The Urgency of the Living

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Good morning and thank you so much for having me. My name is Ana Rita Alves and today, we'll be discussing the concept and the materiality of institutional racism by drawing on two cases of institutional violence and organized State abandonment, in Portugal. While I will be focusing my presentation on a specific geographical and national context (by which I mean, the one I know best), I also argue that these cases can be a prime example in understanding what institutional racism is and how it reproduces itself globally, in particular in the context of Europe.

1. More than a decade ago, the rap group FdiB and Vado wrote *N'kre odjau*, an extremely evocative track paying tribute to black youngsters killed by the police in Portugal. Released in the aftermath of the death of 15 year-old Diogo Seidi, in addition to denouncing police terror and its sequelae across Black self-produced and rehousing neighborhoods, the song was a call to transform collective mourning and loss into organized struggle, illustrating that as a black youngster, Diogo Seidi did not die alone: he was stifled by the rope of history, embodied in the police officers who felt entitled to own and brutalize a gendered young black body. Their acts were authorized by centuries of global antiblack dehumanization.

Over recent decades, grassroots movements and Black and antiracist collectives in Portugal, have fiercely denounced racism and its sequelae. **However**, it was only recently that institutional racism timidly **emerged as a broader public political**

vocabulary for rethinking structural inequalities in the country. This debate was largely driven by a particular case of police brutality against six Black men, in 2015. Initially accused publicly of invading a police station, a thorough investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office, eventually cleared the six men of all charges against them, and, in 2017, eighteen police officers from the Public Security Police were indicted (constituting almost the entire police station's staff). The policemen were charged with crimes of forging reports and testimonies, kidnap, aggravated harm, aggravated assault causing bodily injury, and torture – all aggravated by hatred and racial discrimination. This historic accusation (historic in that it is exceptional) not only corroborated the version of the victims but, for the first time made it possible to publicly question the standard (and collective) narratives of law enforcement agencies in similar cases. On May 2019, eight of those policemen were convicted and sentenced to custodial or suspended prison sentences. **Yet**, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the court did not consider torture and racism to have been proven, despite the fact that the use of racist slurs by the policemen had been proven. Importantly, this historic court case exhibited how the police might engage in routine practices of ill-treatment in certain territories, and then collectively cover it up (meaning that institutions lie), opening up broader debates on how gendered Black subjects from self-produced neighborhoods have historically been constructed as the usual suspects (as the enemies within the nation).

In the meantime, **the public debate had served to downplay the key issues at hand,** rather than contributing to an understanding of what had really been going on for decades, namely **how** legal apparatuses, public policies and political discourses have contributed to the criminalization of black bodies and territories

and what the consequences are of the historical (in)operability of the justice system when confronting criminal complaints of racist police violence, which have usually resulted in the performance of law enforcement agencies being sanctioned, and police officers, acquitted, while Black persons are condemned (all that is to say: the police have not acted alone).

In a country where antiracism has been predominantly understood as an axiomatic legacy of the Carnation Revolution (1974), postraciality was assumed as a given feature of Portuguese democracy. However, international monitoring agencies have been calling attention to the persistence of racism, and especially police ill-treatment towards not only Black, but also Roma and migrant persons. According to data provided by the **Directorate-General of Internal Administration** (an independent office within the Ministry of Internal Administration supervising police intervention) around **seventy persons** were killed in Portugal in the course or as consequence, of police interventions, **between** 1996 and 2020. While there is no official collection of race and ethnicity data in the country, if we compile, analyze and cross-reference this data with the compiled **files on police brutality** at the archives of the association SOS Racism, we can conclude that among the seventy deaths, at least **25 victims were Black and Roma** which means that, between 1996 and 2020, Roma and Black people died disproportionately in the course or as a consequence of police interventions. To be even clearer, Roma persons died 43 times more than non-Roma, and Black persons, 21 times more than non-Black.

2. In April 2010, an NGO dedicated to defending the rights of Roma populations in Europe filed a complaint against the Portuguese State for violating Articles 16, 30,

and 31 in conjunction with Article E of the European Social Charter. The complaint outlined the inequalities in accessing housing faced by Roma people in Portugal and underlined how rehousing programs had severely contributed to their socio-spatial segregation. In June 2011, **the European Committee of Social Rights found** that Portugal had violated the rights to **housing**, **legal**, **social**, **and economic protection**, and **protection against poverty and exclusion** – along with the **right to non-discrimination**. Furthermore, the Committee concluded that the construction of a walled neighborhood in the city of Beja – built to rehouse 50 families (from which 48 were Roma) – was an explicit example. **However**, as you all so well know, the Committee's decision is not binding, and it is up to each member State to decide if and how to implement the recommendations.

Today, housing precarity persists as an appalling reality among Roma families. In Beja, around 800 people, all Roma, live in worse housing conditions than they did in 2011, under a condition of organized (State) abandonment. Following the only official study on the **Housing Conditions of Roma Communities** by the Institute for Housing and Urban Rehabilitation, of the approximately 9.418 Roma families living in Portugal, it is estimated that around one-third live in so-called non-traditional dwellings (32%) while approximately half inhabit rehousing neighborhoods (46%) – showing that around 80% of Roma people cannot choose where they live. In addition, forced nomadism, long days and nights spent in extreme weather conditions (that are ever more extreme) have produced health vulnerabilities which have lowered the Roma average life expectancy by two decades compared to non-Roma people in the country (EAPN). Like black youth, Roma elders also die younger, prematurely, stifled by the rope of a long history of

legalized persecution, that dates to, at least, 1526 (the year fifteen hundred and twenty-six), when the first anti-Roma law was enacted.[1]

Therefore, and as Professor Ruth Wilson Gilmore taught us many years ago, racism, **specifically**, is the **State sanctioned** and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to **premature death**, in distinct **yet** densely interconnected political geographies.

3. While concepts and definitions might appear superfluous amid racial violence, they are essential tools for forming and molding the realm of the living, particularly in a political and economic context where **race** – as a key political category – **and racism** – as a historical socio-political relation – are ontological in structuring inequalities (alongside class, gender and sexuality), creating the conditions for the production and reproduction of racial capitalism.

In their book *Black Power: Towards a Politics of Liberation* (1967), Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton call our attention to the fact that racism cannot be reduced to individual actions but should be understood as "decisions and policies aimed at subordinating and controlling a racial group". According to the authors, **while individual racism** can cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property (as we testify more and more with the rise of the far right for example in Europe, Brazil and the USA or the assassination of the Portuguese black actor Bruno Candé Marques in 2020, by a former solder in the Portuguese colonial war),

[1] First Royal Law prohibiting entry of ROMA into the Kingdom of Portugal and ordering expulsion of those who resided.

institutional racism "is less overt, far more subtle and less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts". **However**, "it is no less destructive of human life".

Accordingly, emphasizing the institutional character of racism requires us to turn back time and explore how the dehumanization, dispossession and displacement of Black and Roma populations over the last 500 years, under colonial rationales and practices, was fundamental in structuring western rationality (eurocentrism), racial capitalism (private property and the accumulation of capital) and European modernity. Furthermore, following David Theo Goldberg, we recognize that race and racism are ontological to modern state formation. Indeed, Goldberg argues that the **modern-State is a Racial State** because it is **racially configured** in conceptual, philosophical and material terms **and** is **directly involved** in reproducing racist exclusions.

That several countries in Europe attribute nationality to its citizens according to the principle of *jus sanguinis* rather than *jus soli* **is paradigmatic of how nation-states are racially configured**. The previous cases I mentioned illustrate how legal apparatuses, public security and housing policies, police interventions and court decisions **are fundamental in reproducing racist exclusions** and perpetuating racial inequalities.

This is what is going on at Roma camps, police stations, prisons and in the Mediterranean. To change it, to change everything, as Professor Gilmore also encourages us, that is the urgency of the living.

Thank you so much.