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# Violent masculinities:

## Gendered dynamics of policing in Rio de Janeiro

### ABSTRACT

Historically, policing in Rio de Janeiro has been shaped by the equation of racialized violence and masculinity. Attempts to reform the police have paradoxically drawn on forms of male violence that are centered on the rational and professional use of force and on “softer” practices, such as dialogue and collaboration, symbolically coded as feminine. The failure of police reform reflects the cultural salience of understandings of masculinity centered around violence within the police, historical patterns of policing in Rio, and political actors’ strategic cultivation of male violence. Through Rio de Janeiro’s failed attempt at police reform, we theorize the relation between racialized state violence, authoritarian political projects, and transgressive forms of male violence, arguing that an important appeal of authoritarianism lies in its promise to carve out a space for performing what we call *wild masculinity*. [*masculinity, race, police, violence, gender, politics, favela, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*]

O policiamento no Rio de Janeiro é historicamente marcado tanto pela violência racializada como pela masculinidade. Paradoxalmente, as tentativas de reformar a polícia têm se baseado no entendimento de que formas de violência masculinas são centradas no uso racional e profissional da força e que práticas “mais suaves”, como o diálogo e a colaboração, são simbolicamente codificadas como femininas. O fracasso da reforma da polícia reflete a predominância de modelos de masculinidade centrados na violência dentro da polícia, padrões históricos de policiamento no Rio e o cultivo estratégico da violência masculina por atores políticos. Por meio da tentativa de reforma da polícia do Rio de Janeiro, teorizamos a relação entre violência estatal racializada, projetos políticos autoritários e formas transgressivas de violência masculina, argumentando que um dos apelos do autoritarismo reside na promessa de criar um espaço para realizar o que chamamos de masculinidade brava. [*masculinidade, raça, polícia, violência, gênero, política, favela, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil*]

**L**ean and muscular, Sergeant Nazareth was half a head taller than his fellow officers at the police unit in Rio de Janeiro’s Alemão favela.<sup>1</sup> Sitting in one of the squad’s bases, while rain poured down, Nazareth recalled his childhood (see Figure 1). Like many of his colleagues in the Military Police, he came from a poor, rural family of Afro-Brazilian descent. From a young age, Nazareth explained, his mother taught him he had to prove to the world that *não todo preto é ladrão*: not all Black people are thieves. “My parents always taught me to do things right,” he said, smiling. “Maybe that’s where I get my sense of justice from.”<sup>2</sup>

When he turned 18, Nazareth left home in the eastern state of Minas Gerais for Rio de Janeiro, living on the streets before getting a job at a beach kiosk. He earned a monthly salary of 300 reais (about US\$100), barely enough to pay his rent in a nearby favela. “But look, now I am a police officer. I didn’t turn out a thug. I didn’t turn out a drug dealer,” he said, with poorly masked pride.

Nazareth got married and his wife soon became pregnant. Since he could not provide for his growing family on his beach-kiosk paycheck, he signed up for the Military Police. But his motivation wasn’t purely financial. “I wanted action,” he recalled. “I had an idea of the police officer as this guy who goes to war, right? I was always watching war movies and such, thinking, *Damn, that’s cool!* So I entered the Military Police to try to change the world, right? I wanted to join BOPE [Batalhão de Operações Especiais, the paramilitary special operations unit] because I thought BOPE was the *real* police.” Yet he couldn’t pass BOPE’s demanding entrance tests. For 11 years he was stationed at a regular Military Police unit before being appointed sergeant of a Pacifying Police Unit (Unidade da Polícia Pacificadora, UPP), which had been created to wrest territorial control of select favelas from drug-trafficking gangs.

*AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 65–79, ISSN 0094-0496, online ISSN 1548-1425. © 2021 The Authors. *American Ethnologist* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved. DOI: 10.1111/amet.13005

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With his police salary, Nazareth moved his family from the favela to a home in a low-income suburb of Rio. Although the neighborhood bore little resemblance to the affluent neighborhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema, it was still one of the proudest moments of his life. For him, becoming a police officer was directly linked to becoming a man: the kind of man he had seen in action movies, the kind of man who could provide for his family, and, importantly, the kind of man who could buy a house. But the action-hero model of manhood that Nazareth drew on for validation was incompatible with the “proximity policing” model that police leaders and local authorities introduced at the UPPs. This was to be their new community-oriented policing strategy that emphasized dialogue and deescalating conflict.

The UPPs built on earlier institutional attempts and civil-society pressures to modernize and demilitarize Rio’s Military Police forces after Brazil democratized in 1985. Yet they emerged at a particular political and economic moment when Brazil was vying for status as a “modern” and progressive global power. The new police units were part of an ambitious public security initiative rolled out in Rio ahead of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics. To assert state control in select favelas dominated by drug traffickers, the Military Police sought to establish a permanent occupying presence.

Mirroring broader international trends toward humanitarian-centered approaches in warfare and policing, the UPPs were modeled on both UN peacekeeping forces and North American beat cops. They were presented to the public as a softer, gentler police force that included women (Fassin 2012; Lutz 2002; Saborio 2014; Savell 2016). Police authorities marketed them as a response to what was broadly perceived as an outdated, inefficient, and violent model of policing. The main aims of the UPPs were to reduce the level of armed violence in Rio de Janeiro and to challenge representations of policing as a war against crime and drugs.<sup>3</sup>

Patrol officers trained in human rights would be the honest and upstanding face of a new, modernized force (Menezes 2013). The UPP was, therefore, frequently described as pacifying not only the favelas but also the police themselves (Henriques and Ramos 2011). Centered on notions of preventive action and collaboration with local communities, the UPP initiative also indicated a changing perception of acceptable levels of state violence among the Brazilian public, which has historically supported killings in the favelas (Caldeira 2001; French 2013; Larkins 2015). With Brazil on the world stage, many viewed managerial and police reforms as emblematic of the country’s modernization.

But this is not how officers like Nazareth understood the UPP. Many of them had been attracted to the police force precisely thanks to its militarism, and they often complained that the focus on proximity and dialogue meant

they could no longer demand “respect” through violence. How is it that young recruits like Nazareth had such an aggressive view of their job, while other actors in Brazilian society sought to institute softer forms of policing? To what do we owe this difference, and how can it be emplotted in the anthropology of Brazil and in the anthropology of politics, policing, and gender? The police officers we study rejected the supposedly feminizing effects that “soft” forms of policing had on the UPPs, preferring to maintain their violent forms of masculine power. As a result, their violent masculine scripts put the UPPs in crisis, a crisis that we see as representative of the broader Brazilian political landscape as the Far Right grew increasingly influential.

Drawing on more than a decade of ethnographic engagement in Rio, we employ material from Tomas Salem’s research at the UPPs and read this data in tandem with Erika Robb Larkins’s ongoing fieldwork with drug traffickers, police, and private security guards. Our text focuses on a period of intensifying violence at the UPPs from January to July 2015, examining police training and patrol practices at five different UPPs and drawing on interviews with officers across the institutional hierarchy.<sup>4</sup>

### The politics of violent masculinities

The notion of a culturally produced *warrior ethos* is often used to theorize the link between political order, masculinity, and violence in Rio. This ethos is generally described as a hypermasculine, hegemonic formation that emerges in the context of the drug wars in the city’s favelas. In this context violence becomes a way for young, socioeconomically marginalized men to assert their masculinity (Oliveira 2010; Zaluar 2010). The warrior ethos concept has also been used to analyze workplace dynamics and male violence in the Military Police (Gripp and Zaluar 2017; Jaffa 2014; Mourão 2013; Sørboe 2020). Yet this concept is problematic insofar as it (a) traces the origins of male violence to the favelas, reinforcing colonial tropes of Black savagery and downplaying the state’s role in producing violent masculine scripts (Alves 2018), and (b) too strongly asserts the hegemonic quality of the warrior ethos, falling short in theorizing the fluid, complex, and multilayered relationship among different masculine scripts and gendered power relations.

As Nazareth’s story shows, the operation of violent masculinities in Rio is contingent on historical, political, and racialized social dynamics, which are insufficiently accounted for in the notion of a hegemonic warrior ethos. In the case of Nazareth’s career choice, the idealized imagery of warriorhood played a role, but so too did multiple notions of manhood, such as that of a stable family provider and moral citizen, together with these notions’ intersection with Nazareth’s racial and class identity.

In our analysis of violent masculinities in Rio de Janeiro, we draw on anthropological work that looks to

Deleuzian understandings of state dynamics and “war machines”: armed groups or forces, including military and paramilitary organizations (e.g., Civico 2016; Hoffman 2011; Mbembe 2003). In formulating these ideas, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) wanted to capture the constant conflict and tension between states and armed forces. They theorize states as structuring, hierarchical, or boundary-producing formations, and war machines as nomads: as transgressive, destabilizing, and ahierarchical forces that continually threaten the state’s authority. The relations between war machines and state formations are complex and can range from autonomy to incorporation. At moments, the state might even transform itself into a war machine or help create one (Mbembe 2003, 32). Mapped onto Brazilian policing, the concept of war machines has produced analyses that focus on how segments of the police sometimes operate outside the rule of law or act semiautonomously, mobilizing violence in pursuit of their own goals (Larkins 2013; Penglase 2014).

Although all social processes are constituted by negotiations between transgressive and structuring forces, the Deleuzian framework is especially well suited to analyze situations in which the state is at war with the people over which it claims control, or in which state governments struggle to control their own military or police forces, as is often the case in postcolonial settings (Kapferer and Bertelsen 2009). War machines are salient in postcolonial settings because colonies were historically configured as places where the judicial order could be suspended and where the sovereign right to kill often went unchecked (Mbembe 2003, 24–25).

In the empirical context that we examine—namely, the entanglements of state projects and violent masculine formations in Brazilian policing—we are concerned with how historical iterations of war machine and state dynamics shape contemporary practices of policing. In colonial Brazil the exercise of sovereignty was a male prerogative reserved for the European colonizer; recognizing this, we theorize the gendered dimension of contemporary police violence in Rio de Janeiro. Our analysis has implications beyond the Brazilian context, being particularly relevant to understanding the emergence of reactionary, strongman political projects and the intimate relations that these projects often cultivate with public security forces, vigilantes, and paramilitary groups.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, we see war-machine dynamics as those in which violence is disruptive, transgressive, or even boundless, resisting attempts to contain and direct it by, for example, establishing legal codes. Such dynamics are reflected in Daniel Linger’s (2003, 100) notion of “wild power,” or the “unregulated, unofficial, unpredictable, potentially annihilating, and therefore terrifying” exercise of male violence. He sees wild power as characteristic of Brazil’s military dictatorship, but we also see it expressed in the terror

of colonial projects (e.g., Taussig 1987). As a model for exercising transgressive male violence, wild power constitutes a masculine performance that we call *wild masculinity*.

On the other hand, state dynamics can contain and direct male violence into institutionalized or legally codified expressions. We call this *composed masculinity*. It is a masculine performance that emphasizes balance, self-discipline, forbearance, and the rational control of emotions (Linger 1995).

Wild and composed masculinity do not constitute a binary in the traditional sense. Rather, they are configured in a war machine and state dynamic that can be mapped onto political, institutional, intimate, and embodied gender formations. Imagine not “either/or” but “both/and.” Partnered, the concepts offer a framework that addresses the waxing and waning power negotiations that take place between different performances of male violence in different political and institutional settings. Sometimes violence is contained, channeled, and directed; sometimes it is unleashed in excessive, transgressive forms. To say that the latter forms are wild is not to say that they are natural. But they are culturally specific, and as such they resist the state’s attempts to contain them, although they might be used strategically in a sanitized form, often as part of so-called civilizing projects (Mbembe 2003; Taussig 1987).

### *Violence, masculinity, and the Brazilian nation*

Negotiations over male violence are not new to the UPP or modern policing. Historically, wild masculinity in Brazil has been embodied in the patriarchal figure of the plantation owner, the local strongman, and the armed state and vigilante groups of the military dictatorship era (1964–85). All three helped shape contemporary violent masculinity in the Military Police.

Describing the extreme and spectacular violence of Brazilian slavery, historian Lilia Schwarcz (2019a, 86) writes,

Public chastisement in the stocks, the use of the whip as a form of punishment and humiliation, the iron collars studded with spikes to prevent escape, the iron masks that prohibited slaves from eating earth as a way of provoking a slow and painful death, the chains with which they were tied to the ground, created a world of violence in Brazil rooted in the figure of the master and his supreme power under the law, the marks of which were constantly registered on the bodies of slaves.

With the constant threat of unhinged violence, the plantation owner cultivated himself as the rightful *owner of land* and *head of the family*. Tracing the roots of Brazil’s authoritarianism, Schwarcz (2019b) points to the unquestioned right of the *senhor da terra* (lord of the land) to command violence and to exercise economic and political domination. Here we find the roots of contemporary

intertwinements between Brazilian patriarchy and antiblackness: in photographs from the 19th century the master is often depicted in the foreground of his plantation, while his slaves and extended family are all arranged as background, subordinate.

Sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1964, 161) would later describe the patriarchal plantation owner as a “temporal God,” a man who followed no authority but his own. Slave masters made a point of performing their dominance, a feature that according to Schwarcz (2019b) stems from fundamental insecurities: because Brazilian plantation owners were not nobles, they had to habitually enact their dominance and power, fashioning themselves as “fathers,” both benevolent and severe.

Although this patriarchal model does not (and never did) describe the patriarchal structure of most Brazilian families ... the powerful father—provider, protector, authority, and guardian of family honor—remains a central, albeit contested, ideological component of the family. (Linger 2005, 86)

In the Brazilian protostate, European elites and slave owners could rely on institutionalized forms of wild power to uphold the racialized social order. They generally did so using the Military Police, which was conceived in the early 1800s to protect the Portuguese crown against slave revolts. After abolition, in 1888, it would prove instrumental to upholding white elite privileges (Holloway 1993). Over time, large landowners in the postabolition era would exercise control over poor populations by doling out favors, creating a new political machine known as *coronelismo*—a configuration of (white) masculine authority that, institutionalized through military rank, retains its wild potential, meaning it can be activated in certain situations (e.g., land disputes).

The years of military rule in Brazil represent a more recent intensification of wild masculinity. Soldiers, police, and parastate actors like death squads experimented with channeling wild violence into a form of political power. Their perspective was informed by changes in warfare and politics after World War II: with the invention of the nuclear bomb and the technification of warfare, as well as the emergence of women in the public sphere, Cold War military leaders feared that their soldiers would be emasculated (Cowan 2014). Across the Americas, militaries viewed counterinsurgency as an opportunity to remasculinize themselves in the era of “push-button warfare.” With the guerrilla warrior as a model, they created an anti-communist New Man, characterized by his toughness, resilience, “lack of restraint and willingness to get his hands dirty, and by the abandonment of the ‘niceties’ of classic warfare and engagement in indiscriminate violence” (Cowan 2014, 691).

In Brazil, counterinsurgency was the foundation of the dictatorship’s dirty war against (communist) subversives. It

permeated the Brazilian Armed Forces and Military Police, in which the ideal of the counterinsurgent warrior was materialized in the special operations units known as BOPE. At the end of the dictatorship, the BOPE were tasked with invading favelas with hypermilitarized tactics and equipment (Larkins 2013).

Within the Military Police, the rhetoric of a “war on drugs” reconfigured the relation between the wild and composed scripts of violent masculinity, carving out new spaces for transgressive violence and contributing to the unprecedented increase in police violence leading up to the establishment of the UPPs. While the UPPs altered the relation between wild and composed masculinity within the police in the pre-Olympic years, the post-Olympic intensification of wild masculinity, most clearly expressed in the rise of President Jair Bolsonaro’s neofascism, is a backlash against attempts to contain transgressive male violence through the discourse of human rights, as well as against the policies of social inclusion enacted by the leftist Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores).

In this way, violence, in both its wild and composed forms, underpins the functioning of the ever-vacillating Brazilian political state. It is therefore a misreading to view the abandonment of authoritarian state projects as a shift toward less violent forms of sociability; rather, it is better understood as reconfiguring the relation between wild and composed masculine violence, reining in its wild forms and replacing them with “civilized” forms. This points to the disjunctive nature of Brazilian democracy and the fraught application of the rule of law, which rests on the containment and selective application of violence for some territories and bodies, as well as the continuing operation of wild masculinities outside the rule of law for others, especially those associated with favelas (Caldeira 2001).<sup>6</sup> Historical intensifications of wild masculinity point to the racial and gendered dynamics of state violence and its uneasy relationship with the law, which is unevenly applied according to social position: for wealthy, white elites, the law does not apply; for the poor and Black, it justifies police violence (Caldeira and Holston 1999).

There is in Brazil a commonplace authoritarian ritual of personhood, which Roberto da Matta (1977) describes by referring to the idiom *Sabe com quem está falando?* (Do you know who you’re talking to?) This ritual signals the entanglement of social hierarchies and the law (see also Linger 1995). Evoking the power of traditional authority—that is, white, upper-class, and male authority—the ritualized performance of social status positions the speaker above the law. Police officers are tacitly aware of this. While their authority is regularly challenged by upper-class people, they habitually and brutally apply the law as a weapon against people at the lower ranks of the social hierarchy, such as favela residents. This phenomenon highlights the “ambiguities, unequal treatment, exceptional rules and



legislation, privileges, impunity and the [legitimation] of abuses” (Caldeira 2001, 144) that are intrinsic to Brazilian institutions. Moreover, they demonstrate that violence is an integral, constitutive element of the Brazilian police—not a last resort or mediation but a form of social production. Wild masculinity is partially rooted in this logic, which is why men from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of them Black and poor, were drawn to policing in the first place: it offers them a space to exercise the transgressive male authority normally reserved for the wealthy and white.<sup>7</sup>

### The cultural production of violent masculinities

When Nazareth talked about his evolution as an officer, there was an ever-present, constant negotiation between wild and composed forms of violent masculinity. Before joining the force, police officers like him had already been socialized into a cultural ethos that linked masculinity and violence: in their families, at school, and in civilian social life. As recruits at the police academy, they were then subjected to an institutional hierarchy and disciplinary code of conduct that paradoxically cultivated both wild and composed forms of masculine violence. Eventually, they took up their posts at a police station or UPP and were exposed to the intergroup violence specific to Rio, where the dynamics of wild masculinity were generally accentuated. While these processes of subjective formation among police officers typically followed a chronological order, they are best framed as ongoing and synchronous negotiations between wild and composed masculine scripts. Thus, while the police established protocols that restrained police officers’ use of force, the cultural equation of manhood with violence (e.g., in action movies) led many officers to ignore the protocols they were taught in their attempt to live up to popular ideals.

While Brazilian men can assert their masculinity in different ways—through entrepreneurialism, religion, or landownership, among others (Rebhun 1999)—men who do so through owning guns and working with violence can choose between two career paths: that of a criminal network or a security force, be it state or nonstate. Many officers have themselves previously completed their compulsory service in Brazil’s armed forces, while others go straight to policing. They are drawn to militarized representations of masculinity that are idiosyncratic to Brazil but that also rely on global associations between policing and manhood and on masculinist ideologies that justify and naturalize male domination (Brittan 1989; Herbert 2001).

The conflation of policing and violence was sustained in representations in the local media, in international action movies, and increasingly also in social media groups that often act as echo chambers. The patrol officers we spoke to often discussed what they thought were common police practices based on movies they had seen, like the



**Figure 1.** Police officers stationed at a secondary base station housed in an old shipping container in a Rio de Janeiro favela, March 2015. (Tomas Salem)



**Figure 2.** A war movie playing at a police base in the Alemão favela, Rio de Janeiro, May 2015. (Tomas Salem)

Brazilian blockbuster *Tropa de Elite* and Hollywood movies that celebrate the violence of the US police and military (see Figure 2). Their favorite movies portray tough, ruthless, and resilient action heroes who embody both wild and composed masculinity, and they support ideas of manliness as “the capacity to fight and exercise violence” (Bourdieu 2001, 51).

Adding to these representations, patriarchal structures explain why young Brazilian men join the Military Police:

the job's stable income allows officers to fulfill their pecuniary duties as fathers and family providers, while their profession allows them to make status claims as strongmen. Contrasted with the prospect of unemployment, of becoming relatively powerless low-income workers, or worse, gang members, many men envision their career choice as an individual moral victory. Officers' position as powerful men derives not only from being on the "right side of the law" but also from their ability to balance wild and composed masculinity. This is evident in Nazareth's rejection of what he characterized as the unchecked wildness of drug traffickers and in his admiration for the efficient and uncompromising special units.

### *Institutional processes of violent socialization*

Despite the cultural relevance of wild masculinity, embodying it requires arduous work. At the Military Police academy, this is achieved through violent socialization. Recruit life is characterized by various forms of abuse from superiors, draconian disciplinary punishments, humiliations, and verbal assaults during training. Such violence is a common feature of police academies across Brazil. A national study from 2014 shows that 38.8 percent of patrol officers suffer torture at the hands of their superiors during training or in other professional contexts (Lima, Bueno, and Santos 2014).

The violent socialization of recruits is designed to reassert wild masculinity and to normalize and incentivize aggressive behavior. A former patrol officer's testimony describes the impact of violence on him:

Sometimes during lunchtime, the superiors would scream in my ear that I was a monster, a parasite.... The training was just messing with your emotions, so that [you] would leave the quarters like a pit bull, crazy to bite people.... Today, when police are trained, it seems like they are training a dog for a street fight. (Barros 2015)

Here, the officer signals that the aggression of wild masculinity must be cultivated through violence. Abusing recruits is, therefore, not a superfluous effect of institutional hierarchical relations but a quintessential component of producing a police subjectivity that simultaneously produces wildness and directs it through the institutional code of conduct. Recruits are expected to show submission to authority and to exercise restraint and control. Their violent socialization constitutes a police identity inscribed by rank and characterized by obedience to superiors.

The hardship of training is a source of capital in its own right; it is recognized as a way to inscribe a military identity on the recruits and transform them into actors who differ fundamentally from civilians. Importantly, training hardens recruits and prepares them for the reality of armed violence in the favelas. According to one of the high-ranking Military

Police officers, "The body [of the police officer] needs to be trained. It needs to be toughened up [*rusticizado*, lit. "made rustic"] so that he can face the complexities of war." Symbolically, the concept of *rusticidade* signals the need to remove the recruit from the polis to the tough, lawless backlands to foster subjective transformation. "This causes impacts ... on the psyche ... of that police officer," the officer explained. As an inherently male quality (women are not expected to be tough in the same way), toughness is both associated with ideas of (wild) ruggedness and (composed) resilience.

Elaborating on the notion, Lieutenant Leila, a police psychologist, explained that "the guy thinks that he has to be tough, that he has to have *rusticidade* to confront [the traffickers], and when he confronts [them], he is *the guy*, right?" Highlighting the simultaneous power and precarity of police masculinity, she continued, "He is so much *the guy* that he goes to the favela with a handgun and ends up in a confrontation with someone who has a machine gun. The trafficker has a much better weapon, but the officer is a *man*, he is macho, and he can face the criminal." Her comments reflect Pierre Bourdieu's (2001, 50) suggestion that the negative aspect of male privilege is found in the "permanent tension ... imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances." In other words, the opportunity to assert male authority through violence was an important motivation for police recruits, but training at the police academy cemented their associations between masculinity, toughness, and violence. It taught police officers to be wild and aggressive but remain loyal and obedient to their superiors. Officers who successfully embodied the ideal were referred to as "the commander's pit bulls."

### *Armed conflict and the intensification of wild masculine scripts*

After training at the police academy and several months of apprenticeship at a regular police battalion, newly credentialed patrol officers were stationed at UPPs and expected to enforce order in the favelas. The UPPs' *raison d'être* was to reduce armed confrontations in the favelas between police and gangs, as well as between rival gangs. Yet as the project expanded to include new communities, violence proliferated between the gangs and police. In Alemão, one of the largest "pacified" areas in Rio, officers were involved in shootings that often evolved into full-blown urban battles *every day* during the first three months of 2015.

As the chief of staff at the Military Police explained, the idealization of the warrior "is not specific [to Rio]. It is a shared representation of police [forces] across the world, [and] many police officers would go crazy to play it out—and will do so [given the opportunity]." According to this understanding, intergroup violence in Rio provided an ideal context for expressing wild masculinity through police work. Indeed, UPP officers' assertions of wild masculinity



**Figure 3.** A Brazilian police officer displays his injuries from a confrontation with drug traffickers, Rio de Janeiro, February 2015. (Tomas Salem)

were facilitated by their conflicts with traffickers. But not all officers were eager for this. As with distinctions made in US police departments, where officers are characterized as either “hard-chargers” or “station queens” (Herbert 2001), the UPP officers would often distinguish between those who “liked war” and those who were “calm” or only “did what was expected” of them. Yet, while “acting calm” was a way to resist the imperatives of wildness, showing any sign of fear was emasculating and interpreted as weakness.

This dynamic became clear during a group interview with the patrol officers stationed at the notoriously conflict-ridden UPP in Alemão. Our conversation was interrupted by heavy shooting near the base. “It must be the GTPP [tactical patrol unit] that just left,” an officer quickly noted. “They said they were heading for Areal”—a “critical” area of the favela. Another officer chimed in that this particular team of officers “liked war.” Except for some moments when the conversation would stop as the shooting grew louder, most officers at the base seemed unfazed. But when one of them, unable to carry on as if nothing was going on, nervously left the room, the remaining men felt a need to justify his behavior, since it departed from their understanding of masculinity. “It’s a reflex,” one of them said. “He’s been shot before, so he gets a bit nervous, but it’s OK. He’s still a good officer.”

The fragile equilibrium between wild and composed dimensions of violent masculinities in the police—a product of the violent training and mental tolls of war—was broadly recognized among officers (see Figure 3). It was imperative to their sense of self that they see themselves as warriors and combatants whose main duty was to hunt and kill criminal-enemies rather than to uphold the law. This was clear from how police officers often described their work as “shooting, beatings, and bombs.” It was also clear in how they idealized hypermasculine BOPE officers for their ability to balance the wild and composed dimensions of violence:

PATROL OFFICER. BOPE is good. They have excellent training and do *real* police work.

ETHNOGRAPHER. What is real police work? What is the job of the police?

PATROL OFFICER, *answering without hesitation*. The job of the police is to kill, steal, and destroy. [The officer quickly corrects himself.] To kill the *vagabundo* [criminal] who steals and destroys.

Here, the conflation of wildness and policing is explicitly expressed in the idea that the job of the police is *to kill* a vaguely defined *criminal-enemy*, as opposed to providing peace and security to the population in the favela. The officer’s comments were not an isolated case; such thinking permeated the institution, pointing to its uneasy negotiation of wild and composed masculinity. UPP officers were taught that the priority of patrol was to “capture (if possible) or neutralize those acting outside the law” and, in second place, to maintain public order. “Neutralize” (*neutralizar*) carried the unequivocal meaning *to kill*, which was evident in how it contrasted with the impossibility *capturing* the marginal person (already defined as *criminal*, not *suspect*). Through such sanitizing language, officers obscured the prevalence of wildness at the UPPs.

#### *The transgressive potential of wildness*

The equation between manhood and killing is also prevalent in studies on protofascism, militarism, and war. These studies have noted the gendered and sexual connotations of killing (e.g., Theweleit 1989). Among patrol officers at the UPPs, killing criminals was perceived not only as the real task of the police but also as the epitome of manhood. In particular, killing in battle was cast as a heroic achievement, in which police put their lives at risk for the greater good. There was an important distinction between straightforward executions of criminals and legally sanctioned killing in battle, since officers often killed criminals after they were detained. In the hierarchy of killing, such executions did not confer the same masculine status on the officer. Because they rarely involved risks to the executioner, such extrajudicial killings did not invoke bravery or the disciplined dimensions of violent masculinity in the same way as killing in battle. Such actions could even be considered a *covardia*—injustice and cowardice. Killing in battle was a way for the officer to powerfully enact himself as a *real* police officer and a *real* man (Oliveira 2010).

Patrol officers would often express profound admiration for senior officers with a long track record of killing many criminals. In conversations, it was apparent that killing was understood as an expression of masculine strength, aggression, and virility. Similarly, among US police officers, adopting the “language of the street” and “acting crazy” can work as a form of currency (McElhinny 2003, 2005). In the Rio context, a similar type of acting



crazy—especially in the context of killing—allowed officers to strategically enact the violent scripts of drug traffickers in order to elicit fear and respect.

Police who killed, therefore, held an ambiguous position among their colleagues. They were perceived as tougher and braver, but they could also be seen as indomitable, unstable, and more dangerous. One officer told us that he knew “a guy who has killed 200 people” and added that “some people can’t handle the pressure. They go crazy. Here at the base, four people have gone crazy.” Going crazy (*ficar doidão; maluco*), in the latter case, signals that one cannot balance the wild and composed dimensions of violent masculinity, and this inability represents the limit of wildness within the police.

Thus, officers who successfully defeated and killed their enemies in battle enacted notable aspects of both composed and wild masculinity, such as sacrifice, bravery, and dexterity, but also potency, virility, and sexual prowess. This became particularly evident when a patrol unit at one of the UPPs killed a 16-year-old boy during a patrol round. According to the officers involved, they retaliated against the teenager when he fired at them. When the officers returned to the base after disposing of the body at the hospital, their colleagues eagerly cheered and congratulated the man who killed the assailant while one of them proudly displayed the victim’s gun. A few days later, they noted how this particular kill had been *especially* gratifying—they had successfully engaged in battle—and joked that the celebration at the UPP continued in the bedroom with their wives, underscoring the sexual connotations between guns, dominance over women, and the act of killing, all seen as symbols of masculine virility.

In contexts of urban violence, displaying anger and exercising violence is not just a *male duty* (cf. Bourdieu 2001); it is a survival strategy and a way to construct authority (McElhinny 2003). According to officers, violent displays of force deterred attacks from traffickers. They saw it as potentially risky to reduce aggressive behavior (at the core of the UPP project).

During a training lesson, this became evident when the instructor stressed the importance of ostentatious displays of weapons because of their “psychological factor.” He argued that officers who carried intimidating equipment commanded more respect (see Figure 4). “If you see a group of criminals,” he said, “who do you kill? You kill the weakest looking! You don’t pick the one that looks toughest. [...] Criminals also think that way.” Indeed, similar ideas about displays of weapons as sources of power, deterrence, or “professionalism” are also common among traffickers, showing how different violent masculinities in Rio are in dialogue with each other.

In addition, both police and traffickers are driven by globally circulating repertoires of violence and combat. The police instructor mentioned above exemplified his point by



**Figure 4.** Police on patrol in a Rio de Janeiro favela, February 2015. Even in favelas that do not have active armed conflicts, officers carry large, military-grade weapons that they believe command respect. (Tomas Salem)

referring to the US Army’s use of tomahawks (battle axes) in Iraq and compared it to the choice of armament on patrol in the favela. “Just imagine a patrol unit armed with handguns and one armed with rifles and see what difference it makes!” he said. Patrol officers who might initially have found violence appealing as an assertion of their masculinity were also socialized to understand the threat of violence as a mode of self-protection; similar dynamics have been found among US police officers, whose accounts of fear involve a “thin edge between displays of anger and aggression” (McElhinny 2003, 270).

Wildness was also mobilized in cases in which police masculinity was challenged or threatened. In particular, revenge dynamics required the reclaiming of a lost or damaged reputation, leading to more wild behavior. According to the police psychologist, Lieutenant Leila,

The guys who are injured, who are hurt [...] tend to return to work with more anger, desire for vengeance, for [committing] abuses of force. [...] We cannot avoid addressing that violence and understanding how, when [officers] are marked by it in their bodies, their desire to perpetuate it increases.

A gendered logic underpinned the desire to strike back: attacks on the police violated their status, and retributive violence was a way to restore male agency and reputation. The logic is similar to that associated with the concept of honor in the Mediterranean region, but in Brazil, retributive violence is largely shaped by the colonial configurations of patriarchy that underpin wild masculine scripts (Rebhun 1999, 112–13). Yet the opportunity to reassert reputation and male power through wildness was largely suppressed by the UPP project, to the frustration of its officers.

Despite patrol officers’ violent socialization, many of them chose to distance themselves from the violence of



policing by, for example, avoiding conflicts and doing the bare minimum that the job required of them. These were attempts to remain as uninvolved in the war as possible and to minimize suffering and their exposure to risk, highlighting how dominant forms of masculinity can also be precarious (Besnier et al. 2018). While intergroup violence in Rio intensified the prominence of wild masculinity among police officers, the UPPs sought not only to advance masculine scripts that reinforced the composed and controlled application of force, but also, as we shall see, to incorporate qualities symbolically coded as feminine into policing in the favelas.

### *Gender dynamics of police reform*

The salience of violent masculinity among the police and the situation of armed conflict in many favelas largely explains why most patrol officers rejected attempts to transform their institutional culture. In particular, they resisted strategies that limited their opportunities to use violence, since such limitations were perceived as emasculating (Sørbøe 2020). This played out in contradictory forms of training. On the one hand, instructors sought to perfect the officers' tactical skills and prepare them for urban combat; on the other, they trained them in dialogue-oriented and preventive practices of proximity, which officers understood as feminine.

Gender politics was a cornerstone of early attempts to modernize the police. In 1988, three years after Brazil's return to democracy, women joined Rio's Military Police for the first time. In the following decades more women joined the force, but they remained marginal within the institution. Police officers attributed this to the view that society was unprepared for women to die in battle. When the UPP project was announced in 2009, that changed, as female officers began playing a pivotal role in its rebranding as the pillar of a new and different policing strategy. In the first three years of the UPPs, from 2010 to 2012, women were incorporated across the institutional hierarchy. In this period, the proportion of female officers at the UPPs increased by 10 percent (Mourão 2013). A key novelty was the appointment of Captain Pricilla de Oliveira Azevedo to lead the first UPP and thus serve as the first commanding female officer in the history of Rio's Military Police. Nicknamed "the mother of the UPPs," Captain Pricilla symbolized changing gender dynamics within the institution.

The intentional inclusion of female officers shows that the police authorities thought that proximity policing would benefit from qualities traditionally associated with women. According to one of the officers, "proximity policing [...] requires approximation, dialogue, listening to other people, things that [...] we still associate a lot more with women than with men." Another female officer noted that female police officers remain more balanced, whereas men

can be very impulsive. "A woman is calmer. She thinks more," she said, adding that women can keep the men in check.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, although women were recruited to the UPPs, scholars have concluded that this did not challenge traditional gender roles within the police and, importantly, did not break with confrontational models of policing (Gripp and Zaluar 2017; Jaffa 2014; Mourão 2013). Rather, the gendered division of labor at the UPPs followed cultural patterns that associate women with the house and men with the street (Rebhun 1999): at most UPPs, women carried out administrative chores, as secretaries to the commanders, or they were assigned to low-risk, stationary patrol duties. The few women whom we observed being assigned to tactical patrol duties adopted their male counterparts' grammar of violent masculinity.

At the same time, the symbolic feminization of the UPPs generated significant resistance toward the *softer* approach of proximity policing. Many officers resisted reform attempts because they viewed the feminized models as having low status compared to aggressive policing, which asserted their status as men. According to Lieutenant Leila,

Being a police officer is always associated with [...] the warrior, the very masculinized guy, the more aggressive guy. [...] It is very difficult to understand that other police activities [are important as well] because they are associated with things that don't give as much power.

Paradoxically, then, many UPP officers were constantly engaged in armed confrontations and urban battles with drug traffickers, especially in the initiative's later years, yet proximity policing was not considered *real* policing. UPP officers held a lower status than conventional police officers, both among the population and among their peers since the project implied a symbolic feminization of policing (Sørbøe 2020). Symbolically, the UPP project constrained the exercise of transgressive male authority—precisely what had drawn many of the officers to the police. In this way, many UPP officers rejected the feminization of policing by continuing to adhere to militarized practices. Moreover, they rejected the limits imposed on wild masculinity by policing paradigms that draw on a rhetoric of human rights (Ekşi 2018; Herbert 2001).

### *Training efficient warriors*

On a microlevel, the training of officers and the establishment of new protocols for the progressive use of force highlight the institutional negotiation between wild and composed scripts at the UPPs. In 2015, as increasing conflict levels in "pacified" favelas threatened to undermine the UPP project, officers went through a weeklong course on proximity policing and tactical training. Held at the Special Operations Command Center (Commando de Operações

Especiais, COE), the course centered for the first five days on urban patrol and warfare tactics. The sixth day focused on proximity policing and was held at the Coordinating Office of the Pacifying Police (Coordenaduria da Policia Pacificadora, CPP). In this division, the gender symbolism was on full display: tactical training expressed composed masculine scripts, so the officers welcomed it. As for (feminizing) proximity policing, the officers either viewed it as useless or silently protested it.

At the COE, officers received training in the urban-warfare techniques employed by Brazil's notorious Special Forces Command. Classes focused on perfecting tactical and technical skills, establishing protocols for action, and on the progressive use of force. The curriculum included lessons on battlefield first aid and evacuation, shooting, stop and frisk, vehicle searches, patrol dynamics, the use of so-called nonlethal armaments (such as stun guns and tear gas), and urban patrol tactics. The combination of combat skills and proximity tactics attests to the mixed messages that officers were receiving about the purpose of the UPPs and policing in general.

Tactical training sought to direct the officers' skills as warriors and to limit collateral damage. During a lesson on nonlethal armament, in which officers were instructed in the uses of different weapons, the instructor in charge explained, "While pepper *spray* canisters can be used to incapacitate or disperse a crowd, canisters with pepper *foam* or *gel* are generally used to incapacitate a single individual." Taking action did not, he suggested, follow a one-size-fits-all model. The idea was to encourage officers not to default to the most extreme use of force, but to act judiciously and escalate the conflict only if necessary. The training was designed to privilege composed masculine scripts and to direct the use of violence into a tactical, calculated form—to rein in and direct the officer's desire to use violence. It thus still engaged officers in accepted and violent forms of masculinity.

Protocols for the progressive use of force were not new to the UPP, but they were clear examples of how police institutions try to limit and control patrol officers' use of violence. Such protocols draw boundaries and establish clear paths of action to ensure that the use of force does not undermine or delegitimize police authority in the eyes of the population. At the UPPs, concerns with legitimacy were particularly important, since the police leadership recognized that without the support of the local population, achieving territorial control of the favelas would be a hard-won battle.

In addition to theoretical lessons that established technical protocols for action, patrol officers participated in practical exercises designed to make them reflect on the importance of applying qualified, legitimate force. During one such training exercise, officers were first taken on a light trot around the area where the lessons were held. Fully

equipped with rifles and bulletproof vests, many out-of-shape officers struggled to keep up. Eventually, they arrived at the shooting range and loaded their weapons. A sloppy officer dropped his bullet chamber on the ground and was reprimanded by the instructors. Then each of them was positioned about 50 meters in front of several cardboard figures that represented possible threats. Some figures were depicted holding a gun, while others were holding a microphone or a pair of glasses. Yet others were dressed as police. The officers were ordered to quickly identify and shoot the potential threats. Most of them killed several innocent victims. One officer, with a rather embarrassed look on his face, had killed *all* the civilians. In response, a senior commander from BOPE tried to characterize the combination of wild violence and deadly accuracy that was the officers' goal. He stressed the importance of acting quickly and efficiently under pressure. "The ideal is for you to destroy the enemy and return to your homes," he said, adding, "We aren't training you to be cowards. We are training you to be combatants!"

In this account, the officers' failure was glaring—their failure to live up to the ideals of strength and heroism, as well as to the institutional demands of technical prowess associated with composed masculinity. Furthermore, the BOPE commander's comments showed how wildness permeated the institution and was paradoxically reproduced by many senior officers, even in contexts that were supposed to encourage new forms of restrained engagement.

There thus existed a contradiction between the attempt to establish a new, modern police force and the BOPE officer's emphasis on combat, and this contradiction became even more glaring when read in contrast to the position of the commanding colonel at COE. Referring to the same exercise, he told the officers, "We aren't here to play heroes. We are professionals working within the law." He urged patience despite the recent outburst of violence at the UPPs. "The pacification," he said, "[succeeds] when a new generation of youth has grown up [...] without having to live with the police entering their homes all the time."

The colonel implicitly stressed how important it is for officers to control their desire to be violent while explicitly tying their restraint to the police force's legitimacy in the favelas. This is a clear example of how the dynamics of wild and composed masculinity played out on a microscale: at the UPPs, *real* police officers should not act like action heroes; they should act like professionals and state representatives aligned with the rule of law, which was brought to bear in areas and on bodies (poor and Black) that were traditionally spaces for exercising transgressive male authority.

Despite the contrasting messages that were passed on to patrol officers, the above examples suggest that rather than proposing a radical break with combat-oriented and wild forms of policing, the tactical training at COE aimed to ensure the qualified, efficient, and precise application of force, with less collateral damage—in other words, to

perfect the UPP officers' warfare tactics so as to contain and direct their penchant for violence.

### ***New models of masculinity: Communication as power***

Whereas the purpose of the tactical training was to increase the officers' efficiency as warriors, lessons at the CPP provided them with tools to act as diplomats in the favelas. At the CPP, they received instruction on proximity policing, human rights, interpersonal relations, and strategic, non-violent communication. The lessons implicitly challenged the association between policing and violent masculinity by emphasizing the importance of mastering communication techniques that could reduce the use of force.

During the lesson on nonviolent communication, a female psychiatrist drew on scientific discourse to persuade the officers to exercise restraint. She explained that humans have three brains. "The first acts by reflex, the second according to emotions, and the third, the neocortex, is related to conscious decision-making," she said. She stressed that police action had to be governed by the neocortex and asked rhetorically, "Do you want to be frogs or men?" Casting impulses to behave wildly as primitive, she suggested that manliness was characterized by conscious and intelligent decision-making and emotional control and that there are ways to be powerful that do not rely on violence.

"Communication is an extremely powerful tool," she continued. "Those who dominate the techniques of communication have power: communication is power!" If the officers could understand the needs and feelings of others, they would also be able to *control* and *manipulate* them. One of the communication strategies they could use to solve minor conflicts was to express their vulnerability or frustration with the situation. This would help them "humanize the uniform" and gain empathy from local residents. "You have to win [*conquistar*] allies. If the community is your partner, you have a chance of winning the battle," she concluded.

The psychiatrist offered alternative models of masculinity, urging them to incorporate soft dimensions, similar to those elsewhere described as "emergent masculinity" (Inhorn and Wentzell 2011) and "reformed masculinity" (Ekşi 2018)—new and "modern" forms of civilized masculinity that downplay the importance of expressing traditional masculinity, such as violence and virility, in favor of other kinds of behavior. Expressing vulnerability or frustration, which would otherwise be perceived as a sign of weakness, was thereby reconfigured as an act of power: a strategy of manipulation. While the new model could be cast as breaking with violent masculinity, it shares many features with the instrumentalization or weaponization of empathy that characterizes the recent reconfigurations of counterinsurgency doctrine associated with military humanism. As a strategy of military conquest, cultural

knowledge is taught to help soldiers more efficiently communicate with locals (Stone 2018).

Finally, the lesson in nonviolent communication illustrates the paradoxes of the UPPs. Officers were asked to differentiate between different publics. Nonviolent communication techniques were meant only for "good citizens"—not *vagabundos* (lit. "vagabonds"; criminals). Thus, the UPPs' messaging exposed an important discretionary space for the transgressive and authoritarian exercise of power associated with wild masculinity.

Attempts to foreground communication as a strategy equivalent or superior to violence fell largely on deaf ears. Two days after the COE course, the trainees were back at the base. Suddenly one of the officers rushed in, announcing with a smile on his face, "The police killed a *ganso* [dealer]!" He yanked a frayed, flower-patterned tablecloth off the kitchen table to retrieve the body. Before he left, he grinned and said, "The training we got last week is already producing results!"

### **Conclusion: The failure of the UPPs**

The effects of wild masculinity on the UPPs did not go unnoticed by institutional leaders. According to the chief of staff of the Military Police, "No matter how good our curriculum is, no matter how aligned we are with the democratic rule of law, with the philosophy of human rights, the culture of the police ends up producing [competing] representations." On other occasions, he signaled the problematic coexistence of two opposing "cultures" within the institution: "One is the belligerent representation of [policing as] warfare. The other is the ... concept of citizen police [proximity policing]. On a symbolic level, there is a conflict between the two. It's one wanting to destroy the other" (Paiva and Karakida 2015).

Such comments point to how reform-oriented police leaders describe and understand the intertwinement of egalitarian principles and gendered structures of domination within the Military Police, the disjunctive nature of Brazilian democracy and policing, and the negotiation between wild and composed masculine scripts. They understand these phenomena as opposing and mutually destructive *institutional cultures*—one centered on the understanding of policing as warfare (against the poor, Black, etc.), and the other, on the "civilizing" concept of proximity policing. While these are often thought of as separate and distinct social categories, our ethnography demonstrates that they are inseparable. Both modes constitute violent masculinities in Rio's police forces and the social order in Brazil.

The dynamic negotiation between wild and composed masculinity informs our analysis of violence in Brazil and the attempts to bring policing in Rio in line with the rule of law. In our ethnographic account of policing at the UPPs, we

identify three main reasons why the UPPs failed to produce a less violent police force. First, wild masculine scripts—elsewhere described as a warrior ethos—were cultivated among the police, producing an association between police identity and the exercise of wild violence. But we reject explanations that see the warrior ethos as a hegemonic formation emerging from the drug wars in Rio’s favelas. Rather, we note that different iterations of male violence have long shaped Brazil’s social order, in particular as it relates to civilizing and modernizing discourses. We find such tensions in the Brazilian plantation system, in local strongman politics, in Cold War configurations of military manhood, and in the Military Police’s special units after the return to democracy in 1985.

In such instances, wild masculinity should not be understood as hegemonic in the sense of a stable, identifiable gender hierarchy (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Rather, we should focus on how different masculine formations are conducive to the production and stability of an institutionalized sociopolitical order. Thus, critics of the concept of hegemonic masculinity call for a return to the Gramscian notion of hegemony (Besnier et al. 2018), in the sense of a widely shared common sense that emanates from institutions like the state or church. Wild masculinity is, in this sense, not hegemonic but constantly negotiated within a larger cultural repertoire, one that includes composed masculine scripts (Hirsch and Grosswirth Kachtan 2017). Such scripts alert us to the coexistence of different idealized forms of masculinity in society (Besnier et al. 2018). Thus, violent masculinities, in Brazil and elsewhere, are constituted in dynamic negotiations between wild and composed scripts and in dialogue with notions of masculinity and femininity that do not center on violence.

Second, we have signaled how armed confrontations between police and traffickers intensify wild masculinity among UPP police. While some officers adopt forms of resistance centered around doing the bare minimum at their jobs, high levels of armed violence at many UPPs force them to adopt an aggressive “language of the street,” both to signal power and to protect themselves (cf. McElhinny 2005). At the same time, officers who act too wild risk disciplinary sanctions and expulsion from the police. Some expelled officers saw joining the paramilitary militias as their only viable option, not only because of the stigma associated with expulsion but also because the militias—paradigmatic war-machine formations—offered an alternative space for wild masculinity. The migration of wild masculinity from the police to paramilitary *milicias* is still poorly understood, but the analytics of violent masculinity might help us understand the increasing paramilitary presence in Rio’s favelas during the years of the UPP project (cf. Cano and Ribeiro 2016).

In our theorization of the relation between violence and manhood, we emphasize the link to what is elsewhere

described as *macho* and *protest masculinity* (Connell 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2005; Gutmann 1997). These are seen as subordinated forms of masculinity that compensate for working-class men’s low socioeconomic status with “enhanced masculine sign vehicles” (Walker 2006, 6), like violence and virility. In opposition to masculine formations centered on violence, theorists have proposed *emergent masculinity* (Inhorn and Wentzell 2011) as a contemporary reconfiguration of masculine norms around “soft” values, like nurturance and care. Informed by these debates, we have developed a multidimensional model that avoids hierarchizing different masculine performances and that instead highlights the nuances and dynamic negotiations between them, as well as their intertwinement with gendered and racialized state projects.

A third explanation for the failure of the UPPs is the cultivation of wild masculinity by senior officers across the Military Police, in parallel with attempts to implement the human rights-centered approach of proximity policing. UPP officers perceived the latter as emasculating. Faced with mixed signals within the institution, and the choice of adopting a feminizing diplomatic approach or a belligerent approach largely reliant on wild behavior, most officers chose the latter.

Yet despite patrol officers’ resistance to proximity policing, there was a documented reduction in police lethality during the UPPs’ first four years (Cano and Ribeiro 2016). In fact, there was an explicit understanding among officers that police and political leaders would not tolerate unmerited police violence and abuses of force. In other words, fluctuations in police violence must also be understood in relation to messages from the people at the top.

Importantly, violent masculine formations must be analyzed according to how they intersect with other forms of social inequality. It is clear to us that the appeal of wild masculinity among socially disadvantaged men can partly be explained by how it offers them the opportunity to exercise transgressive violence at their discretion. Yet we understand their application of the law not as arbitrary but as consistent with Brazilian social hierarchies structured around race, class, and gender. The favelas, and the Black bodies associated with them, have traditionally been spaces where the police have been allowed to exercise transgressive violence. The challenge to this *modus operandi* was a crucial reason why the officers so strongly rejected the UPP project.

This signals a fourth and final reason why the UPPs failed. The project has to be considered in light of Brazil’s precarious democracy. Just as the rise of the UPPs must be understood in the context of Brazil’s economic ascendancy, the failure of the project mirrors the police officers’ increasing hostility toward progressive policies, including gender equality, the valorization of different family formations, the emergence of previously marginalized groups in politics,



and attempts to limit the exercise of transgressive male violence against favela residents.

In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the presidential election helped consolidate a right-wing populism with a clear fascist bent in Brazilian national politics. In the ensuing period, elites have reasserted traditional hierarchies, unevenly applied the law, and glorified male violence—as was the case during the dictatorship. These trends reflect the migration of wild masculinity to the political field, as well as a global turn toward neofascism and authoritarianism. The case under examination here might be relevant to understanding how authoritarian leaders strategically elevate certain cultural models of masculinity and create a climate of impunity for transgressive male violence—legitimized through a rhetoric of law and order that in many respects parallels the colonial “civilizing” processes of a previous era.

The tactical negotiations of wild masculinity that we describe are observable across a broad range of contemporary and historical contexts: in British colonialism, whose police forces' ability to control their “impulses to disordered violence” and self-control made it easier for colonial authorities “to cast criminality as a ‘native problem’” (Feldman 2015, 9); in 1930s German protofascism, in which soldiers' sexual impulses were channeled into wild, violent behavior (Theweleit 1989); or even in contemporary US politics, in which the right wing maintains an uneasy relationship with white supremacist movements.

Perhaps the appeal of authoritarian and fascist formations is that they carve out spaces for the messy exercise of transgressive and wild violence. Thus, our analysis does not envision fascism and authoritarianism as purely oppressive forces centered on promises to deliver order and security (cf. Robinson 2019, 171), nor as external to the liberating forces of democracy. Rather, it recognizes that political democracies and authoritarian regimes alike mobilize male violence and negotiate masculinity's relationship with its own wild and composed forms.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* Research for this article was funded by the Behner Stiefel Center for Brazilian Studies, the University of Bergen, and the Meltzer Research Fund. We thank Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, Randi Gressgård, Niko Besnier, Kathleen Kelly, and the reviewers for their sharp and insightful feedback and comments on early drafts. We thank the residents of Rio's favelas and the police officers at the Military Police who facilitated our research. Lastly, to Javier, for everything.

1. Alemão is a sprawling complex of favelas located in the city's North Zone. It has long been regarded as the stronghold of Rio's largest gang and imagined as a war zone.

All names of research participants used in this article are pseudonyms. While we intentionally omit the names of the smaller communities in which we have conducted research, Alemão's significant size allows us to name it without compromising the identities of the officers we worked with.

2. Rio's Military Police force is racially diverse, and while it has historically been associated with the policing of racial hierarchies, it employs many self-identified Black officers (French 2013; Salem and Bertelsen 2020).

3. The location of UPPs was largely determined by real estate interests and Olympic infrastructure, signaling the entanglement of commercial interests and public security.

4. The favelas in our research vary in size, location, and conflict level.

5. The dynamics described here might resonate with those of Duterte in the Philippines, Trump and armed white supremacist movements, or Putin's relation to his public security forces.

6. The uneven application of the rule of law in Brazil has frequently been framed as the criminalization of the poor. Recent analyses, however, call attention to the anti-Black configuration of the Brazilian state (Alves 2018; Vargas 2018).

7. Transgressive, wild masculinity—which always carries the risk of excess—is institutionalized through the Military Police, where it is channeled in directions that uphold the Brazilian social order. Police officers are given a certain autonomy in their exercise of violence, as long as they do not directly attack racialized and gendered hierarchies.

8. For different forms of femininity in Brazil, see Linda-Anne Rebhun's (1999) discussion.

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