police pacification & the culture of survival: 
the pragmatics of violence & hope in the favelas of rio de janeiro

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Tuesday, 17 May 2016, 2-3:15PM
Humanities Gateway 1010, UCIrvine

"When I saw the rockets announcing the caveirão, man, I died", said Raphael Calazans, a 24-year old music composer, about an episode he experienced in the Complexo do Alemão, a group of favelas in Rio de Janeiro where he grew up. His semantically "false" yet pragmatically felicitous "I died" was his way of explaining to my research group and myself that the line between living and dying in the slums of Rio de Janeiro is a blurred one. The approaching of the caveirão or war-like police tank was a sign that a violent raid would leave many people dead behind. As life in the favelas is not a firm promise, Calazans and many other residents have emregistered an ideology of community-building based on such ideas as ‘survival’ and ‘hope.’ A culture of survival, or the semio-linguistic ideological work by means of which people oppose violence and political destruction with a collective construction of hope, is at the very core of the ways in which residents of favelas build networks of cooperation and perform a sense of group attachment. From an empirical perspective, my talk will address modes of community building in the Complexo do Alemão predicated in a work of sociolinguistic scale (Blommaert 2007, 2014) that brackets vertical indexes of racial, geographical or class hierarchy in favor of a horizontal accomplishment of semiotic resources that allow for social support and imaginative modes of ‘survival’ in places variously marked by both linguistic and empirical violence.

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