young residents. *Periferia* is the referential space of the Racionais. But the periphery they rap about is a re-signified space.

In São Paulo, as elsewhere in Brazil, poor workers have settled in cities by building by themselves their own houses in the outskirts of the city and, in the process, urbanizing the metropolis. Their autoconstructed houses in the peripheries are not the same as the *favelas*, which occupy invaded property, while autoconstructed houses are built on land that has been bought by their owners, who thus have claims to property ownership. Starting in the mid-1970s, numerous neighborhood-based social movements appeared in the poor urban peripheries of Brazilian metropolitan regions. Their participants, a majority of them women, were new property owners who realized that political organization was the only way to force city authorities to extend urban infrastructure and services to their neighborhoods. They discovered that being taxpayers legitimated their «right to have rights» and their «rights to the city», that is, rights to the legal order and the urbanization (infrastructure, piped water, sewage collection, electricity, telephone services, etc.) available in the center. The urban social movements were central actors in the political process that brought the military dictatorship to an end and in the constitution of a new conception of citizenship.

In the last 15 years, the peripheries of São Paulo have undergone contradictory processes of improvement and deterioration. The state responded to the demands of social movements with investments that improved the urban infrastructure and indicators such as infant mortality and with the regularization of developments. The combination of infrastructural improvement and regularization radically changed the status of the peripheries in the cityscape, a transformation analogous to that of the political status of their residents obtained through the organization of social movements.

Nevertheless, as the peripheries improved, and as democratization took roots in Brazil, the conditions that sustained industrialization, development, and social mobility eroded. They started to collapse in the 1980s with what is called the «lost decade.» They continued to change as a result of the adoption of «structural-adjustment» policies. Some of the effects of these changes have been high unemployment rates, worsening of an already bad distribution of wealth, and erosion of perspectives of social mobility.

Certainly, one of the aspects that contribute significantly to deteriorate the conditions of everyday life in the peripheries is the sharp increase in violent crime. Violent criminality has increased continuously in Brazil since the early eighties, and São Paulo's homicide rates of around 65 per 100,000 inhabitants is one of the world's highest. In São Paulo, homicide has become the main cause of death of young men (the third for the total population) and has made life expectancy for men decrease in four years in the last decade. More dramatically, the police have been responsible for about 10% of the homicides of São Paulo's metropolitan region in the last 15 years. Most cases of homicide and of police killing happen in the peripheries, not in the center.

In sum, although the urban space of the peripheries improved and the political citizenship of their residents expanded, their civil rights have shrunk and their everyday lives have deteriorated as a consequence of various processes that increased the uncertainties under which residents have to shape their lives.

As hip-hop members reflect on the conditions of life on the outskirts of the city, they transform the quite diverse peripheries into a symbol: *a periferia*. As this new symbol, the periphery is homogenized to represent the worst social inequalities and violence. Not all residents of the peripheries, and not even the majority of them, share the interpretation of the periphery articulated in this recent symbol. Probably, the people who share this view are only a minority. However, the rest of the population cannot ignore the view that represents them so powerfully and that places their areas once again on the center of political debate.

The members of hip-hop are mostly young, the first generation of children of migrants born in the poor neighborhoods of the city which their parents built dreaming of becoming property owners and modern citizens. However, the conditions they encountered in the peripheries are quite different from those of their parents. They are part of the first generation to come of age under both a democratic political system and the effects of neoliberal policies, such as high unemployment, less formal jobs, and a new «flexible» culture of labor. From many perspectives, their parents succeeded in their dreams of social mobility, and their own insertion in the city, in its modern consumption market, and in its public sphere of political debates and communication, are signs of this success. However, while their parents believed in progress, they feel that they have few or even null chances of social mobility. They think of themselves as marginal and excluded, not as citizens, although they exercise daily their citizenship rights of integrating a public debate and creating a public representation of themselves. They grew up at a moment

in which possibilities of incorporation were matched by their immediate undermining, when the expansion of consumption came with unemployment, broad access to the media with the realization of their distance from the worlds they represent, formal education with its disqualification in the job market, better urban conditions with violent crime, democracy with injustice. From this location they create one of the most powerful critiques of social inequality, injustice, and racism ever articulated in Brazil.

In rap after rap, the Racionais MC's describe the poverty and the precariousness of the periphery where they live and where they circulate, its everyday violence, and lack of alternatives. Many times, they contrast life in the peripheries with that in rich neighborhoods, exposing a clear class antagonism, as in the rap *Fim-de-Semana no Parque* (Weekend in the Park), by Mano Brown, from 1993, in which they describe a black boy from the periphery observing an upper-class neighborhood and its club equipped with all types of facilities:

Look at that club, how cool!
Look at the little black boy seeing everything from the outside
...
He doesn't even remember yesterday, the future
He only dreams through the wall...

In most of their raps, the Racionais portray the periphery as what I call a space of despair. Several of their raps are painful to listen to because of the powerful way in which they describe the proximity of death, refer to various dead friends, and express the vulnerability of life in the periphery. «To survive here, one has to be a magician. ... Death here is natural, it's common to see», they affirm in the rap *Rapaz Comum* (Ordinary Kid), by Edy Rock, from 1997. «If you want to destroy yourself, you're in the right place», they affirm of the periphery in *Fim-de-Semana no Parque*. The Racionais tirelessly reiterate the elements of this space of despair: the constant violence, the naturalness and proximity of death, drugs, alcohol, organized crime, and feuds among brothers. These are the things one has to resist to be able to survive. Poverty is something people can deal with. The trick is to avoid these things that lead to death. «To die is a factor... The true trick is to live.» This is their argument in another famous rap, *Fórmula Mágica da Paz* (Magic Formula for Peace), by Mano Brown, from 1997. They also conclude:

Here your life is worth very little,
our law is faulty, is violent, is suicidal.
[...] Scary it is when one realizes
that all turned into nothing
and that only poor people die.
We keep killing each other, brother, why?
Don't look at me like this, I'm like you.
Put your gun to rest,
Put your gun to rest.
Enter in the train of *malandragem*,
my rap is the rail.

The Racionais describe themselves as survivors, because they escaped the lack of alternatives of the periphery, or rather, they escaped its destiny, the main alternative it presents to the young men, which is fratricide. There is always the violence of the police, but the main cause of death is poor brothers killing each other. Their description of a process of widespread reciprocal violence reminds us of what René Girard calls a sacrificial crisis, a crisis of distinctions in which men are leveled by violence and in which there is an impossibility of maintaining the difference between good and evil. In the indistinction of the universe of violence and death, they try to trace a line. They discover that the real trick is to live when «to die is a factor.» And they want, maybe romantically, to use rap to show to other young men (yes, only men, as they do not talk to women, do not see them as equal, and in fact only despise them) what may separate life and death.

The line separating life and death, right and wrong, heaven and hell, violence and peace is thin indeed. Distinctions are unstable and, therefore, there is always ambiguity. They live side-by-side with *manos* (still brothers) who made other choices, who did not have the strength to resist the drugs, money, the appeal to consume, crime. And they understand why they make these choices – «nobody is more than nobody else», they repeat. Members of the hip-hop movement carry guns, as do so many *manos* in the peripheries, and display them on most of the covers of their CDs and on their sleeves. They sympathize with the faith of those inside prisons. The culture of São Paulo's prisons and of hip-hop share many elements.

What does allow them to trace this narrow path that separates life and death? First of all, there is reason and word. They think, they are the Rationals; their words are weapons. But they alone do not have so much power. Thus, they evoke God and

the *orixás* (the gods and goddesses from Afro-Brazilian religions) to help them to «stop in the middle of the way.» Gods and the old Bible end up being the only guarantors of the distinctions. In the absence of a trustworthy justice system, given the impossibility of trusting the authorities, above all the police that only kill, there is God. This is their argument in the CD *Sobrevivendo no Inferno* (Surviving in Hell), in one of their most famous raps, *Chapter 4, Verse 3*, a reference to Psalm 23, «The Good Shepherd».

I came to sabotage your reasoning!
I came to shake your nervous system and your blood system!
...
Look, nobody is better than nobody else, look.
Look, they're our brothers too.
But from cocaine and crack, whisky and cognac
the *manos* die quickly, without notice.
But who am I to talk about who sniffles and smokes, not possible
I've never given you anything!
You smoke what comes, clog your nose,
drink whatever you see,
make the devil happy!
You will end up like that other *mano* there, who was a «type A» black
Big style
Calvin Klein's paints, Puma sneakers,
and a humble way of being, working, going out.
Liked funk, played ball,
picked up his black girl at the school door.
Example for us,...
But he started to hang out with the white guys at the mall,
That was it!
Ih! *Mano*, another life, another mood,
Only elite girls, parties, and various drinks
Whores from boutiques, all that shit.
Sex without limit, Sodom and Gomorrah
Hah, it has been like nine years ...
I saw the *mano* 15 days ago.
You'd have to see, asking for a cigarette at the bus stop,
Bad teeth, empty pocket

The guy smells, provoked fear!
High, I don't know of what, early in the morning!
No longer poses any danger:
addicted, sick, fucked, inoffensive!

...

Brother, the devil fucks everything around him!
Through radio, newspaper, magazine, and billboard,
he offers you money, speaks softly.
He contaminates your character, steals your soul,
Then throws you in the shit alone!
Ya! transforms a «type A» black into a wimpy black!
My word alleviates your pain, illuminates my soul
Praised be my Lord!
Who doesn't let the mano here go astray.
Ah! and neither put the fingers in a stupid guy
But no son-of-a-bitch ignore my law:
Racionais, Chapter 4, verse 3!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Racionais!
For the *manos* from Baixada Fluminense to Ceilândia,
I know, streets are not like in Disneyland!
From Guaianases to the extreme south of Santo Amaro,
to be a «type A» black is hard!
It's fucked.

...

I had no father, I'm not an heir
If I were that guy who humiliates himself at the traffic light
for less than a buck, my chance would be little,
But if I were that punk
who cocks the gun and puts it in your mouth «for nothing.»
Without clothes, you and your girl,
One, two! Not even saw me! Already disappeared in the fog!
But not...
I remain alive, I follow the mystic!
27 years old, contradicting the statistics!
Your TV advertisement doesn't deceive me,
Hah! I don't need either status or fame.
Your car and your money no longer seduce me,
and neither does your blue-eyed whore!

I'm only a Latin-American boy
 supported by more than 50 thousand *manos*!
 Collateral effect made by your system,
 Rationals, Chapter 4, Verse 3.

To be a «type A» black who defies the statistics and remains alive is hard. He must escape violence, always, but also resist many other seductions and temptations that «transform a 'type A' black into a wimpy black.» The only source of protection is God «who does not let the *mano* here go astray.» But if a young black man survives in the space of despair and temptations, he is subversive. He sabotages your (our) reasoning. And the sabotage seems to be multiple. He sabotages the system, the statistics, the reasoning of the elites, the racist status quo, which destines him to death in the periphery. He sabotages the pattern of reciprocal violence and indistinction that makes the brothers kill one another. But he may also sabotage the usual ways of conceiving of democracy and a democratic public sphere by marking a non-negotiable position of exclusion, drawing rigid boundaries to the brotherhood, and testing the values of tolerance and respect for difference. They sabotage the assurance of a democratic project that ignores the task of protecting the bodies of the subalterns.

For the Racionais, what makes a «type A» black is *atitude* (attitude). This expression, which is also present in the lexicon of American hip-hop, acquires a more prominent and central role in São Paulo's hip-hop. «*Ter atitude*», or «to have attitude», means to behave in the proper way that supposedly will help to keep one on the side of life. It means to avoid drugs, alcohol, and crime; to be loyal to your *manos*; to be proud of the black race; to be virile; to avoid ostensive consumption and proximity with the upper classes; to avoid the mass media; to be loyal to the periphery; to be humble; to avoid women. In other words, the brotherhood is kept together by this strict code of behavior that those who consider to be their spokesmen do not hesitate in enforcing in quite authoritarian terms, as they do in the rap *Júri Racional* (Rational Judgement) in which they condemn in the strongest of the terms a black man that they consider to be a traitor of the race.

From the brotherhood are excluded not only the usual suspects (rich, white, policemen, politicians) and those with the wrong attitude. Excluded also are their sisters – all women. Maybe the only women treated with respect in the raps are their mothers who suffer, cry for them, and give them character. Verses despising women abound. The list of faults attributed to women is more detailed than those attributed to rich whites and

sometimes the words used to refer to them are more offensive (as are those used to refer to the black «traitor»). There are several possible conjectures to be made in relation to such an anxiety in relation to women. It could be remembered that women in the periphery seem to have another relationship with the position of marginality, as they continue to be educated, to enter the labor force and find jobs, to support and head households, to raise children by themselves. I would argue that the denigration of women (even if black) as well as the harsh judgment of the black «traitor» are part of the same trend. This is the need to police the boundaries of a community that is kept together on the basis of «attitudes» and which has no tolerance for difference. This task of policing is easy in relation to the obvious «others» but becomes a cumbersome deed when it has to separate those who are «equal but not quite.»

The periphery is a space of huge uncertainties. The generation of youth to which rappers belong grew up at a moment in which the strong belief in progress and social mobility that have structured the lives and actions of the previous generation of residents of the periphery has vanished. Moreover, the culture of labor that anchored working class culture and their sense of dignity, especially male, has lost reference in the context of unemployment and job informality. When the loss of these references combine with the constant presence of police harassment and murdered friends, «daily life becomes a perpetual dress rehearsal for death», as Zygmunt Bauman puts it.³ No wonder, then, that anxieties about betrayal, loyalty, appearance, and the evil eye should be high and that trust becomes something to be carefully constructed and difficult to obtain.

Democracy and Enclosed Spaces

In recent years, numerous movements in Brazil have exposed the inequalities and injustices that condition the lives of the working poor and their spaces. The social movements of the seventies and eighties certainly did this. But their perspective had two crucial differences in relation to hip hop's. First, the social movements countered the negative images of the periphery by presenting a positive image of themselves as hardworking families and property owners. In other words, they questioned the elite's images of themselves, but not their values of property and progress. Second, they articulated their demands from a position of inclusion. They placed themselves inside

3. BAUMAN, Zygmunt, cited by GILROY Paul, « "After the love has gone": bio-politics and etho-poetics in the black public sphere », *Public Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 69, Duke University Press, 1994.

of the political sphere and indeed forced the expansion of its parameters so that they could fit in. The law and the state that the residents of the periphery engaged with and that incorporated them during the democratization period have protected their political rights, improved at least partially their spaces and even protected their property rights; but they were unable to protect their bodies and lives, especially if black and male. It is this vulnerability that the Racionais and the hip-hop movement dramatically express. As they do this, however, they articulate for themselves a position of enclosure. Their intolerance of difference (any difference, in fact, remember the sisters) sets limits to the kind of community and politics they may create. They think of the periphery as a world apart, something similar to the American ghetto, an imaginary that has never been used before in Brazil to think of the peripheries. Moreover, democracy is not a word in their lexicon. Their evocations of justice are not necessarily those of citizenship and the rule of law – as were the ones of the social movements. Theirs is a moralistic order, and one in which difference has no place.

This construction of a position of self-enclosure gets to be especially problematic when one considers that it is paralleled by other practices of enclosure, this time from the upper classes. For some time, groups from the upper classes have been creating spaces of isolation for their activities, from housing to work, from entertainment to consumption. These are fortified enclaves kept under the surveillance of private guards. When both sides of the wall think of themselves as enclosed and self-sufficient, what are the chances of democratization? What are the chances of the construction of a less unequal and segregated city and a democratic public space when intolerance is evoked to build the communities on both sides of the walls?
