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107 Days and Counting...

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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my experience of social/physical distancing in Brazil, one of the current epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic. I draw upon Achille Mbembe and Denise Ferreira da Silva to explore how necropolitics underpins the Brazilian Government's response to the crisis, framed by a colonial and racialised logic that privileges whiteness and trivialises the deaths of Brazilians. I conclude the essay by making reference to my track *107 jorna (107 days)*, written on 1 July (and premiered online by the Glasgow-based Lights Out Listening Group), where I combine Sicilian speech and electronic noise in order to articulate my own astonishment, impatience and indignation with the current situation.

Keywords

Pandemic; Brazil; Italy; Death; Racialisation; Musical composition

Introduction

When I began writing this essay it was roughly five months since my family and I had started our quarantine in João Pessoa, the easternmost city in Brazil, and capital of the northeastern state of Paraíba. To this day, we are still mainly at home, trying to avoid any form of physical proximity with people from outside. I say 'mainly' as very recently, encouraged by a consistent fall of infections and deaths in our city, we started considering the idea of going out for groceries and for other essential tasks.

Starting from the end of February, as immigrants—proudly not 'expats'—coming from Italy, we experienced two main phases of the COVID-19 global crisis. In March and April, with shock and despair, we were following the daily death bulletins coming from Italy; from May

onwards, the progressive easing of the situation in Italy coincided with the escalation of contagions and deaths in Brazil. May 4 was a key date for us: the progressive easing of the lockdown restrictions that started in Italy coincided with the introduction of mobility restrictions in the municipality of João Pessoa that forbade access to squares, markets, beaches, parks and waterfront walkways. By that time, while the daily deaths curve in Italy had already fallen considerably, Brazil's curve was rapidly rising towards a peak that eventually would exceed one thousand deaths per day in June, only to hit a 'long, deadly plateau' that lasted four months ([Montes & Agarwal 2020](#)). The seven day moving average of daily deaths slowly descended from 997 on 22 August to about 300 at the beginning of November, only to worryingly skyrocket again to about 500 in a matter of a few days between 10 and 15 November ([Gaspar 2020](#)), heralding a second peak in many Brazilian cities, including João Pessoa ([Bertoni 2020](#)).¹ Although we had considered travelling back to Italy we resolved to stay in Brazil and wait for the worst to pass. In mid-November, at the time of submitting the last version of this essay, we reckoned that we might be equally in peril by staying in Brazil as returning to Italy.

Necropolitics, Self-Destructive Desires and Unworthy Victims

The constant minimisation of the pandemic and of its gravity, perpetrated by the Brazilian Government in the person of the current President of the Republic is too well known to deserve any recapitulation here.²

In his famous essay *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe coined the eponymous term by looking at 'those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations' ([2003](#): 14). The association of Bolsonaro's politics with signifiers such as 'genocide' and 'necropolitics' is in fact very frequent among political commentators. Gislene Aparecida dos Santos, Associate Professor at the University of São Paulo, directly connects necropolitics with COVID-19 deaths in poor and Black communities in Brazil:

Necropolítica é o modo como o Estado, por meio de suas políticas, decide, a cada minuto, quem vive e quem morre. Penso que, agora, isso possa estar ocorrendo em hospitais de todo o mundo. Não faltam dados para indicar que o tratamento das pessoas pobres e pretas, nos serviços de saúde, também é desigual. Se tiver que escolher, quem "o médico" escolherá para a UTI e para o uso do respirador, para o hospital com equipamentos de ponta e para o hospital de campanha? Podemos nos esquecer dos algoritmos que dão preferência a brancos, em detrimento do atendimento dos negros, como revela pesquisa de Ziad Obermeyer e outros?. Quem são as pessoas que apresentam, em maior medida, as comorbidades que as fragilizam para a covid-19? E por que apresentam tais doenças crônicas? ([Santos 2020](#)) [Necropolitics is the way in which the State decides, through its policies, who is to live and who is to die. I think that this may be occurring in hospitals all around the world at the moment. There is enough data available indicating the unequal treatment that poor and Black people receive from health services. Should the doctor have to choose, which patient will be sent to intensive care and provided a respirator? Whom will the doctor send to the best-equipped hospital, and whom to the field hospital? Can we afford to disregard the algorithms that prioritise white patients to the detriment of the quality of assistance provided to black patients, as

1 Update: as of 10 December, the second peak is confirmed as the moving average hit 642, while daily cases run on an average of 42,290.

2 Good introductions on the issue are Kibuuka ([2020](#)) and Jorge ([2020](#)).

Ziad Obermeyer *et al.*'s research reveals?³ Who are the people suffering to a greater extent from the pre-existing conditions which render them vulnerable to COVID-19? And why, in the first place, do they suffer from these chronic ailments?]

In this context, the growing scenario of trivialisation of death mentioned by Veiga (2020) may be deciphered critically by drawing upon Denise Ferreira da Silva's description of Brazilian society as characterised by a violent desire of 'erasure of the "Indigenous" and of the "African" in favour of the 'self-production of the European' (Silva 2006: 62). Silva explains that this desire positions Brazil's 'sujeito social subalterno mestiço'⁴ ['subaltern *mestiço* social subject'] as 'the subject of a destructive desire' and 'the agent of his/her own annihilation' (Silva 2006: 62). Critically addressing the work of Brazilian historian Gilberto Freyre, Silva argues that:

while the product of Portuguese desire, the *mestiço*, becomes the symbol of Brazil's specificity—being a fundamentally unstable figure as it is a temporary incorporation of Brazilianness and a necessary step for its real expression—the Brazilian subject is always white, because Freyre, like others before him, construes the Portuguese as the authentic subject of Brazilian history. (Silva 2006: 63)

Silva's critique of the racial imagery that inscribes *mestiçagem* is far from the positive uses of the concept proposed by Chicana authors like Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) or Chela Sandoval (2000). Other important contributions about *mestiçagem* in Brazil, such as those by Larissa Pelúcio (2012) and Maria Thereza Alves (2018), might also differ from Silva's view. Regardless of these different views on *mestiçagem*, all these authors seem to agree that the legacy of European colonialism has shaped and informed a self-inflicted genocidal logic (cf. Alves 2018: 34), by which, in times of pandemic, Brazilian deaths might actually appear to Brazilians as less tragic than European ones: 'Quando na Itália morriam 800 pessoas por dia, todos aqui estavam apavorados, mas e agora? No Brasil em média são 1200 por dia, mas não tem mais graça? Na Europa é mais chique morrer?' (Carvalho 2020) [When 800 people per day died in Italy, everyone here was terrified, but what now? In Brazil, on average, 1200 are dying per day, but is that not horrible anymore? Is death fancier in Europe?].

This trivialisation of death aligns with Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's notion of worthy and unworthy victims:

Our hypothesis is that worthy victims will be featured prominently and dramatically, that they will be humanized, and that their victimization will receive the detail and context in story construction that will generate reader interest and sympathetic emotion. In contrast, unworthy victims will merit only slight detail, minimal humanization, and little context that will excite and enrage. (Herman & Chomsky 1988: 35)

As a great dis-equaliser, COVID-19 therefore foregrounds—even more than usual—the intolerable racial and socio-political imbalances that characterise Brazilian society. I cannot refrain from connecting Ferreira da Silva's aforementioned claim that the Portuguese are construed as 'the authentic subject of Brazilian history' (Silva 2006: 38) with my own legacy as an Italian migrant in Brazil, and Italians' undeniable contribution to an entrenched settler colonial fantasy of whitening the country (Beneduzi 2011).

After the East Asian period of the pandemic (January–February) and the European period (March–May), and up until the deadly second wave in Europe (October–present), the pandemic had mainly become

3 The author refers to a 2019 paper titled 'Dissecting Racial Bias in an Algorithm Used to Manage the Health of Populations' (Obermeyer *et al.* 2019).

4 'Mestiço' [fem. 'mestiça'] in Portuguese, or 'mestizo' [fem. 'mestiza'] in Spanish, indicate mixed-race people. 'Mestiçagem' or 'mestizaje' indicates the condition of being mestiço/a or mestizo/a.

a developing countries' disease. Brazil, India, Mexico, Iran and Peru are among the ten countries with most victims, with Argentina and Colombia not far behind, the former having just hit 35,000 deaths on 13 November 2020 at the time of finishing this essay. Up until the second wave in Europe, the virtuous rich countries (except the USA) seemed that they had beaten COVID-19 and had started looking down at poor countries and labelling them as 'threats' (Pittet cit. [Chade 2020](#)).⁵ I noticed that when things started getting serious here and at the same time were easing in Italy and Europe, a sudden lack of interest from many Italian/European friends and relatives kicked in: these were people who we would often contact during the worst days over there to ask how were they doing and cheer them up. While they were getting back to life we were sinking more and more into an endless quarantine. The musical track I present in the last part of this essay is precisely a piece about being stuck in perennial isolation when thousands were dying around us, and people back home were hurting us with their indifference. Predictably, as the second wave in Europe spread, many of our COVID-related conversations with people in Italy restarted.

107 Days and Counting

My fixed-media piece [107 jorna \(107 days\)](#) was written on 1 July and premiered on 29 July 2020 during an online event by the Glasgow-based [Lights Out Listening Group](#). In *107 jorna*, I combine my own Sicilian speech, recorded sounds and electronically synthesised noise in order to articulate my own astonishment, impatience and indignation with the current situation. The 107 days mentioned in the title refer to the time since I started observing physical distancing:

107 jorna, that is, 107 days—and counting. I put this track together on 1 July 2020, exactly 107 days since 16 March, when we (myself plus my wife and son) started our quarantine. We're still in the quarantine, and it's been almost five months now.

The piece contains a spoken text composed of just a few sentences, characterised by various repetitions, that very simply outlines the current situation from my point of view:

107 jorna, 107 jorna, 107 jorna: chiossà ri tri mmisi, tri mmisi e mmenzu ca stamu ccà. I ggenti tunnanu a nesciri, e nuatri semu ccà, nfficcati rintra. Javi ru misi, tunnanu a nesciri, ddha bbanna finiu, e nuatri semu ccà, ancora, nfficcati rintra. [107 days, 107 days, 107 days, more than three months, three and a half months that we're here. People resumed going out, and we're here, stuck inside. It's been a couple of months, they resumed going out, over there it's finished, and we're here, still, stuck inside.]

I opted to write and recite a text in Sicilian as this is part of a precise artistic and political manifesto (see [Messina 2015](#)) and because I considered it the most appropriate language to convey my status as an immigrant (not expat) here in Brazil, while disavowing the hegemonic significance that Italianness imposes in this geographical context. My disavowal of Italianness, among other things, might be read as a response to Italy's disavowal of Italian citizens stranded in Brazil (and in several other countries), who were initially denied any help to get back home while their flights were repeatedly cancelled ([Focone 2020](#)) and then were literally prohibited to travel to Italy if not registered as a resident in the country before the decree ([Palma 2020](#)).⁶

⁵ More specifically, Pittet singled out the USA, Brazil and Mexico as the country to be wary of. What struck me about this claim was that it conveniently came a few days after Mexico surpassed UK to (provisionally) reach the third highest death toll in the world. In the context of the general reopening of Europe during the Northern Hemisphere summer, it was as if countries like Italy, the UK, Spain and France had suddenly ceased to be worrying pandemic hotbeds.

⁶ The legislation that regulates this travel ban is a decree of the Ministry of Health from 16 July 2020 <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/07/16/20A03912/sg>> [Accessed on 3 September 2020]

The recited text is placed against the backdrop of a domestic soundscape,⁷ composed of radio static noise, bits of voices, a blender, and some synthetically generated sounds. Clichéd fetishes of several generations of experimental composers, the radio and the blender are used in their denotative capacity as objects that materially constitute a part of the domestic space where I have been spending my quarantine; a space regulated by precise narratives that have specific political implications. Home, as an intimate family space compulsorily turned into a dedicated place for work—in my case musical experimentation and, most importantly, academic tasks such as teaching and research—hosts a series of everyday negotiations that have to do with one’s ‘conflicted identities’ within and outside the family, for example as a ‘worker, parent and partner’ (Armstrong 1995: 4; Keller *et al.* forthcoming).

In this context, the verbatim repetition of the spoken text is devised precisely to convey the endless cycles of life negotiations at home: while the weeks and the months go by and everything stays as it is, people keep dying and going out remains unsafe. On July 1 when I wrote the track, it was 107 days. When I completed the first draft of this text, on 6 September 2020, it was 174 days. In mid-November, at the time of revising this paper before publication, we are still counting the days of our quarantine here.

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⁷ While indebted to Schafer’s elaboration of the concept (1993), and to the original formulation of the concept by Southworth (1969), I situate this work within the general rubric of ecologically grounded creative practices (cf. Keller & Lazzarini 2017) and within the recent formulation of domestic ubiquitous music (Keller, et al., forthcoming).

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