Militarized everyday lives, logics and responses among children and youth in a violent community in urban Brazil

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with 40 participants (12–25 years) to examine how drug trafficking and armed violence militarizes the everyday lives of young residents in a deprived community in urban Brazil. The overall aim is to explore whether, and how, children and youth who are not involved in the drug trade are influenced by, engage with, and respond to militarist rationalities and manifestations. In addition, it frames militarization as resting upon and reinforcing structural inequalities.

Introduction

The Brazilian *favela* childhood has come to represent violence, poverty and marginality, in media reportages, academic research and popular culture, for example, in award winning movies and TV series such as *Cidade de Deus* (2002) and *Cidade dos Homens* (2002–2005). Images of childhood are often conflated with drug trafficking, where flying kites have turned into symbols of drug traffickers' communication systems, warning about the presence of the *alemão* (the enemy), and schoolbags into presumed modes of transport for drugs. Children of the *favelas* are portrayed as easy prey for drug traffickers – being poor, uneducated and in a constant need of material goods. Youth, boys in particular, are seen as the perpetrators of violence, crime and drug trafficking – not only being poor, ignorant and in desire of material goods but also as unpredictable and malevolent. Recent statistics revealed that approximately 31 children and adolescents are killed

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daily in Brazil (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2019), making it the world's top three country for child homicides (Waiselfisz, 2015). Black males in their late teens and early 20s, with low education level and living in deprived urban communities are starkly overrepresented in the homicide statistics (Waiselfisz, 2015). While statistics leave no doubt that children and youth growing up in the *favelas* are the victims of urban violence in contemporary Brazil, the rhetoric of journalists, politicians and police officers is heavily militarized – with talk about 'war on drugs' and 'taking the enemy down' rather than about how to ensure the safety of young people.

Regardless of children and young people being both rhetorically and literally caught in the crossfire between the drug trade and state response, political and media debates on security measures are perceived as adult endeavours. As Hörschelmann (2016) notes, 'Secure futures are predominantly thought to be an adult responsibility, including their management of the risks that are perceived to be threatening children and the risks perceived as emanating from children's actions' (p. 30). Children and young people tend to be thoroughly objectified within risk discourses, perceived and presented either as innocents to be protected or dangerous beings whose innocence is distorted (Beier, 2015). Regarding drug trade and drug-related violence in Latin America, there has been an increasing amount of ethnographic small-scale studies on cultural aspects of drug ambiences, trying to understand the aspirations, rules and rationalities of young drug traffickers (e.g. Soares et al., 2005; Zaluar, 2009). Although these youths represent, by far, the minority of young people who come of age in poor urban communities, much less attention has been paid to how their non-involved peers are affected by the drug trade, as they are often muted in discussions about the violence that affects them (Berents, 2015). The few studies that excavate the micro-dynamics of violence and insecurities in the lives of non-involved children and young people in Latin America tend to focus on the ways in which they navigate hostile waters, noting their coping strategies (Winton, 2005), resilience and competence (Berents, 2015), and safety tactics (Berents and Ten Have, 2017). However, there is a need to connect everyday experiences of young people and the wider geopolitical discourses to reveal how militarist rationalities and manifestations affect their lives (Basham, 2011).

This article draws on the notion of militarization as referring not only to combatant children and youth in state and non-state forces, including those involved in armed drug trafficking, but also the intangible and subtler dimensions of militarization, such as the influence of militarist ideologies and the increasing normalization of violence (Macmillian, 2011). Inspired by Basham (2011), it is based on the premise that urban violence is inextricably bound to the militarization of wider society. Methodologically, it responds to Beier's (2015) call for a progressive rethinking of security as it pertains to children and lived childhoods, positioning the subjectivity of children and youth more centrally to understand the multidimensional impact of the drug trade and armed violence from their point of view. The study involved interviews with 40 participants aged 12–25 years in a *favela* in Salvador, Brazil. The overall aim of the article is to explore whether, and how, children and youth who are not involved in the drug trade are influenced by and engage with militarist rationalities and manifestations. The focus is threefold. To better understand (1) the militarized experiences in the everyday lives of young residents; (2) the militarization of their understandings of and reasoning about violence;

and (3) their safety strategies. The article has been organized as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of previous studies on young people, violence and militarization. I then move on to contextualize the field site more broadly before I present the methods and ethical considerations of the study. The analysis of the empirical material is divided in three parts – exploring young people's militarized everyday life experiences, media-mediated militarization, and young people's militarized logics and responses to improve their sense of safety – before concluding reflections are provided.

Conceptualizing children and youth, violence and militarization

In areas riddled by conflicts and violence, there is, as observed in Guatemala, a routinization of terror, that 'allows people to live in a chronic state of fear with a façade of normalcy, while that terror, at the same time, permeates and shreds the social fabric' (Green, 1994: 231). Brazilian neighbourhoods run by the drug trade are regularly described in similar terms (e.g. Goldstein, 2003; Perlman, 2010; Soares et al., 2005), and for the people affected by it, the ever-present risk of violence saturates everyday routines and social interactions (Wilding, 2014). However, Berents and Ten Have (2017) criticize common portrayals of such places as mere sites of despair and danger, and representations of the residents as nothing more than passive victims. This holds particularly true for the youngest residents, who are commonly rendered passive in discussions about the violence surrounding them (Berents, 2015).

There is a small but growing body of literature exploring young people's encounters with everyday violence in Latin America, often stressing their subjective experiences and highlighting agency and competence. Winton (2005) maps different coping mechanisms among young people who grow up in Guatemalan communities that are dominated by gangs, ranging from avoidance to various degrees of compliance or engagement. Berents (2015) detects young people's resilience to everyday violence in Colombia, being highly competent and proactive in finding ways of manoeuvring dangerous environments. Berents and Ten Have (2017), drawing on Vigh's work, describe Colombian and Mexican youth as skilled navigators in the midst of violence and insecurity. They argue that the concept of navigation challenges the passive construction implied by 'coping' and instead recognizes agency and capacity. Although offering vital contributions in negating the passivity often accredited young people in security discussions, these studies do not connect the ways in which young people reason about and respond to violence with the wider discourses and geopolitics of armed conflict and state violence (Basham, 2011).

Scholars are increasingly documenting how childhoods in both areas of conflict and peace are being militarized through national and global discourses within politics as well as popular culture. In this article, I build on Enloe's (2000) definition of militarization as how societies are imbued by the logic of military institutions, in ways that permeate language, media, popular culture, government policies and economic priorities, and national values and identities. While militarism embraces military as an institution, militarization refers to processes that blur the distinction between military and civilian life. As Sutton and Novokov (2008) highlight, subtle and more overt forms of militarization

influence our worldviews and everyday lives and may result in a normalization of violence. The logic of militarization rests on the dehumanization of people perceived as 'others', commonly based on racist, nationalist and class-related ideologies (Sutton and Novokov, 2008).

Processes of militarization are deeply gendered (Enloe, 2000; Lee, 2008; Stephen, 2008). Gender ideologies assume older boys and men as combatants while generating perceptions of vulnerability and innocence onto women and children (Carpenter, in Sutton and Novokov, 2008; Wilding, 2014). Nevertheless, militaristic artefacts, imaginations and practices have become naturalized parts of childhood (Hörschelmann, 2016). Children and young people 'are not predetermined by these circulations but engage with and through them; they are not merely militarized, they participate in the making of their own identities in relation to militarisms' (Beier, 2011a: 10). In her study from the United Kingdom, Basham (2011) taps into some of the tensions between state militarism that targets young men from the lower socio-economic classes and violent gang cultures. She questions the dichotomy between organized (state) and disorganized (gang) violence, as they are inextricably interlinked and bound to the militarization of society. While Basham explores how young people are aspired by militarized politics and popular culture and attracted to joining gangs as a way of accessing status and capital, the empirical material presented here focuses on militarization among young people who chose to abstain from gang activities.

Doing research on drug gangs' territory

This article draws on empirical material from 2-months fieldwork in a *favela* in Salvador. The field site was chosen due to my long-term personal acquaintance with the neighbourhood and its residents. As characteristic of *favelas*, it is situated close to vital commercial centres and has been increasingly riddled with drug trafficking and violence. In 2012, the neighbourhood had 61–90 homicides per 100,000 residents, which is neither better nor worse than other *favelas* in Salvador (Torres and Rodrigues, 2012). The fieldwork included semi-structured interviews with children, youth and parents. In total, 8 parents and 40 young people, aged 12–25 years (16 females and 24 males), were recruited through snowball sampling. There were both *involved* (trafficking and/or consumption) and *non-involved* children and youth in the study, and the male overrepresentation was due to their higher involvement in drugs. This article explores the rationalities, viewpoints and experiences of the non-involved children and youth.

The participants chose whether to be interviewed at a family house at my disposal or a location of their choice, most often their homes. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours and 10 minutes. The voluntary nature of the study and confidentiality were explained at recruitment, and at the outset and the end of the interview. The interview guide consisted of a general part, asking about overall neighbourhood perceptions and experiences, before honing in on questions on drug trafficking, drug consumption, drug avoidance and prevention. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, there was an emphasis on participants' perspectives on reasons for, consequences of, and preventive strategies connected to the aforementioned topics. I underscored that I did not seek information about specific persons, gangs or outlets (see Goldstein, 2003, for a similar approach) but

rather wanted to understand the general dynamics of everyday life of young people in the community.

Doing research in a violent ambience may entail both ambient and situational danger (Lee, 1995). Ambient danger is caused by being present in a potentially dangerous setting, in my case a neighbourhood where shootouts occur regularly. A decade of research with street youth laid the foundation for understanding the context of urban violence and strengthened my capacity to read the environment (Ursin, 2012). Due to my familiarity with the area, I knew which routes and times were safe(r). Situational danger arises if the researcher's presence evokes hostility from those within the setting (Lee, 1995). As the field site was an important drug trade territory, I clarified my research aims with the head of the local drug gang to avoid dangerous misunderstandings. Existing personal acquaintances functioned as 'sponsors' (Lee, 1995), confirming my status as researcher and not undercover police or journalist, the most common outsiders investigating the *favelas* (Zaluar, 2009).

Unravelling urban violence in Brazil

While the last two decades has seen a steady decrease in the cocaine market in the United States, Europe's cocaine consumption doubled, causing unfortunate consequences for countries along the new route (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2011a). Located between the cocaine-producing countries of Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, and the Atlantic Ocean, Brazil has become a popular transit country, experiencing a three-doubled number of cocaine seizures between 2004 and 2009. The shift in global drug trafficking trends has resulted in a sharp rise of available cocaine in the Brazilian market, and one-third of the cocaine consumption in South America is estimated to be consumed in Brazil (UNODC, 2011a). *Favelas* have become prime sites of the local drug trade. These communities have historically been poor yet peaceful (Perlman, 2010), but the lack of state presence has facilitated an expansion of organized crime and violence in the past decades (Leeds, 2013). Souza (2010) highlights four factors that make these communities suitable for drug trafficking: They tend to be close to city centres, facilitating supply and demand of drugs; have many streets and alleys that obstruct police control and offer flight routes; have an irregular topography that allows drug gangs to monitor entrances; and are inhabited by large numbers of young people with low education and at the fringes of the formal job market, facilitating recruitment of users and dealers (see also Soares et al., 2005).

Cocaine is the most problematic drug worldwide in terms of trafficking-related violence and the number one substance to cause drug-induced or related deaths in South America (UNODC, 2011a), but its presence does not cause urban violence *per se* (Ursin, 2014). Drug *trafficking* turns into a drug *war* due to access of firearms. Brazil is the second-largest producer of small firearms in the western hemisphere (Dreyfus et al., 2010). The country's two large private producers maintain strong ties with the national defence and public security establishments while the public producer has strong ties to the army, regulating the small arms market with an annual value of approximately US$100 million (Dreyfus et al., 2010). Contrary to common beliefs, the firearms used in the country's crime are mainly domestically produced. In fact, Brazil experienced an

economic boom in the domestic small arms production during the same decade they witnessed a steep rise in violence (Dreyfus et al., 2010).

However, fire weapons need to be purchased and used in order to kill. As the UNODC (2013) notes, the level of violence caused by drug trafficking is determined by the modus operandi of organized criminal groups and the response by state authorities. Organized and violent crime tends to emerge in metropolitan areas marked by lack of policing and political attention, socio-economic inequality and spatial segregation (UNODC, 2011b). Although violence caused by gang rivalries should not be underestimated in the case of Brazil, it is important to note that the police are not a remedy against violence but rather a source of it (Wacquant, 2003). They are deeply entwined with the organized drug economy, possessing unregistered firearms, receiving bribes by drug gangs, and conducting extrajudicial killings (Dreyfus et al., 2010). A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2016) reveals patterns of persistent institutional violence. One-fifth of reported homicides in Rio de Janeiro in 2015 were police killings, mostly victimizing young black men. A former police officer, quoted in the report, confirmed that 'Police officers only kill where it is accepted by society; in the *favelas*'.

Traditionally, hegemonic perceptions of poverty and crime amalgamate in Brazil (Perlman, 2010), and police violence is a centuries-old tradition of controlling the poor, rooted in slavery, reinforced by military dictatorship and reinvigorated by contemporary neoliberal penal responses to poverty (Wacquant, 2003). The standard approach against drugs gangs is invasion of poor communities in SWAT (special weapons and tactics) style operations (Leeds, 2013). Police officers attribute the excessive use of lethal force in the military police to a pervasive 'culture of combat' and a language of 'taking down the enemy' (HRW, 2016). Likewise, the rhetoric on their website is deeply militarized, where the police force is said to execute 'operations' and 'missions' to 'minimise threats' (Polícia Militar da Bahia, 2020). HRW (2016) reveals that the Disciplinary Code of the military police offers little choice but to comply orders, the police shoot to kill rather than subdue, and 'resistance followed by death' is accepted without further investigation. In addition, fear of being executed makes it less likely for suspects to surrender peacefully, reinforcing the cycle of violence.

Fatal violence in Brazil victimizes along gender, generational and geographical divides, and encompasses class and racial dimensions (Wacquant, 2003; Waiselfisz, 2015). The homicide rate among children (0–19 years) in Brazil increased by 477% between 1980 and 2013, victimizing 218,580 children (Waiselfisz, 2015). A recent report from Rio de Janeiro documents that 42% of the homicide victims were 17–25 years old, and that black boys and young men are mostly at risk of nearly all kinds of violence (Manso and Gonçalves, 2018). Furthermore, people with 0–7 years of schooling represented nearly 84% of the homicide victims but only 28% of the population. The stark and disproportionate homicide rates bear strong resemblance with a genocide of young, poor, black males.

Militarized childhoods

Most young people in *favelas* are not involved in drug trafficking. However, the empirical material reveals that drug-related violence has a severe impact on the lives of the drug-avoiding majority. All participants stated that their neighbourhood had become

increasingly dangerous. A young man (21 years) explained, 'There is a lot of death going on . . . This is not good. Drug dealers passing with their guns'. The narratives were of a constant fear of violence:

> Today whatever happens is a motive for being scared. Sometimes it's nothing and we live in panic, thinking that something will happen at every moment. If someone suspicious passes by, we think there will be a shootout, death. It's like we don't have any more of that . . . peace to stay on the street. (Female, 23 years)

As seen in many of the narratives, the fear of violence was like 'an unease that lies just below the surface of everyday life' (Green, 1994: 231). Although many dreaded the visibility of drug use and trafficking, the presence of fire weapons and the potential danger it caused were highlighted as detrimental. Even places commonly associated with childhood and safety, such as school and home, were not always spared. At school, armed police forces regularly appeared and students occasionally brought in weapons (Ursin, in press). A girl (12 years) described how she must pass a drug outlet on her way to school, explaining that it frightens her because 'they have weapons in their hands, at the waist, or I get afraid that the police will arrive and there will be a shootout with me in the middle'. The home was seen as the last retreat, where they could seek refuge at the presence of arms or the occurrence of gunfire. Yet, as some revealed, even the home is not always a safe haven, as both the drug gangs and the police forces might invade:

> The dealer's selling, the police arrives, and they need to hide in the neighbour's home. The police enter, and the war starts, right? People die, having nothing to do with it because the dealer entered without asking, she couldn't have said anything either because then she would have been killed. (Female, 24 years).

In their narratives of fear, drug outlets were commonly mentioned as causing unease, and some boys reported aggressive attitudes among the drug dealers: 'Sometimes we pass by, and the dealers start looking for trouble with you' (14 years). This might indicate the gendered logics of militarism, where violent gang activity projects and privileges idealized forms of masculinity while sanctioning boys and men who refuse to adapt (see also Wilding, 2014). Some participants also shared feelings of police fear, describing the police forces as hostile and rude. While this was more reported by boys than by girls, being more likely suspects of drug involvement, the girls' unpleasant encounters with the police were more likely to have sexual undertones. One girl (12 years) recounted being caught in a shootout:

> I started running. The cops thought I was a drug trafficker and started body searching me. [The police officer] ordered me to stop, be quiet and stand up against the wall to search me . . . He said: 'What are you doing here, you whore?'

As Stephen (2008) recalls from Central America, Catholic images of femininity are used by men in positions of power to control women and children. This kind of gendered militarization divides girls and women into 'virgins' and 'whores'. Such categorization places certain individuals or groups outside the standards for dignified and respectful

treatment; the 'whore' symbolizes the impure and immoral, an object of male sexual interest and a suitable target for sexual assault and violence.

The empirical material suggests that young residents of *favelas* reject what Basham (2011) refers to as a common division into organized violence of state forces as good and disorganized violence of youth gangs as bad. As previous studies in Brazil have documented, young people more often perceive the police as endangering rather than securing the neighbourhood (Goldstein, 2003; Gough and Franch, 2005). However, some also stressed the absence of the police as dangerous:

> When there is a real serious situation going on here, they [the police] don't give a sign of life! There are shootouts happening here regularly. They only appear after its finished . . . They don't care. [They] want it to get ugly. (Female, 23 years).

At the same time, many participants conveyed a general fear of stray bullets, particularly at police arrival. This fear was sometimes rooted in episodes of violence and incidents when they, their family members or peers were hit or nearly hit by stray bullets. One girl (13 years) shared how she had ended up in a shootout after church, where a boy died in front of her. The pervasive sense of danger was in some instances connected to traumatic memories of real-life experiences, where brutal homicides occurred in their vicinity:

> A friend of my sister was at a birthday party and went out to drink water. When he was drinking water, a car passed and killed him . . . I felt tragedy. I tried to help. His t-shirt was all covered with blood. (Male, 14 years)

Such narratives document the highly militarized nature of the everyday lives of children and young people in *favelas* where both the drug trafficking and the state response follow an ethos of militarism, solving conflicts with armed violence in public.

Media-mediated militarization

In some interviews, it was difficult to distinguish real-life and second-hand experiences from media-mediated events. Many participants recounted episodes of drug-related violence, crime and drama in detailed and emotional ways that turned out to originate from news programmes. As a boy (12 years) explained, 'There is always someone who died somewhere and mothers ending up without sons on television'. Media companies cover crime daily, and sensationalistic police shows report live from crime scenes, offering brutal and dehumanizing images of both victims and suspects, most commonly with *favela* background. The media tends to prefer, and prioritize, the police and their version, reproducing the war-like rhetoric previously described. In case of shootouts between the police and drug gangs, the media creates distance to the victims, referring to 'numbers of causalities' rather than names and life stories, to 'confrontations' and 'operations' rather than extrajudicial killings, and to 'suspects' rather than victims, revealing the militarized language at work in journalism (cf. Enloe, 2000).

As such, media companies legitimize militarist ideologies and militaristic responses to drug trade (cf. Sutton and Novokov, 2008). For the young people living

in violence-ridden areas, the militarized media coverage does not only represent reports of far-away incidents but is inextricably intertwined with their everyday lives. It permeates their narratives of violence and sense of fear, as demonstrated by a boy (14 years), noting, 'Everyday it's on the television: "15 year-old dead," "13 year-old dies because of drug debt"'. Although reporting real deaths, the way they are represented – brief, detached and impersonal – leaves an impression of redundancy, of disposable lives. Fernandes (2014) describes how media plays a central role in reproducing and reinforcing stereotyped images about *favela* youth. Media representations depersonalize the youth and detach their destinies from the wider structural conditions and networks of arms and drugs traffic, corrupt politicians and the police, making the youth the main target of violent action in a 'war against drugs' (Fernandes, 2014; see also Caldeira, 2000). The Brazilian media discourse fuels and is fuelled by so-called neo-racism – indirect forms of racism – in rendering *favela* residents dangerous and militaristic interventions necessary (Penglase, 2007). As Lee (2008) notes, militarism proceeds from suspicion and relies on perceiving certain others as threatening, making their lives seem expendable.

Sometimes, media-representations and real-life experiences merge in the young people's narratives, where real-life violence turns into mediated violence on screen and in newspapers. There were several incidents of violence that participants recounted from their neighbourhood, adding 'It was on television'. Media was sometimes perceived as part of the 'circus of violence', as visible in a 13-year-old boy's statement:

> We see police all the time here. But it's not only the police, helicopters come, the police, 'ta, ta, ta, ta' [making sound of shots], the Rede Record [media company] car, *Bocão* [sensationalistic police program] . . .

Media companies redefine the 'truth' about violent occurrences within a strict hierarchy of knowledge, manoeuvring its audience through the process of militarization. These representations were perceived as not only valid but also valuable among the participants, as a vital source of life wisdom (see also Wilding, 2014). A 12-year-old boy explained that to be able to stay safe, it is necessary to 'watch the news. If you watch the news, you get to know what is going on'. Another boy (also 12 years) acknowledged, 'My mum makes me watch the news . . . so I see what is going on and don't want to go outside'. This shows the power of media images in creating and defining understandings and experiences of violence (Penglase, 2007), reproducing and reinforcing the culture of fear (Wilding, 2014).

Militarized logics and responses

The narratives of the young residents provide important insights into the ways in which both real-life and media representations of militarized manifestations and experiences saturate their everyday lives. Through the massive and multidimensional presence of violence, militarism was rendered normal, natural and indispensable (Beier, 2011b). The violent death of young *favelados* was often perceived as ordinary and common sense, as part of the natural order of things. As a young woman (23 years) recalled,

There is death all the time here, shootouts . . . When someone shouted, 'somebody died!' before, everyone became frightened. Today there isn't this shock . . . It has turned into something common; it's turning into something commonplace. Kill and die.

The militarist action, language and reasoning of the police and media were often evident in the narratives of the participants, influencing their worldviews where extreme violence was rendered normal or inevitable (Sutton and Novokov, 2008). A major part of this was the internalization of the suspicion and 'othering' (cf. Lee, 2008) of young people (believed to be) involved in drugs. All participants drew a distinction between mainstream residents and the ones choosing 'that life', and some described personality changes in those who get involved: 'The person becomes bad, vengeful, evil. No one can come close because they think you'll kill them' (female, 24 years). This is in line with a study among *favela* youth in Recife, where people who were engaged in drugs, crime and violence were labelled as living the 'wrong way' (Gough and Franch, 2005).

The young participants commonly reasoned that 'If you were involved, you had it coming', expecting and justifying causality between drug trafficking and death (see also Ursin, 2014, from the street ambience). This was vivid both in the case of drug dealers – as a boy (13 years) who said that he avoided staying close to drug traffickers because the police could come 'thinking that I'm a threat and shoot me' – and in the case of drug users – 'a lot of users owe money at the outlet, so they kill them' (male, 14 years). This reveals an acceptance and naturalization of violence, including state violence, as not only a possible or reasonable response but as the only response to drug trade. Most often, they reasoned, it was not a matter of *whether* someone involved would be killed but *when*. Some participants also noted lethal outcome as positive:

Today here in Bahia when the police get to know about a drug trafficker, they shoot, and he either ends up dead or imprisoned. *This way it gets better*, but it doesn't help having one drug trafficker dead or imprisoned because today one dies, and a bunch of new ones come! (Male, 14 years, emphasis added)

This indicates an incorporation of neo-racist ideology (Penglase, 2007) that provides the impetus to militarized violence (Sutton and Novokov, 2008) to achieve order, and a support of the most dehumanizing aspects of militarist logics, where the death of certain people seems inevitable or even desirable (Lee, 2008). The young people often adapted the discourse that renders their neighbours and peers as 'enemies of the state', drawing a line between those who deserve and those who do not deserve to die: 'There's shootouts, and sometimes, *the people who shouldn't die, die*' (male, 12 years, emphasis added). This witnesses about a 'politics of personal responsibility' (Kershner and Harding, 2014) that skew wider socio-economic and political conditions.

In addition to the logics of perceiving the natural death of someone who uses or sells drugs, most participants reasoned that socio-spatial and relational vicinity to the drug trade entailed equal risks. A common saying was, 'He who lies with dogs, arises with fleas', meaning that you are not better than the people you hang out with. A young man (25 years) provided an example:

Those who have nothing to do with it, end up paying [the price]. Imagine the humiliation if you are imprisoned, appearing on *Bocão*, a police program on television . . . And you're there, innocent, you didn't do anything. Will the people watching think that you didn't do anything? You may lose your job and the respect you've earned.

The statement reveals how the sensationalistic television shows not only inform its audience and reproduce the culture of fear but also serve as modern-day pillory, punishing suspects by public humiliation. The fear of being associated with drugs was not simply a matter of dignity and morality but more importantly a fear of arrest or violence. A boy (12 years) reasoned, 'It's best to avoid places where there are drug traffickers because if the police come, they take everybody'.

The causality between drugs and death also involved having friendships or partnerships with people involved. A young woman (24 years) reasoned,

It's difficult to live with someone like this. First, because he starts trafficking. Then there will be disputes. Let's suppose I'm at a place with him and the guys come to kill him and kill me too.

The sheer presence to the drug trade was perceived as lethal and a sound cause of death, and this sense of contagiousness had severe implications on the social relations among young people in the *favelas*. Many participants explained how they constantly seek distance to people and places associated with the drug trade (see Ursin, in press). This entailed to deliberately stop hanging out with peers if they suspected that they were getting involved in drugs, as a boy (12 years) described the end of a friendship:

I left him behind. To leave behind means to let him be on his own. If I pass him: 'Good evening' and that's it. Never stop to chat. Because you never know what will happen if you are close to him. If they come to kill him, and you're with him, you also die.

This resembles what Wilding (2014) found in Rio de Janeiro, where *favela* residents avoided people with 'risky' behaviour as a safety strategy. The participants shared that they not only seek distance from drug dealers but also from drug users, although these were people they more often pitied or looked down upon than feared:

[People] get farther away because they could risk dying with that guy who . . . You never used drugs and he uses. If he is owing [money] to a drug dealer, the drug dealer will send a person to kill him. And if you're next to him, you'll go too. (Male, 14 years)

Hence, young people do not only dissociate from people reputed for being armed and violent but also people commonly perceived as at the bottom of the social ladder, fearing the militarized consequences of their addiction.

The pervasive sense of fear and unpredictability saturated the narratives of the young participants, and bear witness of a worldview fed by an economy of fear, where danger is seen as omnipresent and the enemy as being everywhere (Basham, 2011). The avoidance patterns in social life divulge the ways in which militarized events, experiences and logics define and reshape social interaction and relations, aiming to keep the 'source of risk', or even the 'enemy', at bay. Their perceptions of peers and neighbours are subjected

to processes of militarization, being produced and reproduced as 'threats'. This way of reading the surroundings might be seen as 'militarized literacy' (Beier, 2011b) – fanned by the militarist rhetoric of politicians and police, militarised media-representations and real-life experiences – which again resulted in conscious and active responses in how to increase their sense of safety. Conventional notions of warfare were reproduced in the young people's sensemaking of social life, severely distorting social relations among peers and neighbours.

Concluding reflections

As a result of long-lasting political and economic neglect, and a high proportion of young people at the margins of the education system and job market, the *favelas* have become major sites of organized crime and drug trafficking in urban Brazil. The state response has been lethal force and penalization (Wacquant, 2003). Rooted in a long history of racist state violence and marginalization, the military police regard the *favelas* and its residents – particularly young men – as socially acceptable targets of violence. In the *favelas*, political attention and public security measures are manifested as military-style policing and SWAT style invasions, drawing on a militarized mind-set and rhetoric of 'taking down the enemy' (see HRW, 2016). The narratives of young *favela* residents presented in this article document the brutality and inhumanity of the manifestations of militarized violence in their everyday lives, revealing how children who come of age in the *favelas* bear the buffer of the so-called 'war on drugs'.

As I draw on a small-scale study from a single community, it does not allow generalization. Nevertheless, to position children and youth's subjectivity help us understand some of the implications of growing up in environments saturated by (fear of) violence. The young participants in the study provide an alternative perspective of security as the one stated in public discourse (cf. Sutton and Novokov, 2008): State intervention and militarism is not perceived as an effective antidote to fear but rather as reinforcing the cycle of violence. They reject any division of state violence as good and gang violence as bad, as both follow an ethos of militarism and convey similar risks and harms (see Basham, 2011). In their day-to-day lives, members of police forces and gangs are perceived as violent and unpredictable threats alike. Both reiterate the gendered logics of militarism, hassling and persecuting boys while sexually harassing and intimidating girls.

The militarization of young people's lives is not only based on real-life events but through constant media images of *favelas* as natural sites of violence and its residents as victims and perpetrators. As such, the militarized logics and language of politicians and police permeate the media, feeding into a culture of fear (Wilding, 2014) and sustaining the idea of brutal deaths of poor young people as not only normal and expected but also necessary and wanted. Media representations are interwoven in the young people's narratives of everyday violence in manifold ways: as a reconfirmation of experienced incidents, an affirmation of violence as mundane and all-encompassing, and an important and sound basis of knowledge to keep safe. Therefore, the media does not only hold power to define understandings and experiences of violence (Penglase, 2007) but also to distort, exacerbate and naturalize its character and presence in society.

Despite the fact that state presence (or lack thereof) is unable to minimize risks and secure the futures of young *favelados*, the participants express few signs of inertia or inaction. On the contrary, all participants shared how they strategize to reduce the chances of becoming victims of violence (see Ursin, in press). To seek distance from, and not be associated with, the drug trade is a continuous identity project among the non-involved children and youth. In this way, they establish their identities through non-engagement in militarism and militarized activities and reject people associated with the drug trade. At the same time, militarized logics underpin this very identity project. Many participants reiterate the logics of militarism in their sensemaking of the world, perceiving danger as omnipresent and peers as dangerous and, in worst case, deadly (cf. Sutton and Novokov, 2008). Hence, they accept a military approach to drug trafficking as fertile and rational. Their ways of acting, reacting and responding to both perceived and real danger may be interpreted not as a way to overthrow a system or discard the militarized world order in which their lives are embedded but as brave moves to try to survive within it. The study therefore supports recent claims that children are not merely passive victims of violence (e.g. Beier, 2015; Berents, 2015) but employ security measures in finding safe(r) ways of carrying out everyday activities.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the militarist rationality that saturates contemporary Brazil, not only silences and normalizes the violence young *favela* residents must endure but distracts attention from the underlying conditions that deem poor populations as more inclined to traffic drugs in the first place (as previously described). The logic rests on a neoliberal understanding of risks as individualized and young people as both competent and accountable for their very acts and for the environments they find themselves in. This entails a limited interpretation of *favela* childhoods as disconnected from wider social, political and economic structures. Rather than providing (non-militarist) public security measures and increased economic investment in social welfare, education and employment, state presence reinforces the violence. As disclosed by Dreyfus et al. (2010), it is not only the national and international criminal networks that economically benefits from this violence, but also the national – partly state-owned – small arms industries. Processes of militarization that affect young populations are thus deeply embedded in, and reinforced by, wider geopolitical and economic interests.

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