

WHO KILLED JOHN LEE? GHETTO NARRATIVES, THE VOICE OF THE
MARGINAL IN GIL SCOTT-HERON'S *THE VULTURE*

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RESUMO: O objetivo dessa pesquisa é discutir como o livro de Gil Scott-Heron, *The Vulture*, problematiza questões vitais sobre estratificação social, segregação geográfica, e limitação econômica que muitas pessoas enfrentaram nos Estados Unidos no início dos anos 70, e que ainda hoje muitas pessoas enfrentam em todo o mundo. Procuo fazer uma contextualização histórica e socioeconômica do gueto Norte Americano a partir de ideias elaboradas pelo sociólogo Francês Loïc Wacquant. A partir dessa contextualização do gueto, estabeleço conexões entre tais mudanças geopolíticas que aconteceram em muitas das cidades do norte dos Estados Unidos, com momentos específicos do livro de Scott-Heron. Minha intenção é discutir os elementos não ficcionais de uma historia fictícia; é ficção, ou é um retrato surpreendentemente preciso e objetivo de um momento na historia? As lutas de gangue, os drogados, o estilo de vida implacável do gueto, o politicamente incorreto e a ameaça em potencial vistas no livro, publicado em 1970, são ainda hoje, infelizmente, evidência material de nossas tentativas fracassadas de melhoria social, uma sombra mórbida que esfacela nossa ordem social putativa. Uma situação que precisa ser solucionada antes que qualquer mudança significativa possa acontecer.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: gueto; marginalização; estratificação social.

ABSTRACT: *This research's objective is to discuss how Gil Scott Heron's book, The Vulture, problematizes vital questions of social stratification, geographical segregation, and economic restraint which many people faced in the United States in the early 1970s, and which still today many people are forced to withstand throughout the world. My aim is to contextualize the North American ghetto both historically and socioeconomically based on some ideas of French sociologist Loïc Wacquant. Based on this contextualization of the ghetto, I establish connections between these geopolitical changes which happened in many northern cities of the United States, with specific moments of Scott-Heron's book. My intention is to discuss the non-fiction elements of the fictitious story; is it fiction, or is it is a surprisingly precise and objective portrayal of a moment in history? The gang fights, the drug addicts, ghetto's relentless lifestyle, the politically incorrect, and the potential threat seen in the book, published in 1970, are still today, alas, material evidence of our failing attempts for social improvement, a morbid shadow which disrupts our putative social order. A situation which must be solved before any significant change might happen.*

KEYWORDS: *ghetto; marginalization; social stratification.*

Introduction

This research attempts to discuss in what ways Gil Scott-Heron's book *The Vulture* portrays the many different types of interpersonal relations between ghetto inhabitants of Upper Manhattan and Midtown Manhattan during the late sixties, and how those relations, and the political, social, cultural and economic changes that happened as a consequence of such relations were paramount to the exponential growth of the ghettos throughout the seventies. Today, while most major cities of Brazil have ghettos not dissimilar to the one Scott-Heron described sprawling through their urban landscape, more and more government programs try to stop this seemingly unstoppable problem. To aid me in the characterization and conceptualization of the ghetto I shall use the ideas and work of French sociologist Loïc Wacquant. In a further attempt to contextualize and historicize

such ghettos I have chosen the works and narratives of people who actually lived in these dreadful places, such as Claude McKay.

The Ghetto

The word ‘ghetto’ has been (re)used and disseminated usually¹ to describe different places around the world, inhabited by different people, who share only the forced spatial confinement. According to Loïc Waquant (2008, p. 78) the etymological origin of the word is contested, “coined by an Italian derivation *giudecca*, *borghetto*, or *gietto*, or the German *Gitter*, or the Talmud Hebrew *get*.” (WACQUANT, 2008, p.78). During the Middle Ages, when the word was created, all over Europe ‘ghettos’ were the specific districts to where Jews were designated to “by part of the political and religious authorities” (ibid). Most recently, it was imported by North American political authorities – from Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) to Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) – to describe “neighborhoods with great proportion (real or imaginary) of Jews from oriental Europe that installed themselves in the port cities of the East coast.” (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 61).

As more and more immigrants arrived from all over the world, especially Europe, stricken by poverty and desperate for work after World War I, more neighborhoods had to be designated for these people. The religious overtone of the word ‘ghetto’ dilated itself into new ethnic possibilities – Polish Hill, in Pittsburgh, Little Italy, in Chicago, and Chinatown, in New York, were some examples. These ethnic neighborhoods were gradually transformed into disposal and recruitment centers of cheap workers, as almost all penniless immigrants were sent to these neighborhoods. As housing conditions began to deteriorate, and soon thereafter the degradation of entire neighborhoods would follow, the geopolitical areas of major cities of the United States underwent enormous changes. The word ‘slum’ – which is often used in a context that denotes “overpopulation and misery (associated with unemployment and job instability)” (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 62) – began to be used as a synonym for ‘ghetto.’ There is an exponential growth in Race Riots, which start happening in many cities of the north, especially New York.

After World War II, though, ‘ghetto’ began “to denote almost exclusively the forced segregation of North American negroes in compact and degraded districts of downtown areas of cities” (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 62). These ‘time-bombs’ ticking away in the downtown areas of many cities² indicated that, possibly, Du Bois was right, and, in fact, the “problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line” (DU BOIS, 1994, p. v). The Second Great Migration (roughly 1940-1970) of millions of African Americans brought about new problems: what could these prefectures of the North do with all these people flocking into the cities with nothing more than a bag of clothes? In New York, during the fifties, it was not uncommon to see riots between African Americans and the Irish at the docks for the position at the bottom of the economic ladder which climbed to the circulation and production of capital.

Even though the sixties brought about many constitutional promises of renewal for African Americans, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the unparalleled sprawling of ghettos throughout the nation, combined with the unpunished

¹Today, with the help of media it is not uncommon to hear about sound systems called GhettoBlaster, or musicians called Ghetto, as the British rapper, or even magazines or entertainment programs called Ghetto.

² Some of them eventually exploded, as was evidenced with the Philadelphia Race Riot (1964), the Watts Riot, in Los Angeles (1965), or the Hough Riots, in Cleveland (1966).

police brutality against African Americans indicated that, maybe, in reality things had not changed so much; or maybe changed “too little, and too late”³ (LEWIS, 1963). As the labor market saturated itself throughout the decade, unemployment skyrocketed and ghettos grew out of control. Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968 must have reverberated as an ominous requiem not only for African Americans, but for impoverished people as a whole.

Communitarian Ghetto and Radical Organizations

One of the results of the forced confinement of the African Americans was their stunning ability to organize themselves as a people. Du Bois had already described ‘black New York’ as

a world in itself, closed to the outside world and almost unknown by it, with churches, clubs, hotels, saloons, and charity institutions; with its own social distinctions, entertainment, and ambitions. (DU BOIS, 1978, p. 152).

A direct result of this incredible organizing capability was the Harlem Renaissance. In his 1930 book entitled *Black Manhattan*, which discusses this watershed moment for African Americans, James Weldon Johnson states,

here we have Harlem, – not just a colony, community, or town – in no way a district, a slum or a marginal zone – but a black city, located in the heart of white Manhattan. (JOHNSON, 1981, p. 4).

But by the end of the sixties all these startling accomplishments were somewhat belittled by the lack of compromise of the Federal and State governments. Martin Luther King tried to cash the Nation’s ‘bad check’ of freedom and equality for all African Americans, only to be told to his face it had ‘insufficient funds.’⁴

The Vietnam War tore the nation apart politically, the economy plummeted, the country as a whole was damaged, and a feeling of deepening anxiety loomed over people’s heads as the decade closed its curtains. 1968 marked the end of LBJ’s ‘Great Society’ and the beginning of Nixon’s ‘Law and Order.’ Not surprisingly, many African Americans who were furious and tired of waiting for the Government to protect and help them, began to create radical organizations during the same period, sometimes extremely nationalistic, as was the case of the Black Panthers. Claude McKay had already talked about this fury when he wrote,

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot[...]
Like men we’ll face the murderous cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (MCKAY, 1971, p.71).

In the late sixties, the splinters and contradictions within the ghettos became too big to be ignored. Gil Scott-Heron’s *The Vulture* depicts these splinters and contradictions, as

³ Censored part of a speech given by John Lewis at the 1963 March on Washington. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT VETERANS. *Original draft of SNCC chairman John Lewis’ speech to the march on Washington*. Disponível em: <<http://www.crmvet.org/info/mowjl.htm>> Acesso em: 13 abril 2012.

⁴ Excerpt taken from the “I Have a Dream” speech. CHICAGO TRIBUNE. Full text of King’s “I have a dream” speech. Disponível em: <<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-mlk-ihaveadream.0,36081.story>>. Acesso em: 15 abril 2012.

well as the whole transformation which many ghettos were undergoing during the late sixties in ways which I shall discuss below.

Ghetto narratives of interpersonal relations, the voice of the marginal

Gil Scott-Heron's book *The Vulture* revolves around the killing of a young man called John Lee. Lee was 18 years old when he died. Like many of his Harlem peers he had dropped out of high-school and sold drugs as a means to stay alive. The story is predominantly set in Upper Manhattan, more specifically in Harlem, during the mid-summer of 1969. Four different characters give their version of the story. All four are directly connected to John Lee, and, as the story reveals, all of them are possible suspects. Two of these characters are also drug dealers, while the other two are portrayed as intellectuals and, in varying degrees, activists.

The character that narrates the first part of the book is called Spade. He is also young, a drug dealer, and, at least by his account, a well-liked member of his community. Spade and John Lee studied together, but because of their conflicting business interests – clients – they end up drifting away from each other. The second part is narrated by Junior Jones. Jones is overtly preoccupied with becoming a new Spade. He is a rookie drug dealer who is starting to get a fixed set of customers. Jones disdains and envies John Lee. While he thinks John Lee is lagging behind in so many ways, as consuming the drugs he is supposed to sell, he nevertheless recognizes that John Lee is tremendously respected within his community; a respect which he would do anything to get.

Most of the plot is centered on these three characters and their business in common. Their presence and doings are so perennial to the story that one might get the impression that the buying and selling of drugs in that specific context was something habitual, and which generated a lot of revenue for a very restricted number of people. An important character emerges from this triangular interaction, a drug lord called Zinari. He operates from the Bronx, but has 'ramifications' all the way down to Lower Manhattan. Zinari is the dealer that provides drugs for Spade and John Lee. Although he is a minor character, appearing only in the very beginning and very end, Scott-Heron depicts him as a godfather type of character; a man of few words and even fewer actions, who, nonetheless, seems to run the show.

The third and fourth parts are narrated by Tommy Hall, who is also referred to as Afro. He is a political activist, and a member of a radical African American organization. An active member of the community, he speaks at the gatherings of this radical organization and also co-manages a local shop in Chelsea which sells clothes and accessories. The high ranking officers of this radical organization see John Lee as a threat to the community because of his business. Afro, on the other hand, is rather friendly towards John Lee, and sees him as just another kid trying to make a living; a rather deviant kid, but a kid nonetheless. The high ranking officers of the radical organization plan to assassinate John Lee as a way of getting rid of the drug problem of the community, and call upon Afro to do the job. Afro accepts the mission, but because of his respectful relation with John Lee, plans to scare him instead. He manages to substitute some of the drugs John Lee would sell for salt capsules, in an attempt to thwart his business. In the end, Afro's plan fails and the organization's plan is completed.

The fifth part is narrated by Ivan Quinn, who is also known as I.Q. I.Q. is a young and brilliant intellectual of the community who enjoys quoting Shakespeare as much as he

likes to smoke marijuana. He wants to become a teacher at the school which the radical organization helped to establish in the community, and his bewildering encyclopedic knowledge of a vast array of subjects certainly calls their attention. Yet, when I.Q.'s forbidden lust for white skinned women is revealed, his admission into the organization is halted. As a result of this, I.Q. and Afro, who was in charge of his acceptance into the organization, have a serious disagreement. I.Q. also has a misunderstanding with John Lee because John Lee is selling drugs to his suicidal lover-friend, Ricky Manning. I.Q. is concerned that Manning's drug habit is increasing his suicidal tendencies. In the end of the story Manning jumps off a building and dies. This horrific event casts a huge shadow of suspicion over I.Q. concerning John Lee's assassination.

The sixth and final part is also the smallest one, and it is divided into three different moments. The first one depicts the detectives of the story coming across Spade's name. The second moment is narrated by Junior Jones and Ricky Manning, where Manning commits suicide. Although their conversation is brief it reveals that most characters of the story have concealed interests, and will usually think about personal benefit or profit before any action they take. The final moment is a very short dialogue between Smoke, a friend of Spade and minor character, and what seems to be Zinari. It is only here that we learn that Smoke is in fact John Lee's killer, and the killing happened because of a debt of 700 dollars that John Lee had with what seems to be Zinari. The habitual tone and rather indifferent manner which the killer and motive are finally revealed – everything is said in one sentence – seem to point to the absurdity of it all.

Afro and I.Q. are the intellectual politics of the ghetto they live in with their seductive virility, their fiery discourse against racial discrimination, their seemingly progressive ideals, as well as their innate leadership. However, as much as their characters represent a hope for their community, they also demonstrate the many internal fissures their community had. After all, the radical organization is also a criminal organization. At the same time I.Q. and Afro seem to suggest that the future of the community might be promising, they undeniably show the ubiquitous inconsistencies of the social framework of their community. Spade, Junior Jones and John Lee with their pervasive and somber presence, their captivating brutishness, and their beguiling smile fall exactly into the stereotype of the ghetto inhabitant we see so often in the news and movies. Are these characters really different from people of the early 1970s, or present days, or are they a good description of people we might know, or are shown in the news?

Who killed John Lee?

The plot's lack of conciseness or its inconclusiveness is one of its best features because there is a multifaceted present which continuously morphs into more presents; the future never really happens in the story. Situations in the story seem to have no discernible connections with the past. Actions in the story are but the prolonged shadows of the thunderhead which looms over everyday life in the ghetto. There is a strong overtone of desolation to it, as if actions are happening all around, but none of them bring about any sort of consequences other than an atavistic 'eye for an eye,' kill and die chain of reactions. The atmosphere of dread and overwhelming sorrow present in the novel suggests that Manhattan's underground community did not recognize any written or conventional laws during the late sixties.

By focusing more on the underground day-to-day life of Manhattan than on the killing itself Heron diverts the attention of the reader to other contexts, other stories

surrounding the assassination and the assassinated. One of the results of this shift is that the assassination and the murderer become leaves sprouting out of branches of a huge tree that has even bigger roots. The question, “who killed John Lee?” gradually becomes irrelevant, – proof of this is the fact that the murderer is a minor character in the story – even though it is what intertwines the novel. However, if we change one word, and ask instead: “what killed John Lee?” an array of answers immediately come to mind, and most of them render the murderer a mere pawn which operates in accordance with ‘laws’ it barely recognizes or has power over.

Aftermath and Final Considerations

According to a study published by the New England Journal of Medicine in 1990, young black men of Harlem back then had a bigger chance of dying in the heart of New York, than they did during the Vietnam War (MCCORD, FREEMAN, 1990, p. 173). In East Harlem, West Baltimore or South Central in Los Angeles “the commercialization of cocaine[...] has become the first and practically only regular employer of young blacks” (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 24). In the United States today there are more black men aging from 19 to 25 in prisons or on parole than in universities courses lasting four years? (FRANKLIN, 1987, p. 159). The ghettos of today are not so different from the war zones which many North American soldiers are seeing overseas. Wacquant talks about this when he reminds us that one of his ‘informants’ kept calling the ghetto of West Side Chicago the “Wild West,” “Murder town,” or even “The Killing Fields” (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 24).

Government investment in these black ghettos declined sharply throughout the twentieth century, and so did the living conditions. This led to the end of the divisions of labour, communitarian agencies, and racial unity. Living conditions decline to a point where safety on the streets becomes a problem. This in turn produces an economic gap, as there are fewer customers, or clients going to local businesses, shops, and establishments, which, in turn, depend upon this ‘internal’ revenue to exist. As these social activities of exchange decline, work becomes scarcer and in many ways also illegal; as the ‘off-the-market’ commerce of drugs and arms, or prostitution.

The gang fights, the drug addicts, ghetto’s relentless lifestyle, the politically incorrect, and the potential threat seen in the book, published in 1970, are still today, alas, material evidence of our failing attempts for social improvement, a morbid shadow which disrupts our putative social order; a situation which must be solved before any significant change might happen. Today, it seems that we are investing each time more money in public safety issues, while we keep trying to deny that such investment keeps on producing some of the very means which generate poverty in the first place, namely social stratification. Our technological and scientific advancements might trick us into thinking that we are continuously moving forward with progress on our side, but the escalating and overwhelming number of people living below the poverty line indicates otherwise.

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