'You should go back to where you belong': reflections on race, space and identity

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Abstract: In an effort to explore black women's geographies the aim of this essay is to reflect upon space as a category that can both differentiate and constitute racial identities. *Where* you are may also inform *who* you are, as practices of domination are spatialized. The study on black women's geographies disclose how place gives meanings for black lives but also constructs blackness in paradigms of racism and sexism. To make possible connections on how space can constitute spatial (racial) identities, the biographic novel Child of the Dark of Carolina de Jesus ([1960], 2000) will be read together with the theoretical work of McKittrick on her book *Demonic grounds* (2006). Even though the purpose of this work does not allow us to engage deeply with McKittrick's philosophic project on sexism-racism, it surely helps reading of Carolina de Jesus, a black Brazilian writer that identified as *favelada* kept being 'put in her place'.

Keywords: racism; space; black geography; identity.

Black matters are spatial matters

This essay brings an initial reflection on the relation between space, race and identity. In order to understand the complexities subjacent to this debate I build on the theoretical work of Katherine McKittrick on her book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006). Her reflections on black geographies open questions that are useful to explore the spatial identity of the *favelado* in the metropolis of urban Brazil and the possibilities of unveiling racial identities, spatialized forms of domination/resistance and the various faces of racism. Even though the purpose of this work does not allow us to engage deeply with all her debates on sexism-racism, it surely helps the reading of Carolina de Jesus, a Brazilian writer that was always identified as *favelada* and kept being 'put in her place' regardless her possibilities and desires of 'being elsewhere'.

On *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick argues that concealment, marginalization and boundaries are socially produced, and for the matter she is concerned, organize *where* racial-sexual differentiation occurs. We all produce, know and negotiate space, but the geographies of those in the diaspora have been marked by racism and sexism. Black spatialities have been either 'ungeographic' or caught into spatial binaries "placement and displacement, segregation and integration, margins and centers, migration and settlements" (p. xiv), which are not complete, but classifies the *where* of race. It is, then, important to demystify the idea of space as associated with stasis or physicality, as if space "just is", as a neutral category that only 'contains' social complexities and relations. Then, sexism and racism are not only bodily, or identity based, but also spatial acts, as making place underscores the production of differentiation.

"Black matters are spatial matters", racism has mostly dictated the possibilities of blacks in the diaspora (in the Americas) to negotiate and produce space or knowledge about it. Thus, McKittrick proposes a different vantage point to look at the production of space or narratives over spaces, the vantage point of the *black look*. Her argument is that black geographies or black women's geographies have the potential to contest the unitary vantage point of traditional geography that, in her words, "naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong" (p. xv). The black look can challenge this seductive approach to space – the one connecting to stasis or neutrality.

Both historical and contemporary black subjects have not only been (physically) producing space, but also making imaginary place for the traditional geographic project through displacement and placement. In her words "the connection between geography and blackness is crucial to identifying some conditions under which race/racism are necessary to the production of space" (p. 12). When looking at "insides and outsides, borders and belongings, and inclusions and exclusions", projects of domination become visible as spatial projects, determining *where* social differences or social order happens. The naturalization of difference creates a common sense around the bodies that belong, those bodies that do not belong, and those which are out of place, naturalizing also practices of domination. Whereas blackness is being conceived as 'ungeographic', racial narratives are centered in the dispossession, rarely around ownership and human life.

For McKittrick, a great contributing of Fanon to black geographies is his bodily schema, showing the mutuality of identity, self and place. His sense of place is always reoriented in racial terms, when his black body encounters the white world. Fanon described how the forces of racism 'imprisoned' his body when he was frequently told "to stay within bounds, to go back where I [he] belonged" (p. 25). When Fanon is said to 'be in his place', he learns that the black body has physical limits that are not supposed to be crossed. He also embodies this experience by producing his self, his identity and his place through violent processes of racialization and objectification that renders him hypervisible (when 'out of place', in the white world) but with a distorted sense of place. In McKittrick words:

A black sense of place, then, is produced by and through long processes of racialization; it is not necessarily a bound or unintelligible place for the black subject, but the condition of 'all-too-human' existence, which is understood through the displacement of difference and future possibilities. (p. 28)

Recalling Harriet Jacobs or Linda Brent, and her tale *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*[1] McKittrick articulates the concept of "paradoxical space", central to her reflection on sexism-racism. The garret renders paradoxical because it discloses contradictory forms of captivity, concealment, resistance and freedom. Brent is free from slavery, which is still a life-threatening and violent condition. On the other hand, her bodily pain, the children abandonment and the uncertainty make her optional place also a source of punishment. However, Brent's narrative can tell a different history, it allows for the investigation of "alternative geographic options within and through racial-sexual oppressions" (p. 43). Narrow approaches to Brent's positionality could render her both as victim and as having a heroic trajectory. What McKittrick affirms is that even though Brent is confined, she is also free, and this is the paradox – her freedom was relational to strategies undertook within the reality of sexism and racism.

McKittrick is also arguing that some racial spatialities - as the display of the naked black body in the auction block-, where *central* to the construction of the "whiteness" and the white femininity, and central (not marginal) to the sexual-racial domination. In depicting this landscape, she directs a critique towards an insistence on locating black

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[1] The narrative tells the story of Linda Brent, an enslaved woman that decided to flee from captivity to save herself and her children, but before reaching freedom in New York she had to hide in her grandmother's garret (a small space where she could not even stand), where she had to stay for seven years before managing to safely leave.

theories, black geographies, blackness in the *margin*. According to her, even if the use is metaphorical in theoretical argument, it contains a materiality of "real margins and real centers" (p.57), and this corroborates with a geo-conceptual of spatial stasis. The margins are not centers, and in that way, this is prohibitive language. We should ask why the margins are constantly cast as the metaphor. Periphery is also a convenient argument of dominance, while constructed as a place inhabited by the subaltern and non-white bodies, it is a site of dispossession, it is an ungeographic space and then, easy to empty out, to ignore. By working with stereotypes, dehumanizing those put in that location, is put to work ideologies of dominance like sexism and racism.

Finally, she makes her concluding thoughts in dialogue with Sylvia Winter and her philosophical debates over the creation of the Man. Winter's argument in relation to the 1492 conquest is how Man (the white Christian European) had to be both ontologically described in relation to the 'new world' and its inhabitants as well as physically represented to bodily schemas of differentiation. The uninhabitability of the land (New World -unimaginable for Europeans, categorized as *res nullius*) had to be mapped to transform into profitable resource, had to be inhabitable. For that, uneven geographies were put into place to define the social differentiation from the abnormal to 'the normal way of living'. The normality is always constructed in opposition to its contrary, so the uninhabitable should remain so that could be the inhabitable.

As the creation of the Man is simultaneous with the invention of the Other, Man's overrepresentation in geographic terms relate to how both representations are built in relation to each other. The struggle against the overrepresentation of Man challenges the naturalization by global capitalist processes of stigmatization of "the homeless, the underdeveloped, the jobless, the incarcerated" (p. 126), those unlivable-uninhabitable places. Those stigmatized 'others' - bodies/places - illustrate the overrepresentation of Man's geographies which are produced while erasing dispossessions and desires. McKittrick argues that "those who occupy spaces of Otherness are always already encountering space and therefore articulate how genres or modes of humanness are intimately connected to where we/they are ontologically as well as geographically" (p. 133). McKittrick's philosophical encounter with Sylvia Winter helps deepening the

comprehension of how the colonial project of creating 'otherness' was intimate related to the creation of spatial differentiations.

(Un) reading Carolina

Carolina de Jesus is a Brazilian writer and poet whose life as well as intellectual production rendered numerous studies and publications. Her first book was published in 1960 entitled *Quarto de Despejo: diário de uma favelada* - published in English as *Child of the Dark*. It was an editorial success and accomplished great international attention[2]. The fascination around Carolina's testimonial narrative is quite reveling, from the editorial choices to the construction of a character. Her first book is a compilation of her daily writings, telling her experience as resident in the *favela* Canindé, São Paulo, between the years of 1955 to 1960. The poverty described in detail, the starvation, the efforts to survive is a real narrative of everyday struggle, yet the way she was (and still is) referenced also allows reflections on spatialization of blackness and the spaces of absolute 'otherness'.

Specialists on Carolina's biography and literature show how the editorial choices made for the first publication were meant to create a character, the *favelada* writer (Perpétua 2003; Coronel 2011). The editor of her first edition of *Quarto de Despejo* made changes in her texts so to eliminate any elements of erudition, substituting her words for more popular expressions. The intent was to adapt her 'language' to her 'social [racial/spatial] condition'. According to Perpétua, the modifications of Carolina's text were meant to converge into a character that was strong, attentive to the problems in the community, but also passive, submissive and without individual freedom. On the other hand, Carolina was 'sold' as the voice of the *favelados*, as the representative of an undifferentiated collective of those in extreme poverty, what she never intended to be.

Editorial choices that 'put Carolina in her place' were not only a phenomenon of the 60's. For this work, I am reading the 8th edition published in 2000 and there is an 'editorial choice' not to correct the language of Carolina (orthographic or grammar

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[2] It was translated into 13 languages and published in 40 different countries.

errors) to keep the 'authenticity' of the text. According to the editorial the "grammar errors give the text more realism" as her personalistic style "trespasses the limits of the individual, giving voice to the collective of anonymous miserable that inhabits the shacks and cracks of bridges in the large Brazilian cities" (editorial, p. 169). One can wonder if there would ever be such an 'editorial choice' if she was not *who* she was, *where* she was. Carolina was known as a 'marginal writer' who fought against the 'marginality' that defined her, as Coronel explicates (p.70).

A recent polemic around Clarice Lispector biographer, Benjamin Moser, gives a very illustrative example of how Carolina is depicted until today. Moser is being currently accused of racism since a stretch of his book, published in Brazil in 2011, has been circulating on social media. In a passage he describes the encounter of Clarice Lispector with Carolina de Jesus, when the later was staring the autographing evening of her *Quarto de Despejo*. The photography and the entire passage of Moser's book were published in Revista Cult[3] and I translate here in length, as the words speak for themselves:

'In a photo, she appears [Clarice Lispector] standing next to Carolina Maria de Jesus, a black woman who wrote a disturbing memoir of Brazilian poverty, Quarto de Despejo, one of the literary revelations of 1960. Next to the proverbially beautiful Clarice, with the clothes and the big dark glasses that made her look like a movie star, Carolina seems tense and out of place, as if someone had dragged Clarice's maid into the picture,' writes the biographer on page 25.

Carolina is 'out of place', as a writer, as a poet, in the 'white world' she can just be accepted as an aberration, exceptional permission for the amusement of the (white) audience, from its exoticism. Out of the *favela* there is no place for Carolina, what was clear from the editorial disinterest for her fictional production[4]. Like Fanon, she learns there are lines that should not be crossed. Carolina was always a writer and a poet, and she did not consider otherwise, she kept crossing lines. Her criticism towards the *favela* could be even seen as a protest towards the confinement, the boundaries – political, intellectual, epistemic - it represented. Carolina wanted a 'brick house' ("*casa de alverania*"), which is both a physical location and an imaginary, desired one. She was *favelada*, but she was, above all, a black woman in a racist-sexist world.

The multiple (white/external) constructions around this place – *favela* -, keep placing it as hierarchically inferior or negative, or even exotic or abnormal. It is the uninhabitable place, necessary to the existence of the inhabitable one, as McKittrick and Sylvia Winter point out. The *favela* is depicted as containing sub-humans[5], so it is there just waiting to be dispossessed. McKittrick's reflection about the 'ungeographic' black space and its relation to possession and dispossession is telling the history of urban Brazil, it tells the relation of the *favelas* and the constant processes of dispossession. Canindé, for instance, is a place existing only in Carolina's book, is was already erased (the community was evicted to give place to an avenue, where today is the Marginal Tietê). Those places are cast as disposable for the convenience of the hegemonic geographic project but remain alive as sites of memories.

Carolina does not describe the *favela* as a black place, nonetheless, for the outside world, *favela* is a racialized space. Dialogues in the book referred to 'the blacks from the favela' in general terms - "*as negrinhas da favela*" (Jesus, 2000, p. 150). McKittrick herself goes to similar reflection when she tells us that "it wasn't until I moved to Toronto that I came to read these places [where she was born and raised] as black", even if today

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[4] She publishes her fictional production *Pedaços de Fome* (1963) at her own expenses. (Coronel 2011, 70)

[5] Carolina recalls a moment when a politician came to the slum and was astonished with what he saw and asked out loud "Are those people from these world?", she laughed at him and answered "We are ugly and badly dressed but we are from this world indeed" (p. 128).

they are demographically white, she learns that "these very locations were also inflected with all sorts of meaningful racialized archives" (Hudson et al, 2014, 233).

Carolina was writing diaries in the late 1950's, her intent was not to reflect upon racism particularly, yet her testimony is a register of everyday racism and its spatial dynamics. In her description of various situations of violence, discrimination and segregation, she cannot make a separation between being a black woman and a *favelada*. It is also difficult to distinguish the discrimination she suffers from *where* she writes, this location, from her condition as a black woman. *Favela* becomes the only place "she should be", the only possible location she is always described as belonging to, despite her own wish not to accept the confinement.

We are poor, we have come to the banks of the river. The banks of the river are places of garbage and of marginalized. (...)

The brick house neighbors look at the favelados *with disgust. I catch their hateful glances because they do not want the favela here. That the favela misrepresented the neighborhood. They are disgusted with poverty. They forget that in death all become poor. (p. 48-49)*

And when we are at the end of life, we know how our life has gone. Mine, so far, has been black. Black is my skin. Black is where I live. (p. 147)

In several passages of her narrative she reflects on the relation between white dominance and violence towards the black body. She has a conscious that "Brazil is predominated by the white" (p. 102), most probably her parents were born in captivity. Due to the strength of the testimony and consciousness of the racial-spatial conditions I bring again her words:

May 13. It's a nice day for me. It's the day of Abolition. Day we celebrate the freedom of the slaves. ... in prisons blacks were scapegoats. But whites are now more educated. And they do not treat us with contempt. May God light up the whites so that the blacks will be happy. (...) And so on May 13, 1958 I was fighting against the current slavery - hunger. (p. 27)

(...)

August 1. I was paying the shoemaker and talking to a black man who was reading a newspaper. He was disgusted with a civil guard who beat up a black man and tied in a tree. The civil guard is white. And there are certain whites who turn black into a scapegoat. Who knows if this civil guard ignores that slavery has already been extinguished and we are still in the regime of the whipping [chibata]? (p. 96)

(…)

There were sacks of rice that were in the storerooms and rotted. They got thrown out. I was horrified to see the rotten rice. (...) I thought: why is the white man so wicked? He has money, buys it and puts it in the warehouses. Play with the people like cats and mice. (p. 130)

Carolina was a woman aware of her spatial-racial-gendered condition. She lived in a life-threatening environment within and outside the *favela*, for being a woman, single mother of three children. To protect herself and her family within the favela - where she was not respected for not 'having a man'-, she used the 'word' as a weapon. For Carolina, the *favelados* feared her because she was a writer and often threated to write about them on the magazine[6]. Outside, Carolina knew people 'fear' the slum, then she used that to protect herself, "*é só dizer que é favelado*", even men feared her (p. 73). This racial-spatial identity protected her from the outside world, where she worked as a paper collector. She learned to perform different identities to survive from/through sexism and racism.

Carolina was often described with sorrow and pity, as a victim of misery or as the 'voice of the collective of the *favelados*'. Nonetheless, *favela* for Carolina, like the garret for Brent, was the place of her chosen freedom. Carolina was a single mother by choice – she was affirmative of not having a husband to oppress her – even though many times she understood the price of her option. Being a paper collector was also a choice, she liked the freedom she could not have as a domestic worker – she could not stand the humiliation. For her, those processes were temporary and necessary to reach the 'brick house', what would come from her work as a writer. The *favela*, as the possible place of choice in Carolina's narrative is a paradoxical space. But instead of containing just misery, it contains freedom. Then what freedom, it is certainly limited to existing oppressions that she lived: sexism and racism.

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[6] Before her first book, a serious of articles with parts of her diary were published in a famous magazine, O Cruzeiro.

Unfinished (spatial) conclusions

Bodies that belong, bodies that do not belong, citizenship, refugees, workers, domestic workers, sex workers, politician, diplomat, business visa, golden visa. French *banlieus*, American ghettos, Brazilian *favelas*, are a categorical fabric (Quiñonez 2016) that constantly caught blackness in spatial binaries of 'inclusion and exclusion', 'possession and dispossession', 'being and non-being'.

Katherine Mckittrick have dedicated theoretical efforts to show how power relation are spatialized, centralizing black women's geographies. She opens various arguments of analysis, with different possibilities to re-write or re-invent erased cartographies. The history of Carolina gives us ground for an initial reflection about the space of the black woman in Brazil and how the *favela* is both the confinement and the hypervisible place of the exotic and absolute otherness.

The challenge though is to avoid putting those narratives within the margin, reinforcing boundaries, closing the possibilities of making space. Talking about race and space should not lead to reinforce the spatial confinement of blackness, on the contrary, in denouncing how the black bodies have been 'put in their place', in recalling practices of dispossession, we question space as a neutral category, we attempt to unveil ongoing processes of domination. Finally, we challenge the 'whiten space' as the normal, in contrast of what is constructed as subnormal or just forgotten or erased.

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