
From the University to the Quilombo: Dissident Epistemological Reflections and Counter-Stories of the Von Bock Quilombo

De la Universidad al Quilombo: Reflexiones Epistemológicas Disidentes y Contrarrelatos del Quilombo Von Bock

Da Universidade ao Quilombo: Reflexões epistemológicas dissidentes e contra-histórias do Quilombo Von Bock

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Abstract

This article seeks to produce and articulate reflections emerging from the authors' practice in quilombola territories, regarding the epistemic controversies currently intersecting their academic careers. In this sense, it first suggests ethical reflections on their work in quilombola territories from an academic context, confronting the onto-epistemological and practical limits that emerge and highlighting the strategic dimensions of such action, as a way of reflecting and seeking to reference oneself, not strictly from theoretical perspectives, but primarily from the praxis that emerges in Black territories. Secondly, we address what we have been calling a "context of overlapping violence" operating against the Von Bock quilombola territory in São Gabriel, Rio Grande do Sul, based on Saidiya Hartman's notion of archival recomposition and counter-histories.

Keywords: Quilombos; Afro-pessimism; dissident epistemologies; anti-Blackness; Saidiya Hartman.

Resumen

Este artículo busca producir y articular reflexiones que surgen de la práctica de los autores en territorios quilombolas, en relación con las controversias epistémicas que actualmente intersecan sus carreras académicas. En este sentido, primero se sugieren reflexiones éticas sobre su trabajo en territorios quilombolas desde un contexto académico, confrontando los límites ontoepistemológicos y prácticos que emergen y destacando las dimensiones estratégicas de dicha acción, como una forma de reflexionar y buscar referenciarse, no estrictamente desde perspectivas teóricas, sino principalmente desde la praxis que emerge en los territorios negros. En segundo lugar, abordamos lo que hemos denominado un "contexto de violencia superpuesta" que opera contra el territorio quilombola Von Bock en São Gabriel, Rio Grande do Sul, con base en la noción de recomposición archivística y contrahistorias de Saidiya Hartman.

Palabras clave: Quilombos; Afropesimismo; epistemologías disidentes; antinegitud; Saidiya Hartman.

Resumo

O presente artigo busca produzir e articular reflexões que emergem da prática das autoras junto a territórios quilombolas, acerca das controvérsias epistêmicas que na atualidade atravessam os seus percursos acadêmicos. Nesse sentido, num primeiro momento, sugere reflexões éticas acerca da atuação nos territórios quilombolas a partir do contexto acadêmico, confrontando os limites onto-epistemológicos e práticos que se apresentam e destacando as dimensões estratégicas de tal atuação, como forma de refletir e buscar referenciar-se, não estritamente por perspectivas teóricas, mas principalmente pela praxis que eclode nos territórios negros. Num segundo momento, abordamos o que viemos chamando de um "contexto de sobreposição de violências" que opera contra o território quilombola Von Bock, em São Gabriel/RS, a partir da noção de recomposição do arquivo e das contra-histórias, de Saidiya Hartman.

Palavras-chave: quilombos, afropessimismo, epistemologias dissidentes, antinegitude, Saidiya Hartman.

Introduction

Our work with rural and urban quilombos in Rio Grande do Sul, in the case of the site where this essay was produced, stems from a historical trajectory that begins at the university but also stems from the Black movement. We have been working with diverse communities in the context of university research and outreach (Grupo Terra-UFRGS), drawing on the practices of individuals like Ubirajara Toledo and José Carlos Gomes dos Anjos, and later on quilombola leaders

such as Liane Ávila, Janja, Tereza, Sr. Moreno, Flávio, Vanusa, Luis Rogério Machado, Tânia, and Clédis. In this sense, this paper does not intend to catalog "findings" from the field regarding the practices of quilombolas in their contexts of struggle. In other words, before articulating theoretical and empirical approaches to political strategies emerging from quilombola territories as a way to disseminate, in the scientific sphere, our discoveries about life in these territories, we understand that it is important to take a step back. Here, we intend to record a portion of our formative journey, highlighting what we need to "unlearn" so that there is room to truly learn how to work alongside quilombos, constantly developing an "extension practice" based on respect and appreciation of quilombola trajectories as epistemic and ethical frameworks, alongside Afro-pessimistic and sociological frameworks.

Based on our experience working with several quilombos located in different regions of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, particularly Quilombo Von Bock, located in the interior of the state's western border in the "campaign" region, it is worth highlighting insights and insights into this analytical stance that academia suggests when "researching quilombos," based on a critical approach that emerges from the territories themselves. Along these lines, we chose to highlight some writings from Saidiya Hartman's work as a guide, to then highlight noteworthy aspects and denunciations regarding how anti-Blackness has been operating in Von Bock's quilombola territory.

Dissident epistemological reflections and counter-stories of Quilombo Von Bock

Based on the strong criticism we heard from communities regarding the instrumental and, at times, opportunistic stance of academics—often white—who arrive in quilombola territories and extract data from them without even giving their interlocutors any understanding of their academic or scientific objectives, in a modus operandi often replicated by individuals involved in institutions that have

hierarchical relationships with the communities, we suggest that we need, first and foremost, to question the ethical framework that guides our perspective and our presence in the territories. Thus, we linger on the moment of our arrival and are challenged to conduct a critical reading of the paradigms that continue to inhabit this place of 'encounter' between academia and quilombola communities. The risk of reproducing predatory extractivism that uses Black knowledge to exemplify categories developed by white people, further supporting a forced hierarchy of knowledge in research practice, or of shallow appropriation, which, as a rule, implies the emphasis on a narrow aspect, corroborating the systematic erasure of entire worlds that operate autonomously, as a way of honoring a discoverer of 'emic' or ethnographic dimensions, which are seen cut out in research that enhances the resumes of others, is always lurking. Therefore, the central invitation we have understood, along the way, which communities have extended to us, is to epistemically rethink our position, shifting our impressions, our references, and our demands, suspending certain certainties, in order to open space for a fertile encounter to occur. Perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of Black radical thought, from an academic perspective, is precisely the invitation to epistemic reflection, which must be present in any movement that seeks to confront anti-Blackness.

If anti-Black enslavement remains a fundamental component of the analysis of capitalist society and its institutions today, which includes the university itself, and perhaps sociology itself, how have we positioned ourselves in relation to the struggle waged for quilombola territories without surrendering to the self-criticism that the social sciences themselves should be undertaking at the present time, which calls for a break with epistemic racism?

As Black students, we perceive ourselves as out of step. We perceive a lack of recognition of theoretical contributions and approaches that produce radical critiques that are up to the dilemmas of the realities in which we operate. We also perceive that quilombola communities not only possess their own ontologies (in a

diversity that necessarily makes each quilombo unique) but also demand from us an epistemically based stance of respect and openness, as mentioned. And it is in this sense that the so-called "popular outreach" to quilombos, as well as the resulting research movements, constantly challenge us and suggest a reflection on the role of academia in the context of anti-Blackness that continued in 1888, and the struggle waged in quilombola territories throughout time.

If, historically, academia has reproduced an epistemic pattern that silences, underestimates, diverts, ignores, or instrumentalizes non-colonized knowledge, we find inescapable aspects in Saidiya Hartman's work that point to a new form of relationship and theoretical production of what can be called the history of the present, but which suggests transtemporal paths. In this article, we draw on this author's notions of archival recomposition and counter-Histories to explore ethical possibilities for action. In the context of the author's work, such notions could be conceived as pre-categories, given that they operate as openings of space for Black existence to assert itself in its complexity, tearing apart not only the colonial archive but also the very notion of what an archive is.

In her work, author Saidiya Hartman reflects on the historical and contemporary impacts of anti-Blackness and the dehumanization of Black people. In Hartman's text "Venus in Two Acts" (2020), the memory of slavery, recorded in historical documents and recreated in literature, highlights the structural violence that spans centuries, even in the post-abolition period. Thus, she questions the dehumanizing paradigm of the production of records on the trafficking of Black bodies during the slavery period: "Upon entering the archive of slavery, the unimaginable takes the form of everyday practice (...)" (Hartman, 2020, p. 21). Using the trajectory of the character "Venus" as a symbolic representation, the author guides us through records from accounting and judicial archives, diaries, and third-party accounts, in which we can map the dehumanized character, converted into a commodity to be transported. We know her only for the moments in which she

confronts the captain of the slave ship that caused the death of Dido, another character also considered a trafficked commodity. The author challenges the reader: who is Venus? Beyond her commodity status, the only record of her humanity emerges in her confrontation with the colonizer's violence, while other accounts are limited to her torture and death. Here the question arises: what is the impact of the dehumanization of Venus, of that girl, and of so many other trafficked Black lives over time?

The relationship between Dido and Venus is mediated by fragmented records, such as accounting books that conceive of them as figures—how much they cost, how much they would be worth—medical diaries that could be veterinary, given their productivist pragmatism, and the court case, to which they were not even a party, that exonerated the captain responsible for their deaths, accused of embezzling the trafficker's assets.

The archive of slavery rests on a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates, and organizes the types of statements that can be made about slavery and also creates subjects and objects of power. [...] The economy of theft and the power over life, which defined the slave trade, manufactured goods and corpses. But don't cargo, inert masses, and things lend themselves to representation, at least not easily? (Hartman, 2020, p. 27)

This scarcity of information about their lives, connections, or any trait that distinguishes them from mere burden highlights the historical brutality and anti-Black dehumanization that may not have ceased. We know their trajectories only as characters in a destiny marked by violence and dehumanization, which perpetuates the invisibility of their individual stories. This invisibility and historical dehumanization resonate today, as we question whether it is possible to recognize or acknowledge the impact of Black dehumanization on the constitution of the field of social research and thus restore the humanity of historically dehumanized people in a way that impacts scientific production in this area. Here, we highlight the need

for a critical eye to refine interventions in this field and the adoption of a political stance that does not rely on reiterating epistemic violence.

Why rebuild the archive? Dehumanization through paper

Wilderson (2020; 2003) argues that the condition of "being Black" is fundamentally distinct and marked by an ontological exclusion, which strips it of its humanity and reduces it to a condition of "nothingness," of "non-being," keeping Black bodies around the world in complete asymmetry with respect to white supremacy. Thus, Blackness, for the modern world, is positioned in opposition to humanity, as it lives under the condition of "social death" (Sexton, 2011). The dimension of social death produces, among other things, an eternal denial of rights to the Black population. In this sense, Wilderson (2020) elucidates:

There is no Black person who makes a spatial or temporal demand that is heard, because the collective unconscious is not ready to accept that Black people owned something that was expropriated, which means that the collective unconscious is not ready to accept that Black people are human. (Wilderson, 2020, p. 107).

It is, therefore, in this attempt that this exercise is launched, by imposing reflection on an "ethics of historical representation" (Hartman, 2020, p. 19) in the challenge of narrating against historical erasure. The attempt here, and in our work with communities, is to "do more than recount violence," but, in Hartman's words:

I want to tell a story [...] without committing further violence in my own act of narration. It is a story grounded in impossibility—of hearing the unspoken, translating misinterpreted words, and reshaping disfigured lives—and determined to achieve an impossible goal: to repair the violence that produced numbers, codes, and fragments of discourse, which is the closest we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved. (Hartman, 2020, p. 15)

And it is precisely in this place of "telling stories without committing further violence in the act of narration" that we linger. Because, in this case, the "field findings" are, above all, avenues for the urgent reparations that quilombola

communities deserve for atrocities that have been perpetrated with impunity over time.

Counter-Histories of the Overlapping of Violence in Von Bock

The origins of Quilombo Von Bock date back to the early 20th century, when a large portion of land was donated to Homero de Ávila, the son of an enslaved woman on the Ávila family ranch. Homero was "taken in to raise" by the ranch owner, and when he grew up, he was given a room to live in next to the main house. The ruins of both buildings—the main house and the room where Homero lived—still stand on the land, now surrounded by a vast eucalyptus plantation. Later, the ranch owner officially donated a nearby plot of land to Homero and his siblings. With the death of Homero and his wife, Odócia, a Formal Deed of Inheritance was registered, dividing the lands Homero had received among his heirs. One of the heirs, Eny Terezinha de Ávila, lived on her plot of land until her death in 1997. Eny married José Felipe, and together they had five children. Thus, the Von Bock Quilombo is currently composed of his descendants, led by one of his daughters, Liane Ávila.

The quilombo's territory is located in the rural backlands, 70 km south of downtown São Gabriel, a municipality in the Campanha region, in the central-western part of the state

of Rio Grande do Sul. Surrounded by eucalyptus plantations and ranches, the quilombo's closest neighbors are precisely the farmers who violate the community in an attempt to prevent them from remaining on their territory. Known throughout the city, the B. family is part of a complex and articulate network of land grabbing in the region, notably advised by the family lawyer, also a notorious figure for land grabbing.

After Mrs. Eny's death, J., the patriarch of the land grabbing family, began a close relationship with Mr. José Felipe and Eremita, a friend of the quilombola

family. Thus, over the years, using protective strategies—such as granting "favors"—predation, and harassment, J. and his lawyer, in an act of manifestly irresistible moral coercion, took Mr. José Felipe to a notary's office in the city. Illiterate, Mr. José Felipe signed a document at his request, without any knowledge of its content or any clarification from the other party. Certain of the attempted scam, the Ávila family later discovered that Mr. José Felipe had signed a power of attorney granting J. full powers to file a lawsuit for adverse possession of a vast portion of quilombo lands, in the name of the land grabber's daughter, R.. A revocation of this power of attorney was later executed. However, the revocation was not recorded in the adverse possession proceedings—that is, for legal purposes, J. still had full powers of representation in the lawsuit involving the quilombo lands, and his daughter became the plaintiff in the lawsuit. In practice, the usucaption action aimed to transfer the lands to the name of the B family.

Later, after Mr. José Felipe's death, Mrs. Eremita was also coerced into signing a deed transferring rights she didn't even possess to the land grabbers. This deed, signed under duress by a starving elderly woman (the cause of death listed on her death certificate is malnutrition), is one of the grounds for the adverse possession lawsuit, which, in itself, constitutes the main instrument of land grabbing analyzed in our research. This transfer of rights can be called, in criminal law, fraud, since it involves the sale of something that does not belong to the seller. After this event, the land grabbers began to pressure and harass Mr. José's children, arguing that they had purchased half of the land, which supposedly belonged to Mrs. Eremita. They also purchased, through a public deed of Assignment of Hereditary Rights, the shares of three brothers, for values well below market standards. The division of quilombola lands by land grabbers is forced and unsupported by civil law, much less by the constitutional norm that guarantees quilombola territorial rights. Thus, land grabbers encroached on quilombola territory and rights and began to determine the form of division, overriding the

law. It is important to note that the Judiciary upheld a series of illegalities in the case files, which are still in the evidentiary phase.

In the words of Achille Mbembe (2003), the exercise of power outside the law is a persistent colonial trait in modern philosophical thought and the European political imagination:

As such, colonies are the place, par excellence, where controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended – the zone in which the violence of the state of exception supposedly operates in the service of ‘civilization’” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 35, our translation).

In this sense, it is important to highlight the weight of the violence underlying the fact that land grabbers, in their acts of harassment, coercion, threats, and arson, attempt to target quilombola families, Black people, inhabitants of an isolated region, composed of economically vulnerable people, illiterate or with little education, as a rule, and who not only lack state protection, but also suffer in various ways from institutional racism. It is important to emphasize that the notion of institutional racism, when it goes beyond the realm of omission and reaches action, which in an act determines, judicially, through a preliminary injunction, the immediate expulsion of a family that has lived in the territory for over 80 years, all based on fictional allegations mobilized by white people; as well as refusing to investigate a fire, and also in this gesture, which imposes violence without refuge, the entity becomes the anti-Black State, as articulated by Denise Ferreira da Silva (Silva, 2014). The community has a well-founded fear of complaining, given the threats, the land grabber's stance, and the fact that they have no one to turn to in the event of a direct conflict, given their geographical isolation. There is no possibility of compromise or establishing a space for dialogue. The relationship between land grabbers and quilombolas is based on force and cowardice on the part of the former. In this sense, regarding the ongoing colonial violence, Césaire (1978) states:

Between colonizer and colonized there is only room for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, tribute, theft, rape, imposed culture, contempt, distrust, the silence of cemeteries, presumption, rudeness, brainless elites, and debased masses" (Césaire, 1978, p. 31).

According to Frank B. Wilderson III (2020, p. 184), "violence without refuge is the sine qua non of blackness." And he goes further:

[...] violence in a narrative needs an explanation, a meaning, a trigger, a contingent moment that gives it meaning. But violence against Black people doesn't cooperate with the narrative. The explanation bleeds beyond the actors. It is immune to rational thought and logical predictions. It is a force from which there is no refuge. It is impervious to challenge; for it is applied first and only then followed by the law. When violence is the law, and not the effect of its application, it calls into question the rules of the narrative. [...] This is the curse of Black stories. There is no ghost in the machine. The motive for the violence is beyond the comprehension of reason (Wilderson III, 2020, p. 106).

In this sense, as Warren (2021) elaborates, "blackness is [...] an endless injury, not understood as a legitimate injury" (p. 174). Black suffering, in the sense of being expelled from the land where one was born, where one grew up, where the navels of one's ancestors are buried, and, further, in the sense of perceiving the State's legitimization of all this violence, crowned with the criminal and unpunished arson of one's oldest family residence, built by one's ancestors, is overwhelming. And, it seems to us, no matter how great Black suffering is, no matter how absurd the aggressions committed over time and in the present moment, this pain seems unworthy of attention, of mourning; it does not deserve to be validated as a symptom of a cowardly crime that needs to be investigated; there are no means of reporting, no refuge, because the right to feel pain and to see the violation suffered against an object repaired is not granted. In this sense,

Afropessimism reimagines theory from the position of the helpless object. It recognizes that the Black person-as-object is situated outside of space, time, and the world, and therefore, the Black person "does not exist" in the world because they lack a symbolic

positioning. Blackness is a pure object that delimits the boundaries between the human subject and its predicative verbs. As an object, it is fungible (Hartman, 1997, apud Warren, 2021) and accumulated (Wilderson III, 2010, apud Warren, 2021), and lacks a coherent grammar of suffering (Hartman, 1997; Judy, 1996, apud Warren, 2021).

What if slavery, which is a relational dynamic, not an event (Wilderson III, 2020, p. 259), has not ended? Beyond the abusive relations of imprisoned labor, beyond the situations of territorial insecurity, an even deeper aspect of slavery that is still in force and institutionalized is perhaps the imposition on Black bodies of the condition of objects subject to all kinds of humiliation, senseless violence, purges, indiscriminate guardianship, and cruelties originating in the overseer's pleasure. A state of slavery, or, as Hartman (2020, p. 31) would say: (...) "a past that has not yet passed and a continuous state of emergency in which Black life remains in danger."

Final Considerations

Thinking with Hartman about the epistemic erasure of fundamental aspects of quilombola existence, suggesting a counter-history that is therefore told not from the perspective of white experience, which generally falls back on abstract universalisms by failing to situate itself, are gestures that suggest confronting anti-Black violence from the university perspective. Von Bock's quilombola counter-histories are told through the gesture of lingering on the critique produced by communities of the university and then repositioning ourselves.

Black enslavement, which we have unlearned to view critically due to countless ideological strategies of coloniality, could be analyzed based on objective criteria or parameters. It is expressed in the Black population's extreme insecurity over land; in the power relations that the state exercises over the quilombola community, whether through omission and negligence, or through active, persecutory, police-like means, through contempt and disproportionate violence; It is expressed in the way the community is treated by its surroundings; how land

grabbing is considered acceptable if practiced by whites against Black people; it is expressed in the erasure of memories and people; in the burning of historic houses, without investigation. It is also expressed in imprisoned, immobile, child, and poorly paid labor. In the unpaid work of women. In the routine humiliations. In the lack of access to education, which cannot be dismissed as an accident. In the lack of transportation. In the absence of escapes; in the need to invent refuges.

In this sense, if we identify such extreme violence in the course of our work, we will understand that university action, whether in the field of outreach or research, must be guided by an ethical, epistemic, and political stance of constant review of its priorities and positions, and commit, first, to the guidelines arising from the territories, and, second, to a critical reading of the contempt with which Black references have been treated in academic spaces. In this place, there is room for the invention of a praxis that draws on ancient references of the struggle for quilombola existence, that reveres such knowledge, is committed to the territories, so that it can then return to academia keeping alive this flame of urgency, of the gravity of the crimes and violations that permeate quilombola lives throughout the country, and also of the power of the countercolonial struggle that has been undertaken in these territories for more than 500 years.

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Research data is available in the body of the article

