

Silences and Surveillance in an Authoritarian Archive:
Researching disciplinary practices for homosexuality in the Brazilian Navy
Tinker Fellowship Report 2016

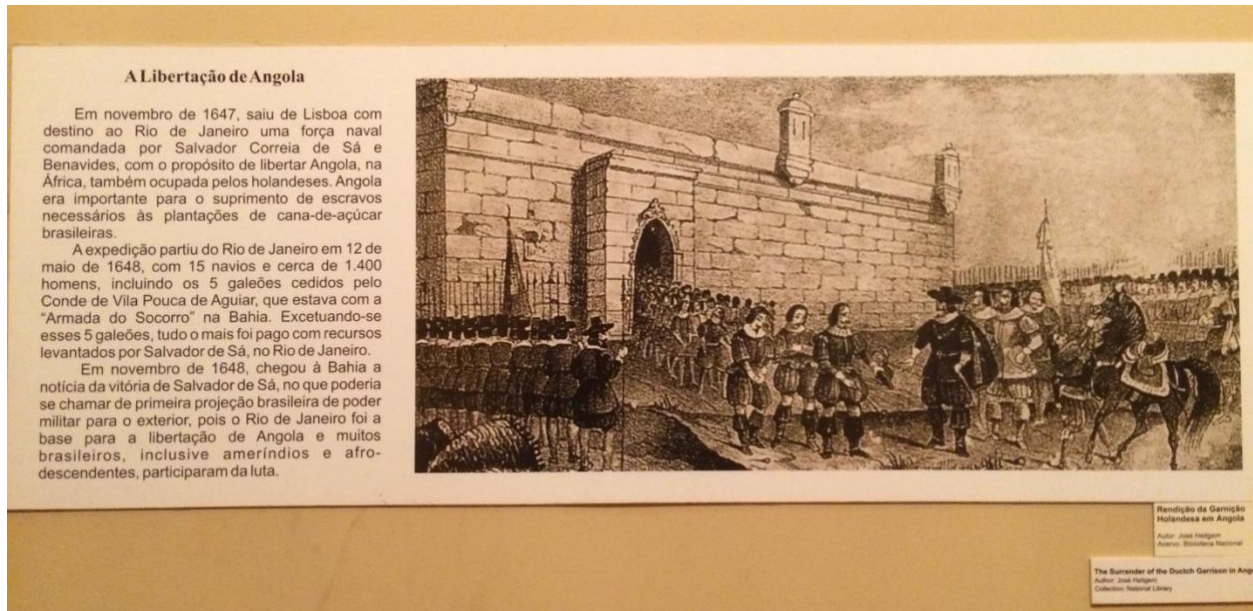
Like numerous other martial institutions around the world, the Brazilian military has shown to have a strict ethics of masculinity in the duties of service and protection with expectations of sailors and officers alike to perform tasks in an effort to safeguard the rights of all the nation's citizens. Nonetheless, this military, like any other, is heterogeneous in its constitution with men of different origins, politics, and identities. As a scholar in Black Studies, Brazil's more fluid understanding of race, gender, and sexuality has fascinated me over the years; and now, in the context of its national military with its austerity and symbolic pomp, how these constructions conflict. More broadly, I ask, how do bodies culturally designated as fluid—non-white and queer—form-fit and stress the strictures of the livery? As one of the many representations of national pride envisaged in the military, these men have the potential to both accept and challenge their bodies as their own as well as property and symbols of the state. As such, in my doctoral dissertation, I analyze queer black men's service in the Brazilian Navy and how the institution's continued imperialist agenda informs their notions of intersectional self-identification through institutional and interpersonal interactions within and beyond naval command.

The research carried out this summer was mostly introductory with as much respect to content as to methodology, learning how to navigate the archive, its holdings, management, and politics. Leading up to the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, I visited the Naval Museum and the Navy Archive in Rio de Janeiro. Apart from a more general research on how the Brazilian Navy situates itself geographically, historically, and socio-economically in the city of Salvador, carried out briefly in the Municipal Historical Archive of Salvador, the time spent in Rio was an initial foray into the realm of the military archive made available to a civilian public. By beginning in the Naval Museum, I wanted to see how the Navy presented itself to broader Brazilian society¹ to then visit the Navy Archive every day possible in order to become familiarized with the Navy's general procedures, documentation practices, and issues involving personnel, namely discipline.

In its intricate explanations of maritime wonders that brought Brazil into global markets through technologies brought on by colonization and laissez-faire economics, the museum could be characterized as traumatizing. "Colonization [of Brazil by the Portuguese] was necessary" due to French and Dutch competition, states one plaque. The Dutch were branded public enemy number one, thus focusing the museum much more so on military action and a unilateral conversation about capitalism's advantages and the glorious inheritance of Brazil's navy from Portuguese navigational tradition instead of focusing on the impetus and the ongoing, greater socio-political impacts to both American and global societies.

The silences in both the Naval Museum and Archive on blackness were most troubling, so much so that the Navy has systematically attempted to hide any mentioning of its protection of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, its impressment of black slaves into its crews during the War of the Triple Alliance, the 1910 Revolt of the Lash², as well as any notable Afro-Brazilian figures in naval history. After speaking with civilian and uniformed historians who work at the Navy Archive, no reference related to race within the Archive itself has appeared since the Revolt of the Lash. Interestingly enough, where the 1988 Constitution states under Title II, Chapter I, article XLII that "the practice of racism constitutes an unwarranted and imprescriptible crime, subject to the punishment of reclusion, under the terms of the law"³ the 1969 Military Penal Code—put into place under a military dictatorship and still in effect—makes no mention of discriminatory

practices in spaces under military jurisdiction to be illegal. Perhaps due to the state's insistence since the dictatorial Getúlio Vargas era (1930-1945) that Brazilian society is a racial democracy, any mention of race in military documents or personnel files has been excluded up to today.⁴ Yet, the mere fact that many of these dictatorial vestiges remain in military law and are enacted within the ranks and even the archive is alarming to say the least.



A plaque in the Naval Museum (Museu Naval) located in Rio de Janeiro entitled “The Liberation of Angola” exposing the Brazilian Navy’s position towards slavery and blacks both at the historical moment depicted and in its present-day representation, stating Angola’s importance to Portugal and its fight to take it back from Holland in the mid-seventeenth century. “Angola was important for the supply of slaves necessary to Brazilian sugar plantations.”

Due to these silences on race, then, my archival research could only enter along the lines of sexual behavior, namely those men who had violated article 235 of the Military Penal Code: “To practice, or permit that the soldier practices a libidinous act, homosexual or not, in a place subject to military administration.”⁵ The prescribed punishment for this offense labeled in the Code as “Pederasty or any other act of libidinousness” is detention for anywhere between six months up to a year. However, my access to such documents was limited, as all military tribunal files are sealed for anywhere between 90 and 100 years, even to other military personnel. Looking at the Navy since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, I discovered in the biweekly bulletins—roughly one to three-hundred-page personnel reports—that there was a section on discipline. These dense documents gave names, titles, ID numbers, the offense committed in regards to the Military or Civil Penal Code as well as sentencing, prison, pardons, absolution, release, and dismissal. Where archivists were required to search out these bulletins for me, they soon asked the “true reason” I was there, insinuating that I had ulterior, nefarious intentions to discredit and defame the Navy. Thus, in such a homophobic locus that the Brazilian military is known to be, I decided to present my research to the archivists as one focusing more generally on disciplinary practices, sans the details of race, sexuality, and sexual practices. However, despite I had written permission on the sign-in forms to take photographs or make copies of documents that any individual, civilian or military, had the right to access under the military’s own public knowledge policy, archivists frequently made known their disapproval: “What are you photographing?”, “That is personal information,” “I don’t think you should be doing that.” The archivists were sure to attend to my

requests last, even if I was the first to arrive, and asked me to write down the name of each document I photographed—over 500 pages. It also did not help that the archive only opened from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., closed on random days for unpublicized reasons or in preparation for the Olympic Games. As such, I was only able to thoroughly look through the documentation from 1985 to 1988 and from 2006 to 2016 requiring that I return to look through bulletins from 1989 to 2005.



Examples of Brazilian Navy bulletins, ranging in one to three hundred-page biweekly personnel reports. On average, each year has 24 to 26 bulletins, in them information on professionalization courses, internal transfers, foreign commissions, sick leaves, physical evaluations, medical discharges, furloughs, declaration of dependents, pensions, the bestowal of medals, obituaries, and what I focused on, discipline.

While military tribunal documents might fill in the holes for specific details, bulletins do provide some leads on each case with the accused's name, his identification information, and his sentence. One man was sentenced in December 1985 to six months in a naval prison, another in January 1987 was absolved of his crime and sentence, and another in April 2008 was sentenced to six months in a naval prison. These names found, searched for over the course of many hours, now give names to this research, names that I always wanted, but now regret to see due to the injustices that they went through. Yet, there could potentially be more, particularly in the years that I was unable to research (1989-2005).

A 2008 *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper article states that its own investigative reporting found that 21 men across all branches of the Armed Forces over the previous ten years had been

prosecuted and dishonorably discharged for violating article 235. The story's interlocutors, two self-identified gay men in the Army told of how they had been ridiculed, one of whom was discharged for a much more minor offense, he argues, as subterfuge to expel him for being gay (Sucursal de Brasília). This makes me question all that might not be present in the documents: the potential for men in the many pages of judicial and discipline proceedings that I viewed that were potentially punished for being gay while being charged for violating a different stipulation under the Military Penal Code. Speaking with two friends from Rio de Janeiro, both gay black men, one currently still serving in the Navy and another who had served in the Air Force, they supported the potential for this to happen as they "had seen it happen before," where a discovery is made about a fellow soldier and he is harassed but then disciplined and discharged for a different offense, namely desertion (Article 187) or disrespect for, misuse, or violation of the uniform (Articles 162, 171, 172).

Despite the tense experience of being in the archives under surveillance and in the (anti-) presence of so many racial and sexual silences, there is still more work to do both in documentation and in speaking to current and past sailors who might help in filling in the gaps. This archival research, as the initial steps to an interdisciplinary study that will later lattice visual culture and literary studies with its current practices in cultural anthropology, helps to echo the varying and changing methods, modes, and styles in African Diaspora Studies praxis. By focusing on the fluidity of race, gender, and sexuality in Brazil within the rigidity of a militarized locus such as that of the Navy—which is, in and of itself, also inherently fluid in the ebb and flow of its fleet and territory—is to honor a counterhegemonic orientation towards decoloniality. Where these black bodies, who historically traversed space and time and were forcefully inserted into Western civilization for profit, yet now take it upon themselves to explore their blackness, maleness, and sexuality while also enforcers of state and nation is to further radicalize African diasporic thought.

¹ When I asked both the receptionist and the curator, they said that their most frequent visitors to the museum were public and private elementary and middle schoolchildren, accompanied by their classroom teachers.

² The Revolt of the Lash (Revolta da Chibata) was started by black sailors in the Brazilian Navy against antiquated and cruel disciplinary practices—binding and flogging—that specifically targeted blacks in an attempt to maintain the racial status quo prior to the abolition of slavery in 1888 as well as against the barring of blacks from upward mobility within the naval chain of command. Having imprisoned their white officers and pointing the cannons of the Navy's newly minted dreadnoughts from British shipyards towards downtown Rio de Janeiro and the National Congress, the mutiny's threats were successful, thus officially ending sanctioned corporal punishment within the Brazilian Navy.

³ "a prática do racismo constitui crime inafiançável e imprescritível, sujeito à pena de reclusão, nos termos da lei" (Constituição 1988).

⁴ Despite the Navy being regarded as simultaneously one of the most traditional and blackest branches of the Brazilian Armed Forces, it did, in fact, begin to reserve spaces for blacks to fulfill officer positions in August 2015.

⁵ "**Pederastia ou outro ato de libidinagem...** Art. 235 Praticar, ou permitir o militar que com êle se pratique ato libidinoso, homossexual ou não, em lugar sujeito a administração militar: Pena - detenção de seis meses a um ano" (Código Penal Militar 1969).

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