

**Jaime Amparo Alves**, *The Anti-Black City: Police Terror and Black Urban Life in Brazil*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781517901554 (cloth); ISBN: 9781517901561 (paper)

I read *The Anti-Black City* in the direct aftermath of the brutal slaying of Marielle Franco, a queer black activist and city councilor in Rio de Janeiro. Preliminary evidence suggests that she and her driver, Anderson Gomes, were targeted by state actors because of Franco's tireless work denouncing the police killings of black, working class people in Rio's favelas. The murders have cast a(nother) dark shadow over Brazil's international image, momentarily making globally visible what has long been a structural foundation of Brazilian cities: acts of total violence against peoples of the African diaspora.

Jaime Amparo Alves's book is a tragically timely contribution to this hypervisibility of violence in Brazil. While the setting is São Paulo, not Rio de Janeiro, his theoretically grounded ethnography points to similar logics of necropolitical urban violence. Alves' project is to interrogate how the state produces "geographies of death and privilege" as a spatialized and racialized regime of governance in the contemporary neoliberal Brazilian city (p.2). The book poses two central questions: "What are the spatio-social practices that enable the (re)production of the city's racial order?" and "What kind of political action is required for turning the city of death into a *blackopolis*, a place for a radical repositioning of black life vis-à-vis violence and victimization?" (p.4). Alves spends most of the book answering the first: each chapter focuses on a different grouping of spatio-social practices that produce the city as a racialized bio(necro)polis, from highly spectacular killings by the police in favelas, to mass incarceration, to black mothers fighting state bureaucracy. Indeed, his deep ethnographic and theoretical accounting of the bio(necro)polis is almost so total that, by the end, the

answer to his second question—how to turn the city into a *blackopolis*—appears almost futile.

Alves' account loosely follows the story of Dona Maria, whose son, Betinho, is killed by the Slaughters—a group of off-duty police officers who regularly carry out killings of racialized youth. Through Dona Maria's and others' encounters with the state, Alves argues that the necropolitical neoliberal order of the Brazilian city operates in a temporally and spatially dispersed manner: the police apparatus kills black people in highly visible spectacles of violence in the city's peripheries; bodies are disposed of in gruesome fashion; the dead are then "socially killed", as state and media rhetorically link them to criminality and narcofactories; and their families—particularly mothers—encounter a slow death as they battle the "soft knife" (p.213) of state bureaucracy. This is what Joaquim, a key interlocutor, terms the "methodology of death", where spectacular murder is accompanied by more mundane methods of killing, such as the withholding of medical care, criminalizing discourses, and bureaucratic hurdles.

Alves—who identifies as black, from a favela in São Paulo—relies on the work of other emerging black Brazilian scholars such as João Costa Vargas and Luciane de Oliveira Rocha to tease apart the fundamental racial structure of the city. His understanding of racial violence is also deeply informed by black feminist, anticolonial, and decolonial work from across the African diaspora. Here Hortense Spillers' hieroglyphics of the flesh meets Katherine McKittrick's black sense of place and Frantz Fanon's zones of non-being in a lucid and vital conversation that tears asunder any imaginings of Brazil as a racial democracy and a country whose inequality is defined solely by class.

But this is not just a theoretical work. *The Anti-Black City* is at once politically angry, desperate, frustrated, resolved, and hopeful. Alves calls his praxis "activist anthropology". It is a "political endeavor" committed to "putting scholarship to the

service of [our] communities' empowerment" (p.29). The book is as informed by Alves' activist work in a number of different black movement organizations in São Paulo—Educafro, UNEafro-Brasil, and the Prisoners Advocacy Network—as it is by his theoretical training in the United States. From the guarded gates of Paulista detention facilities to the family homes of incarcerated men and women, this is a thoroughly rare accounting of violence that is only possible because of Alves' years of community organizing.

To reduce his methodological contribution to "access", however, is to simplify the work. It is the combination of this access with Alves' obvious and explicit respect for his subjects and their experiences that make possible this multifaceted picture of police violence and black agency. He takes prisoners' and drug sellers' words seriously, for instance theorizing from their understandings of "blood in reasoning" and visceral anger over white elite spaces. This approach allows Alves to provocatively argue that black criminality is an "*insurge[nce]* against the forces that drive the city" (p.137), a radical "refusal to comply with the anti-black governing strategies that are embedded in the city's security logics" (p.169).

Alves also dwells on the limitations of being a black activist ethnographer in the liberal academic world. When black subjects are interpellated through state violence and lawlessness—and when insurgent, radical action often means operating outside the law—how is the ethnographer to act and insurgent? He asks if it is possible for the activist ethnographer to be something *other*:

accepting to embrace black insurgency on the margins of the city may indeed require definitive departures from places of privilege and legality. For activist anthropology, it may mean an outlaw/ed anthro: one that if not willing to pay the price—since it is not truly revolutionary—is at least willing to dislodge itself from

white civil society's morality ... If dissociated from radical praxis, an activist anthropology of the current "crisis" of police terror is nothing but an anthropology of sorrow, lamentation, and pity. (p. 32)

As with any piece of writing that seeks major interventions, Alves' conceptualizations may rankle contemporary theoretical imaginings. For instance, because he reads the favela strictly through the lens of race—as a "Fanonian zone of nonbeing" (p.8), as "foreign land" (p. 57), and as a "racialized geography of confinement" (p.142)—Alves risks reproducing marginality theories that many Brazilian urbanists have long sought to undermine. In other words, by naming the favela only as necropolis, Alves potentially reduces extremely complex, heterogeneous, and relational communities to their killability and exceptionality.

Moreover, Alves does not speak to *if* and *how* conjunctural-geographical differences in the construction of race may inform racialized violence in Brazilian cities. For instance, what work does the *nation* and national texts of race (such as miscegenation) do for the constitution of Brazilian racialized subjects? How do productive imaginaries of racial democracy make it difficult to organize around black and Afro-Brazilian identity? And how might Alves' theoretical choices reproduce particular blindnesses, such as how the biopolis also (tries to) obliterate Indigenous peoples and their claims to land, nation, and kin? These ongoing questions do not, for me, detract from the ethico-political importance of Alves' work. Rather, questions of conjunctures and relationalities of race are important at *this* conjuncture, as decolonial and black studies gain greater institutional recognition in geography, and as urban studies attempts to provincialize and globalize its hegemonic theoretical armature.

Racialized urban violence in Brazil is indeed gaining greater global attention in the academy and beyond due to (structural) events such as Marielle Franco's murder. Her

death informs the global political discourse within which many will read this book. But I began this review with Marielle also because her *life* and *work*—and the global rallying around her life’s work—resonates with, indeed demonstrates, Alves’ *blackopolis*. To Alves, public mourning and organizing against police violence offers hope of something other than the bio(necro)polis. It is, specifically, “Black mothering pedagogies of resistance [and] their social-reproductive labor—fostering alternative community, nurturing life, bringing prisoners home, and honoring the dead—[that] subverts pathological narratives of black urbanity” (p.258) and creates the possibility for a *blackopolis*. Franco, like many of the mothers in *The Anti-Black City*, worked within and outside both civil society and the state to fight racialized violence: they have challenged the Brazilian bureaucracy and judicial system to denounce black death, but also recognize black life exceeding the “law”. The subjects in Alves’ book admittedly do not wield the influence or visibility of Franco—Dona Maria still has not received financial compensation from the state for Betinho’s murder, and the public security ministers in Rio and São Paulo continue to deploy militarized police action against favela communities. But in these pages, just as in the streets of Brazilian favelas, Marielle is present. Betinho is present. Black life *presente*.

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