THE URBAN QUILOMBO OF CRACOLÂNDIA

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Abstract: ***This text offers a political reading of the Cracolândia neighborhood in São Paulo, Brazil. As one of the largest areas of drug trafficking and consumption in the world, this urban area is marked by immense violence, driven by the state's actions against it and then daily incorporated within it. The aim is to contextualize this violence within the broader dynamics of governance in the Brazilian state, particularly through the lens of race. Following the insights of anthropologist Amanda Amparo, this paper proposes expanding the concept of Cracolândia as an Urban Quilombo: a technique through which a Black population seeks to escape the death policies imposed by a racist power structure. Compared with Amparo's work, this article emphasizes the political – both practical and symbolic – importance of Cracolândia's spatial location, not in a peripheral area or favela, but in the very heart of the city.***

Keywords: ***Cracolândia; Brazil; Violence; Race; Quilombo; City centre***

a. Introduction

This contribution moves from an ethnographic survey[1] carried out in the Cracolândia neighborhood,[2] "the land of crack" in São Paulo, Brazil.

Located in the heart of the metropolis, the area is described by the media as a large drug trafficking and consumption hub, inhabited by thousands of homeless people and traversed daily by just as many *usuarios* ("consumers"),[3] most of whom sustain themselves by collecting and recycling street waste, as well as through a vast variety of informal, more or less legal activities. My attempt will also be to show that it is much more than this.

[1] The survey was conducted in three distinct periods of one mount each, in March and December of 2023, and in November of 2024.

Cracolândia is barricaded in the heart of São Paulo, perceived by the authorithies and part of the population like an itchy and highly visible fungus that refuses to retreat. In the teeming center of Brazil's main metropolis, arriving from the city's best-known *avenidas*, some streets begin to empty out and stores become less frequent; then suddenly, life explodes again, but in a vastly different form from what was left just a few blocks before. The bodies crowd together, voices rise again, drawing closer to the *fluxos*. A *fluxo* ("flow") is a gathering of people in open spaces, where up to a thousand individuals can congregate at intersections or squares around makeshift stalls. The core of this aggregation is undoubtedly the drug market and immediate on-site consumption, but around this activity, many others flourish: the manufacture and sale of *cachimbos* ("pipes"),[4] cigarette smuggling, the trading of second-hand clothing, as well as prostitution, dance, capoeira, *churrascos* ("barbecues"), and all kinds of social interactions, including those among users, activists, dealers, social workers, and not least, those with the police forces.

The area appears as an environment of extreme degradation, in which people in a condition of enormous physical and psychological distress wander among piles of all sorts of garbage, and in which atrocities are committed every day.[5] Violence is introduced daily by the police and reproduced by organized

It included 20 semi-structured interviews with neighborhood *usuarios* (Conducted in portugues). The composition of the interviewees reflects the demographic reality of the members of this social context, the vast majority of whom are young Black men. However, the voices of a few women are also present. All interviews were conducted on-site and involved only substance users and homeless people. This arbitrary choice is justified by the intention to give voice to those who are least heard, yet who truly embody Cracolândia. Their words reveal all the contradictions of this space, often contradicting each other or highlighting the fluidity of opinions, making explicit the ineffability of the *Fluxo*. The interviews were conducted with ample room for improvisation and are therefore often disorganized. Some quotes were extracted from even more informal conversations held during the everyday life of Cracolândia.

Alongside the voices of the *Fluxo*'s inhabitants appear, in contrast, those of certain members of São Paulo's upper bourgeoisie—individuals who hosted me during my fieldwork in other neigborhoods, and with whom I held spontaneous conversations on the subject of the research. My ethnographic work thus combines a view of the *Fluxo* with a view of São Paulo's conservative bourgeoisie

2 The name was originally coined by the media, first appearing in the conservative newspaper Estadão de São Paulo in 1995. Today, however, the term has entered the city's common usage, being used by all of its residents and also being widely claimed by the neighborhood community itself.

3 The term is widely used in the neighborhood.

4 In this case made of iron, used to consume crack. The *cachimbeiros* make them using salvaged materials, such as old antennas.

5 In order to theoretically frame the context of Cracolândia in the sense proposed here, a rich bibliography, produced not only in Brazil, can be useful. Many authors studied contexts with some degree of similarity (Ayuero, Bourgois, Scheper-Hughes 2015; Biehl 2005; Bourgois 2005 and 2009); While

crime and by the very inhabitants of the "fluxo," trapped in its grasp and exposed to it due to material necessities.

The peculiarity of Cracolândia, as a neighborhood of degradation, drugs, and violence, is it's location, not only in the center of the city, as mentioned above, but even in what was once São Paulo's most prestigious area. Even today, the derelict houses tell the story of Brazil's landowning elite, whose protagonists at the beginning of the last century wanted to build their mansions near the city's most important stations, still present today, where coffee shipments from their plantations arrived. Since then, the neighborhood has changed several times, increasingly deteriorating while also establishing itself as one of the most vital and creative areas in São Paulo. The Boca do Lixo[6] was once a zone of prostitution and underground cinema, of independent filmmaking and gambling; in the years of the fascist dictatorship, it was the refuge of underground, criminal and criminalized São Paulo. The traces of this ambivalent history are still evident in the everyday life of Cracolândia, as urban elites increasingly seek to reappropriate this central, green, and well-connected space.

Today, the area has outgrown the crack dimension; many of its streets host modest commercial activities and some buildings are home to the city's lower class, creating a hotly contested territoriality with the members of the "Fluxo", the component of the neighborhood involved in drug use. As mentioned, this is how we define those groupings of hundreds of *usuarios*, which constitute a scenario difficult to imagine, affecting all five senses, characterized by shocking violence and thrilling solidarity. But by metonymy, the word *Fluxo* has come to mean everyone who is part of it, namely the community of *usuarios* in Cracolândia, homeless people from the Fluxo itself who flood the streets of all the neighborhood, occupying them day and night.

Fluxo is not only a place of horrors and abuse. Over the years, this community has constituted a strongly political dimension, continuously claimed. Today, Cracolândia is traversed by dozens of collectives and hosts countless cultural, political, artistic, and social initiatives produced from below, by both "fluxo" members and outsiders. However, one must also acknowledge the ferocity of this space, which, with its constant presence, leaves no room for illusions. The physical and social tolls of life in the "fluxo" are starkly visible. Many individuals

many other have analyzed the forme of governance that will emerge here (Farmer 1997; Fassin 2014; Sassen 2014; Scheper-Hughes 1993, Wacquant 2016).

[6] The old name of the neighborhood, still widely in use today.

live with the long-term consequences of state violence, precarious health conditions, and structural abandonment.

This is an extremely complex environment in which an infinite number of themes can be observed. The aim of this paper is to analyze, through an ethnographic lens, the relationship between this specific territory and political violence. It seeks to show how this space, though the product of a structural violence sedimented over time and reactivated daily, paradoxically represents a means of escaping that same structural violence and rejecting it. The inspiration for such reflections is provided by an idea from the anthropologist Amanda Amparo (Amparo, *Sociabilidades Negras* 2021), who, revitalizing a key concept of Black Brazilian politics, proposed interpreting Cracolândia as an "urban Quilombo" – the only possible refuge for the city's most marginalized, almost always Black, individuals. This work will attempt to take Amparo's analysis a step further by highlighting, from a political perspective, the importance of the spatial location of this particular Quilombo – right at the center of the metropolis. This reveals an extremely contradictory spatiality: on the one hand, it is daily subjected to the deadly rationality of the Brazilian state, introduced through the brutality of law enforcement, deploying what many authors define as a genocidal mechanism (Wermuth, Marcht, and de Mello, *Necropolitica*); yet on the other hand, it also represents an escape from that rationality through the formation of a resilient and solidaristic community, and through the occupation of the city's central space. Presenting themselves in the city center, claiming the right to occupy it, means escaping the most grotesque brutality imposed by the state in the peripheries and favelas; it means drawing from the metropolis's immense wealth, whether legally or not; and it means building a network of solidarity and resistance that would be difficult to replicate elsewhere. Thus, Cracolândia appears as a place where the gears of Brazil's racist and murderous power grind against a collective force asserting its right to exist – transforming that existence into resistence.

At the core of this interpretation is the conviction that Cracolândia is a product of Brazil's structural inequalities. The inhabitants of the "fluxo" have ended up there due to the lack of opportunities that afflicts Brazil's poor, very often Black, population; and also due to the political violence they have been subjected to since birth.

b. The politics of death in Brazil

To sketch the contours of the structural violence that shapes Cracolândia from the outside, and which it attempts to resist on a daily basis, the category of the "politics of death" – coined by Achille Mbembe (Mbembe, *Necropolitcs*) in the wake of Michel Foucault (Foucault, *History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*) – is useful. The aim in this case is to indicate how Brazilian power relates to its subordinate and racialized territories, attempting to transform them into "death worlds," places of exclusion and confinement where a segment of the population can be left to die or be actively killed.

To look at the structural violence we are talking about, the lens that seems most appropriate is that of racism, in a space where, compared to the 40 percent of the city average, the Black population reaches 90 percent. To justify why Cracolândia is an urban Quilombo installed in the center of São Paulo, a garrison of existence and resistance for overwhelmingly Black people who take refuge there to survive, it will thus be necessary to keep in mind the theme of the genocide of the Afro-descendant population in Brazil, recalling how it has been engaged for centuries against the grasp of a necropolitical and tanatopolitical state[7] from which, in Cracolândia, it relentlessly *escapes*.

On average, 7.5 homicides per day.[8] That is the number of Black people killed by the police in Brazil in 2023, the most recent year for which official sources exist at the time of writing. That's 2,782 per year. Over 92% of the total victims died at the hands of law enforcement.[9] These figures not only show the scale of brutality, but, when placed in a temporal analysis, they also highlight the worsening of the situation in recent years. In 2019, the percentage of Black people among police victims was 75%,[10] and between 2008 and 2018, the number of homicides of Black people in the country had already increased by 11.5%.[11]

7 Following the publication of *Necropolitics*, the term *tanatopolitics* was introduced to denote policies that *kill*, while *necropolitics* continued to denote those that *let people die*. See, in this regard, Agamben (1995) and (Esposito 2004).

8 https://observatorioseguranca.com.br/pele-alvo-a-cada-24-horas-sete-pessoas-foram-mortas/

9 Ibidem.

10 https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2020/07/15/negros-sao-75-dos-mortos-pela-policia-no-brasil-aponta-relatorio.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com

11 www.riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/brazil/life-brazil/homicide-of-blacks-grows-11-5-percent-in-11-years-others-drop-13-percent/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

In a country marked by extreme police violence, the State of São Paulo is one of the very few states in Brazil to have recorded a decrease in this type of violence in recent years; in 2022, 477 murders perpetrated directly by the state were recorded – marking the lowest figure since 2017.[12] This decrease followed the introduction of bodycams on officers' uniforms. This is probably why the newly elected far-right governor, Tarcísio, was quick to declare his intent to abolish them, considering them to be getting "in the way of police officers' work", which egregiously reveals what such "work" entails.

It took Governor Tarcísio just one year to make his impact felt in the state: Between 2023 and 2024, police killings increased by 65%, reaching 835 victims – one every 10 hours.[13] Of these victims, 65% were Black,[14] in a state where only 30% of the population is Black. Under Tarcísio's governorship, deaths of Black people at the hands of the police have increased by 85%.[15]

It is important to grasp the organic nature of this system of death, which does not so much respond to a desire to eliminate black people *tout court*, but rather to a set of management practices of this population that have been consolidated over time, a rationality that has been structured by considering this group of people fundamentally eliminable. Gabriel Andrade da Silva aptly defines this when he writes: "The deaths are an institutional project; without this declared project there would be no genocide. To deny this is to disregard the functioning of the state from the abolition of slavery" (Da Silva, *Genocidio do negro*, 48).

Institutionality lies in the sedimentation of this political practice. Brazil's racist state has inherited and developed a deadly governmentality of its Black population, within which killing is a widely practicable option. The Black person represents a public enemy in Brazil, identified with the criminals, bandits, and drug traffickers. Given the historical desire of Brazilian elites to integrate into Western countries, to see themselves recognized as representatives of the same modernity as Europeans or Americans, it was necessary to perform the operation that Michel Foucault had brilliantly defined, writing:

12 https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-brasil/2025/01/15/letalidade-da-policia-militar-paulista-aumentou-em-2024.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com

13 Ibidem.

14 www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2024/10/mortes-pela-policia-de-sp-crescem-78-em-2024-2-de-cada-3-vitimas-e-negra.shtml?utm_source=chatgpt.com

15 Ibid.

> How could power exercise its highest prerogatives by putting people to death, when its main role was to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order? For such a power, execution was at the same time a limit, a scandal, and a contradiction. Hence capital punishment could not be maintained except by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*, 138).

By demonizing the criminal, one refuses to recognize a system that roots its legitimacy in the coffee and cocoa plantations of the 16th through 19th centuries, where the sovereign right to kill is fully recognized, and where, in fact, the possibility of killing guarantees the perpetuation of order. One does not grasp the political context of Brazil, and of São Paulo, if one does not understand how the mentality that characterizes much of the country's elite today has its roots in Brazil's colonial and slaveholding history. Many wealthy people live in constant fear of the black and impoverished population, perceived as aggressive and untamable; yet they remain de facto opposed to any public policy that improves the conditions of these subalterns (Alves 2018). This may seem contradictory only if one does not see that, in their view, it is the police and justice who must keep these undesirable "wretches" at bay, through incarceration and preventive force, through death if necessary. That is why, according to Tarcisio, the *bodycams*, which seem to have so dramatically decreased the army's killings, "get in the way of the officers' work." The army is engaged in a constant war against an internal enemy perceived as dangerous. Little matter that thousands of innocent lives are lost in the process. As Achille Mbembe points out, racialization is the demarcation within which killing becones perceived as acceptable.

We thus come to another key point in understanding how the everyday life of Cracolândia can be read as a rejection, by the *usuarios*, of such racist policies, namely the spatial dimension on which the described system of death rests: the *favela*. The setting for this violence is often the informal neighborhoods located on the margins and in the less visible areas of Brazilian metropolises. These spaces reflect the ongoing structural exclusion of Black communities following the abolition of slavery, representing vibrant and diverse social realities that contrast this marginalization. The shacks made of bricks and sheet metal were built by marginalized populations in the most inhospitable urban areas, often as a result of mid-20th-century rural-urban migration and displacement,

becoming zones of exclusion for Afro-descendant communities. It is here that police operations leave thousands of bodies on the ground, victims of simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thousands of homicides occur because of stray bullets, but many more are instead due to the state of exception that characterizes these territories. With the favela being a place of crime, and criminals being the public enemy of Brazil, it is necessary to act within it with the utmost firmness. This is the face of Brazilian territorial exclusion, worlds of death based on a state of exception where the right to kill is legally sanctioned.[16]

What I seek to argue here is that Cracolândia is itself a technique, conscious or unconscious, for escaping the death-dispensing apparatus of the Brazilian state[17] – a necrostate, as it has been called by the previously cited scholars. Not, of course, in its hyper-consumption of crack, but in doing it together and doing it in the center of the town. Given the combination of exclusion and death in Brazil, the act of coalescing into a community and establishing oneself in the heart of the country's economic capital to this day represents the salvation for these subaltern and marginalized people. Unsurprisingly, the intent of state power has for years been to expel and disperse them.[18]

This work certainly does not intend to forget how death is also part of Cracolândia, being discernible everywhere in the territory on a par with violence, exclusion, and misery. The Fluxo clearly remains the target of terrible violence on the part of law enforcement, and extreme forms of violence generated by exclusion exist within the "usuarios" as well. However, it is necessary to understand what could happen if, as many wish, we were to "put an end to Cracolândia." That is, if this portion of the city were to be cleared and "sanitized" from its users and they were to be pushed back and dispersed into some peripheries, reducing them to invisibility. Brazil's urban margins are the scene of a systematic massacre against subaltern and undesirable individuals, where death takes the form of poverty or police violence, entering the daily

16 To give just one example, in 2019 the governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro posted videos on social media in which he participated in an operation aboard a military helicopter in the favela of Angra dos Reis; he can be seen shouting "let's end crime in Angra dos Reis!" Machine gunfire was fired from the helicopter at a church.

17 For discussions on the mobile, fluid, and evasive character of the *fluxo*, see Frúgoli Jr. and Cavalcanti's (2012) concept of *"territorialidades itinerantes"* in their study of Cracolândias. Additionally, Rui (2012) demonstrates how Cracolândia is a survival strategy for those people whose bodies are rejected by the metropoly

18 For a detailed analysis of the various forms of governance operating in Cracolândia, see the very recent work of Richmond and Magri (2025)

lives of people. Although there is no intention here to romanticize Cracolândia, where the drama of thousands of people unfolds every day, it is fundamental to contextualize this territory and this community within a system of violence that is hard to imagine. In the streets of the neighborhood, law enforcement is not allowed to engage in practices that are instead commonplace in other territories; for example, here the police shoot with rubber bullets and not metal ones, and military operations are accompanied by the pervasive presence of collectives and activists who monitor the agents' actions. The Brazilian state wages a veritable civil war against a section of its population, exemplified by the constitutional role of the military, which is not to protect national borders but to preserve "internal order." The disorder is personified by the figure of the criminal, or *bandit*, toward whom the state's posture is clear; "*a good bandit is a dead bandit*", politicians often repeat. Who more than the user of Cracolândia embodies the criminal? Illegal by definition, drug addict, Black, homeless, vagabond, and thief. During the field research, I conducted many interviews in the salons of the white, conservative upper middle class of other neigborhoods, whose attitudes toward Fluxo people left no room for interpretation.

Sara: *With COVID, we hoped that those disgusting people from Cracolândia would all die. But God knows why he didn't want that. They need to be shot and the problem solved.*

Teresa: *We need to protect the shopkeepers by any means, but with these "human rights," nothing can be done!*

In short, in Cracolândia, people die, they die a lot but less than elsewhere, and above all, less than some would want. Cracolândia itself is certainly what Mbembe would have called a death-world, a space in which death is a constant presence; however, the necropolitical apparatus fails to fully unfold in this territory, as it is challenged by a series of forces that resist it.

c. Cracolândia Quilombo

Eduardo: *The vast majority of these people come from a devastated life story. The vast majority, brother, I think 80 to 85 percent, already come from a history of segregation. They are the excluded, the migrants, the prostitutes, the trans women, those who were born and raised on the streets. This is the great*

magic of the Fluxo – it welcomes those who are alike. This is a place where the alike recognize each other, without prejudice. People walk around barefoot, with destroyed feet, people who are filthy, who haven't slept for days – you get me? It's the place where the excluded become included. Look at that Black man who just got his water – now he's sleeping peacefully *[emphasizing the word] here with us. Where else could he sleep so peacefully in the middle of the street? Only here.*

[...] *Racism is the reality of this country, we are in a racist reality. Period. Everything is racist. Racism is implicit in the "security issue," it is imminent. The racism of the powerful. I can't go into that bar alone. But if I go there with you, the doors open. That is racism. And then there is the racism that we suffer as Fluxo residents, which is different again. Here in Boca we go barefoot, we are the barefoot race. This already highlights who is from the Fluxo and who is not. Racism is not only based on skin color, but also on clothing color, nail color, it is a racism that goes beyond race, based on social stratification.*

[...] *No really, brother, you have to demistify crack. Crack doesn't encompass the whole thing, understand? This is the place where the last ones recognize each other, it's the place of the excluded. Crack is not the guiding force here; this is the place where the prostitutes come, the abandoned, the segregated. It is a refuge, I think there is no other place like this in the world. Did you see what happened in the five minutes we were sitting here?* (The interview took place in a square in the neighborhood, crowded with *usuarios* engaged in all sorts of activities, frequently interrupting our conversation for various reasons).

Roberta: *Cracolândia is a neighborhood with all kinds of people, not just the "trash" that most people think, working people, residents. For me it is a family, there are fights and everything but we are always united. We are good people, there are also bad people, it is true, but not only!*

The media tells a lot of lies! There are good people here! There is solidarity! I have many good friends in the Fluxo, we chat, I like it. There are people I like, people I talk to – there's all sorts of folks, and if you stay for a few days, you'll see that there are good people here.

Rodrigo: *In this neighborhood, people who have nothing can be together, look at this little group* [pointing to six or seven usuarios huddled together on the ground] *– they wouldn't be like this anywhere else. It's a very ugly place because Brazil is a very ugly place. But at least here, we are together. Only those who have never faced the possibility of ending up like this don't understand it.*

Joao: *On the street we are a family, on the street we are all together.*

[Two hours later, after a *usuarios* had attempted to steal his drum and he had chased the thief inside the Fluxo to beat him up.] *Everyone here is shit! We need the PCC*[19] *to kill all these shitty thieves!*

Maria: [In the Fluxo] *What are you doing? Put your backpack in front of your belly and your cell phone in your underpants! People here suck, they're all shit thieves, they'd steal your sister – I should know, my boyfriend is a thief. I'll take care of you, I'm your godmother in the Fluxo.* [Two hours later] *Do you like it here? We are a big black family, we love each other, we are together.*

Tania: *I'm very grateful because São Paulo has a mother's heart – São Paulo is not like any other city. Cracolândia is not a family; it's different. Because I left my family when I was ten due to huge conflicts. Not everyone in my family accepted my gender transition. My father was unemployed, my brother was a cop – they didn't accept that I was a woman. My mother kicked me out of the house, I left home, thank God, because first, there is God, and then all the Orixás, since I follow Candomblé. I help everyone I can. I went to live with my biological father in Santos in a small apartment for five months, then I left because I never respected him as a father. Now I'm happy. I've had many chances to smoke crack – since I've only been in relationships with people who use it – but I never have. But I can't say I never will – the only one who knows the future is God. All my friends, my street family, are crack users. But I don't judge them. I help whoever I can help. I can't tell you I'll never smoke it. I'm 29 now – who knows?*

"Do you live on the streets?"

Yes. I am a person in a socially vulnerable situation, but only until Thursday! [Laughing] *Thursday I get a subsidy and I will rent a small hotel room. Here I have opportunities ... From lixo* [garbage] *... I will go up to luxo* [luxury], *I have faith. When I'll have a home, even if I don't have much food – at least rice, beans, and a fried egg – whenever I can help, I do. I cook and bring food to my friends on the street. If I really can't help, at least I try not to get in the way.*

[19] Primeiro Comando da Capital is the criminal organization that controls the crack trade in São Paulo and that, until a few years ago, exercised widespread control over the area — a control that has now been significantly scaled back

Wilson*: I've never lost my pride. Never. Fifteen years wandering, since I left my family. And I had a family, a house, a motorcycle, a workshop. Here, I have my family too – another family.*

Carlos: *We build our street family – he is my brother-in-law, she is my spouse, he is a dad, that one is a brother. Day by day, we're in this struggle together, all day long – whenever we need each other. For example, when I got run over and hurt my foot, everyone took care of me – whatever I needed. If I was hungry, whatever. You get it? They give me strength, because that's how it is; each one gives strength to the other, each one is there for the others, like a real family.*

Wilson: *I don't want to lie to you, here people also screw each other, cheat each other, stab each other.*

Carlos: *Of course, it is logical.*

Quilombo represents a concept of great importance in contemporary Brazilian culture. Historically, the term refers to a specific social and political formation that emerged during the centuries of Portuguese slavery. However, in the twentieth century, the concept took on a performative function within the Black movement, evolving into a powerful political tool – besides continuing to exist as territories of Black resistance.

Historically, since the 16th century, the Quilombo was a community of self-liberated enslaved people who sought refuge in the forests to escape the plantation system. Until the abolition of slavery in 1888, Quilombos multiplied, particularly in the northeast of Brazil, taking on different forms – some more hierarchical, some in direct conflict with colonial society, while others remained separate from it. They are thus Afrodescendant emancipation communities in which the freedom of the Black population is restored, the slave-based economic system is rejected, and African religious forms and mother tongues are recovered.

Throughout the 20th century, various authors, known as *quilombolas*, engaged with the Quilombo theme, reinterpreting and updating it in different ways. Quilombos have been seen as utopian communities, survival refuges, spaces of resistance, and sites of alternative citizenship where people can create new forms of community. What unites these perspectives is the effort to construct a Black history of Brazil – one that highlights the country's African

roots and emphasizes the agency of enslaved populations. For the Black movement, the Quilombo and *quilombagem* (the practice of forming Quilombos) are central both in interpreting Brazilian history and as political instruments. *Quilombismo* preserves and rehabilitates Afro-Brazilian memory; exalts African agency in the country's history; promotes emancipation, separatism, and Black communitarianism; proposes a historical and present alternative to the exploitation of former slaves; and offers the image of a refuge for the exploited masses. If *Quilombismo* is a lens through which to read and reevaluate some aspects of Brazilian contemporaneity, from favelas to candomblé brotherhoods, and if some places even present themselves as Quilombos *tout court*, proposing themselves as political spaces *of* and *for* black communities, we will therefore attempt to read Cracolândia as a contemporary urban Quilombo.

In the case of Cracolândia and Fluxo, it will have already seemed obvious that the utopian scope of *quilombagem* needs to be lightened to apply the concept to this context. Yet one can also pick up on resonances that are at once suggestive and prolific.

We certainly cannot claim that, for all intents and purposes, Cracolândia represents a utopia, nor that it is a place of total emancipation or an oasis of freedom. The self-destructive nature of addiction and the deep socioeconomic misery prevent it from being a coherent and functional alternative to Brazil's exploitative system. There are certainly traces of communalism and non-hierarchical solidarity in the Fluxo, but they cannot be generalized to a systemic level of functioning. That said, even though it is crucial to avoid romanticizing a space of profound violence and injustice, how can we deny that the *Fluxo*, in many ways, embodies a form of *quilombagem* – a radically Black community, a refuge for bodies otherwise subjected to Brazil's racist thanatopolitics, a claim to the right to a space of one's own, and a dysfunctional escape from systemic racism?

Amanda Amparo, a Brazilian and Black anthropologist, has been studying São Paulo's homeless population since her brother started living on the streets – eventually losing his life, some years later, as a result of structural violence. She has looked at Cracolândia from the perspective of race, reinterpreting the theoretical proposition of various *quilombolas* and producing what to date is perhaps the most radical academic look at this community. In her master's thesis *Sociabilidades Negras e a Guerra às Drogas: Olhares Sobre o Território da "cracolândia"* (Amparo, *Sociabilidades Negras e a Guerra às Drogas*, 2021), she proposes reading Cracolândia as an urban Quilombo and recognizing in the Black collective body that occupies the neighborhood's streets an

aquilombamento in its own right. To grasp the theoretical and political scope of this proposal, it is crucial to keep in mind the notion of Black genocide, recalling how the Brazilian Black population is subject to various forms of tanatopolitics and necropolitics, of removal from public space through violent death or through segregation in other spaces, such as prisons. From this perspective, to *exist* is to *resist*, and to exist together is a political project. It is worth quoting a passage from Amparo:

> We can think of "Cracolândia" as a refuge for Black people who, within the city, have nowhere else to go. In this sense, it would not be an exaggeration to say that "Cracolândia" functions as an urban Quilombo. The intention of this conceptualization is not to romanticize or over-qualify this space but rather to highlight how a territory becomes defined by the relationships formed within it [...]. The vulnerability of Black bodies in the metropolis allows us to understand why, for some, "Cracolândia" is the only place where existence is possible. The desire to exist is inherent to every individual, but in some cases, existence itself becomes an act of resistance. [...] Resistance to exclusion, fear, loneliness, hunger, cold, and death. I interpret this territory as a community that in a sense establishes itself as a space of total alterity within the city. [...] The Quilombo can be seen as the historical tendency of Black people to preserve themselves, as a social settlement and organizational structure that creates a new internal order. The constant survival strategies inside "Cracolândia" are a response to systematic persecution. Therefore, all mechanisms of defense function to protect a group at risk. When one body of this group is at risk, all others are as well, and therefore every movement of these bodies, even when individual, defines the possibility of the entire group's survival and permanence. (Amparo: *Sociabilidades Negras e a Guerra às Drogas* 2021, 111–113)

Cracolândia is thus the last possible refuge, the only territory for a rejected corporeality under attack, not a utopian place but a survival technique. If every Black body in the city of São Paulo is endangered, driven to passively dispose of itself in the places of exclusion or often condemned to death by a racist system, then every body that lives and exercises its freedom in the space of the metropolis is a political garrison, a Black and abusive occupation of racist and colonial white space. In this sense, reinterpreting Beatriz Nascimento's thought, Amanda Amparo suggests that we see in the tumultuous bodies of Fluxo *aquilombamentos* or *Corpos Aquilombados*. In this framework, *"aquilombar-se"*

(forming a Quilombo) becomes an existential act of self-affirmation and antagonistic self-recognition, where the individual and collective body merge, dissolving into one another.

> Aquilombing is an action on the part of the whole that even under the worst conditions organizes collectively, transforming itself into community. As Batista recalls, "Black people always organize themselves to form communities. Whether during or after the period of slavery, Black people, united, find ways to resist within white society " (Batista, 2019, p.400). [...] These Black bodies exercise their permanence by sharing their common trajectories, practicing a being that does not conform to the inertia of the city, which in turn leads to an *aquilombamento*. According to Beatriz Nascimento, this *aquilombamento* resides within the Black persons themselves, who can, in essence, be considered a Quilombo, as they are implicitly multiple. In this sense, the relationship between Black corporeality and Black territoriality can be defined as *aquilombada*. [...] Beatriz Nascimento draws our attention to the idea that the institution of the Quilombo is pertinent not only to the territory, but also to the individual. Every person can be a Quilombo. Taking this perspective as a key point, we can view these bodies/quilombos, which meet collectively in *Cracolândia*, as forming an itinerant territory that resists the racist practices of the city, even as it remains a product of them. (Ibid. 112)

Quilombo thus becomes a tool to resist the racist Brazilian necropolitics in which some find themselves forced to take refuge due to the lack of alternatives.

Yet, on closer inspection, Cracolândia has not historically been constituted on a racial basis. It was not on the basis of color that the *usuarios* gathered in Boca do Lixo. It was not enough to be Black bodies to meet and constitute a community, to separate and thus to aquilombing. It was necessary to recognize themselves as what Taniele Rui has described, in the case of Cracolândia, as "abject bodies" (Rui, *Corpos Abjetos*). Color is certainly one of the main markers of abjection, but it is not the only one; "filth" is another fundamental element, as is the physical devastation brought on by crack use.[20] *The nòia*[21] is

[20] It is important to specify that what devastates these bodies is not so much the effect of crack, which only intervenes secondarily, at least from a temporal standpoint, but rather the exposure to the necropolitical structure. From this stems the fact that the majority of bodies bearing the mark of structural violence in the city of São Paulo, in most cases, have no connection with crack or other substances.

[21] Very derogatory term for drug addicts living on the street.

the figure *that has aquilombed* within the Fluxo. Drug abuse, for this already subaltern population, becomes the necessary marker for experiencing radical otherness, the very thing that leads to self-separation, to the construction of a distinct space and sociality, where even the most devastated bodies can integrate into a system that enables their survival. The sign of addiction, the dirt, the physical destruction brought by life on the street and exposure to structural violence, the becoming *nòia* lead to exclusion and the impossibility of being in public space in a manner consistent with it and the search for a territoriality and sociality of one's own, in which even the most devastated bodies can fit into a system that allows their survival. This is how, according to Amanda Amparo, *corpos abjetos* immediately become *corpos insubmissos* (Amparo, *Sociabilidades Negras e a Guerra às Drogas,* 99), bodies that are not subjugated; bodies that try to escape necropolitics and not to give in to tanatopolitics, resisting the racial genocide planned for Brazil's most oppressed and avoiding confinement in the institutions designed to enforce it. In Cracolândia, *aquilombamento* passes through becoming *nòia*, a condition by which one finally reacts to the *dor da cor* (Carneiro, *Racismo, sexismo e desigualdade*, 63) experienced by Blacks in diaspora, the pain of color given by the bodily mark of past and present subjugation and exploitation, and which in Cracolândia culminates in the constitution of the separate community as a political gesture, an existence that is resistance from the very beginning, as it expresses a refusal to die and disappear.

Thus, by a surprising coincidence, *O Zumbi* of Cracolândia, the zombie denigrated in the pages of newspapers and on social media, despised by so many, ultimately becomes another Zumbi, Zumbi dos Palmares,[22] the last leader of the largest and most famous Quilombo in history, one of the most important figures in the Brazilian struggle against racism, still celebrated by the Black people of the country. But while the *Quilombo dos Palmares* hid in the forest, today the urban Quilombo of the new *zumbi* of Cracolândia shows up in the center. Again, one certainly does not want to deny or underestimate the tragedy in which these lives are immersed. This is obviously not to romanticize a space marked primarily by enormous pain. However, it is essential to understand that if Cracolândia appears as an environment of desolation and tragedy, it is only

[22] Zumbi lived from 1655 to 1695 and was the last leader of the Quilombo dos Palmares, in what is now Alagoas state. This Quilombo, founded by the African princess Aqualtune, was the largest in the history of Brazil, lasted for one hundred years, and was home to 30,000 people at its peak. Zumbi, after conducting numerous battles, was killed by the Portuguese following the destruction of the Quilombo. The date of his death, November 20, is celebrated today in Brazil as Black Consciousness Day.

because here suffering takes an inescapable form; it presents itself in the center, acquiring a density that does not allow one to look away. Cracolândia itself is not the problem; it is simply a violent response to all the problems that afflict Brazil – and perhaps the best possible response. Desolation would permeate the lives of Fluxo's *usuarios* even if they were forced into the places where the São Paulo power structure seeks to relegate them – to the hidden corners of the city, to the margins of the metropolis. In those places, where many others do survive, their lives are no less affected by violence and deprivation – only worsened by solitude and marginalization.

The problem of Cracolândia will not be solved as long as the inequalities that plague the people of São Paulo exist. Until then, Cracolândia is only the best possible solution to the desperation that throws the poor into the streets, misery, drugs, and violence. It is the most despised by the elite and the powerful, yet the most beneficial for those trapped in these conditions – the most supportive and the most vibrant. The extreme violence that shocks us when we look at Cracolândia would exist even if every drug addict lived in a different corner of the city. But much of what exists in the Fluxo could only exist here, in this Quilombo of the outcasts, at the heart of the richest city in South America.

d. A Quilombo in the Center: The conquest of space against the politics of death

Julia (member of the white Paulist bourgeoisie)**:** *The poor and criminals want the city all to themselves!*

Joelma (member of the white Paulist bourgeoisie)**:** *I haven't gone downtown in more than 30 years! I'm too scared – do you know what kind of people you find there? I was born there, but in the 1950s I moved and almost never came back.*

Rodrygo: "What do you think about the plan to send Cracolândia to the suburbs, for example what happened this winter when the police moved the Fluxo with grenades and rubber bullets to the Marginal Tiete?"

It's all propaganda, and now their media is saying they're going to put an end to it, they're going to cram us somewhere, (shouting) *but if they couldn't send the slaves away when it all started… they're going to send us away now?! No way! They're not going to send us away! Cracolândia would never be the same again!* [...] *They want to send us to the peripheries… send us to the neighborhood*

where the mayor lives, to Alphaville or Morumbi, send us there (two affluent neighborhoods). *They give us timetables, rules; we are not retarded, all the time moving, being arrested, being hit by grenades... It's horrible, shit. And we act accordingly! There are people stealing, committing crimes, messing around.*

[...] *Cracolândia is just a place where there are quite a few intelligent people, professional people, even I, for one, consider myself an intelligent person, I always read quite a lot... Cracolândia was formed because of Boca do Lixo – that's where the freed slaves came... And they never left. They escaped, they came here, all of them drinking, those Blacks all drinking, doing Samba and Capoeira, when they were already free but they couldn't find work and they didn't know where to go... And so here, they became moradores de rua.*

Tania: *Here everything is easy, here you don't go hungry. The center of São Paulo is the perfect place for people in socially vulnerable situations, there is everything for us, it's not like outside the city or in the suburbs... in the central region there is all the support, you are much less vulnerable, you are safer, there is also more solidarity. Everything is easy here, except for the police, who do nothing but shoot at us. There is a lot of bias.*

Eduardo: *Even here the rich people want to take back the center, that's why Cracoland is decreasing, six to seven years ago here it was all ours. Now it is decreasing because downtown has to become rich and productive again. It's called gentrification and real estate speculation. I understand that for the shop-keepers, the residents, it must be shit eh...imagine opening the window waking up and there is this stuff...crack smoke everywhere, screaming, war.*

"What do you think about the plan to send Cracolândia to the suburbs?"

That will never happen. There are Fluxos in the suburbs, you know? And what are they like? They are tiny sad little corners, but imagine this world of drug addicts in a suburban neighborhood – everything that exists beyond crack couldn't exist, crack is just the background, I'm telling you again what I said before, crack is just the background of social issues.... These people here – they wouldn't want to be here. I am almost privileged. (Laughing) *If your research explodes now, I earn a nice trip to Italy! Let's hope so! But I'm going to take a piece of paper and a pen and go out into the world. I'm a citizen of the world, but the vast majority of these people ... they don't know how to live outside of here. It's a war.*

This is the great peculiarity of Cracolândia: it brings radical otherness and the cumbersome presence of subalterns to the center of the country's economic capital. Those who in the Quilombos took refuge in the forests, hiding from the eye of the whites in order to survive, today for the same purpose do the exact opposite. The differentiated bodies that, under the slavery system, had to disappear in order to live, today in Brazil's racist necrostate must impose their presence to avoid exclusion and death. Mortality rates in the favelas, together with hunger statistics that devastate Brazilian families, or data on the incidence of deadly diseases, allow us to interpret the struggle of the poor (very often Black) as a fight for survival.[23] A battle fought against an apparatus that can no longer hang slaves at the demand of the masters, but which through a purported war on crime and an absence of structural redistributive policies, systematically condemns the subalterns to death. Urban suburbs are the theaters of genocide, operated by police force, starvation, disease, and conflicts between rival gangs immersed in a context of generalized violence. To bring this struggle to the center is to completely change its sign, since such genocide has exclusion as its first premise. For subalterns, taking the center already means unhinging the spatial coordinates of their invisible slaughter. In fact, until the early 2000s, the task of those who brought solidarity inside the "fledgling Cracolândia" was precisely to give visibility to these thousands of people whom no one found interesting; today, paradoxically, the problem seems to be the opposite, with media and political attention built on totally erroneous assumptions. Cracolândia, despite media portrayals, is not the problem. Rather, it is a response to many problems; it is the terrifying face of the materialization of nearly all of Brazil's issues. Only the white people barricaded in their militarized neighborhoods and terrorized by the poor can think that there is a "Cracolândia issue" and not understand that Cracolândia is instead the answer, which can only be violent and brutal, to the racist issue, the housing issue, and the issue of poverty and inequality that ravage the city and the country.

But the respectable bourgeoisie of São Paulo, along with a good part of the middle class, cannot stand Cracolândia, cannot tolerate having to see this mass of *cracudos*[24] take over the beautiful colonial houses, occupy with their filthy bodies the prestigious *avenidas* sung about by the songwriters, who bear the names of the brave who made Brazil. This is what is happening in São Paulo,

23 https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/multidominio/condicoes-de-vida-desigualdade-e-pobreza.html

24 Another very derogatory term to refer to drug consumers

where the colonial spatiality is overturned and beyond the grand tree-lined avenues and waterways dwell the subalterns and the descendants of slaves. The city of São Paulo is experiencing an explosive conflict between those who want to defend its good name, fond of its European and positivist origin encapsulated in the national motto of "Order and Progress," wanting to belong to the realm of the great Western cities; and all those who instead throw it back down into the "third world," with their presence and unpresentability, with the tens of thousands of homeless people who sleep in the downtown streets or the drug addicts who beg in the great modernist *avenidas*. There is an internal class clash within Brazilian society regarding the status of the country, whether land launched toward progress or homeland of the subalterns, which in the Paulist context takes the form of a struggle over the representation of the city and its planning.

It is essential to grasp that Cracolândia, the Fluxo, and the *aquilombing* of abject bodies are inscribed in a broader conflictual context where at stake is not only the geographical center of the metropolis, but also, in a certain sense, its symbolic and discursive center. In this way, it is not only colonial spatiality that is being attacked, but also all the assumptions that support the racist and classist apparatus of a country that is both one of the greatest economic giants and one of the poorest nations in the world. It is also crucial to understand that this apparatus works by consigning a large part of its population to invisibility and death. Exclusion, neglect, and the systematic use of violence are the techniques adopted by Brazilian governance to manage the country's subalterns, who are constantly felt to be dangerous by the hegemonic classes. This is why it is so important that Cracolândia's Quilombo remains in the city's center, for it is here that the exist/resist binomial acquires such a detonating political charge, striking at the heart of Brazil's structures of inequality. This particular group of subalterns, users, and Black individuals has gathered in the center of São Paulo, changed the toponymy of the metropolis and appropriated one of the most representative neighborhoods of the city; they survive and live, and from a certain point of view, thrive, under everyone's eyes, gaining centrality in space and discourse. Gathered in Cracolândia –and not scattered here and there or relegated to distant peripheries – they gain substance and assert their presence, imposing themselves on the public scene with strength. The wealthy Brazilian perceives this gathering of the miserable with extreme annoyance and a certain degree of fear, as if a very unpleasant injustice were being done to him by shoving into in his face what is hidden in the favelas or under bridges and

overpasses, waiting for the mercy of death. The reduction to zombie is not only the last, desperate attempt to deny human existence to the *morador de rua* in order to get him out of sight; it is also the way to drive him back into death once again. *Zombie*, a word of Angolan Bantu origin as well as *Quilombo*, literally means "dead man walking." This is what public discourse calls the *usuarios*; this is the sentence of the necro and thanatopolitical apparatus: "You may still walk, but you are dead; death is your place."

Every oppressor demonstrates a very precise awareness of the system within which they exercise their dominance, exposing with disarming frankness a sensibility that is rooted in the history of white, slave, and colonial domination of Brazil. The *usuario* is the body that re-emerges from death, stubbornly continuing to walk even though it is already dead; whether it was killed or left to die makes little difference. The Quilombo is thus the brotherhood of the dead who still live, refusing to give up on life and instead reclaiming it. That is why it is essential for them to be in the center, because the first face that death presents in Brazil is that of exclusion, of confinement in separate spaces where police brutality is invisible, where structural violence permeates every aspect of daily life, and where abandonment by the welfare state is experienced. What is enacted in Cracolândia is a rejection of the colonial and neo-colonial "compartmentalized world" highlighted by Frantz Fanon (Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, 5); not self-separation, but a self-inclusion that also claims for itself the right to life and takes it by gaining visibility and solidarity, by scavenging the garbage of the metropolis and sometimes by looting its stores. Cracolândia is the opposite of a ghetto, not the place where power imprisons a category of undesirables, but the territory they have conquered and from which power would like to expel them once and for all. The forms of sociality, of collective resistance, of meeting needs, in Cracolândia affirm the existence of a Black, underclass, vagrant, and often drug-addicted population, and in Brazil, this is an enormous act of resistance. "Resisting exclusion, fear, loneliness, hunger, cold, and death," says Amanda Amparo, quoted above. Cracolândia is a survival technique adopted by a population condemned to die by a genocidal apparatus; it is the rejection of the spatialities of death provided in Brazil for undesirables. That is why Cracolândia is not only the home of many struggles, but also a struggle in itself.

Practically, within Cracolândia, in the center of the richest city in the country, it is much more difficult for police forces to carry out the terrible violence for which they are responsible in other territories, so it is not difficult to imagine what poses to be the main reasons for the willingness to relocate people to

desolate places. Similarly, within Cracolândia, there are subsistence techniques that could hardly exist elsewhere in the same way. In a sense, the *Reciclagem* (Recycling) is a desperate appropriation of the riches of the metropolis, and is also quite profitable. Theft and robbery themselves are survival techniques made possible by proximity to a certain amount of wealth. Likewise, begging and receiving care and meals from evangelical charity or group mutual aid actions, which are essential for survival, would hardly occur in the same way in the far-off suburban areas to which Cracolândia is imagined to be "relocated."

Today, dismantling Cracolândia would not mean eradicating Crack consumption from São Paulo, nor is such the intent of the repression that falls upon this community and this territory. Instead, the intent of the public administration is to annihilate one of the spatial materializations that the Brazilian public enemy – the subaltern and criminal Black – can take on; with the consequence that "*acabar com a Cracolândia*" ("put an end to Cracolandia") would mean finally dismantling a social network that has taken shape in this territoriality. While crack abuse and criminal trafficking do not need this space to perpetuate themselves – and in fact demonstrate on a daily basis that they can thrive elsewhere and under other conditions – the explosion of bottom-up, social and solidarity experiences that characterizes Fluxo could only exist there. It is this sociability that is unbearable to a section of the Paulist and Brazilian public, to its conservative ruling class. To observe that Cracolândia is, also, a place of celebration and merriment, is something unacceptable to the promoters and supporters of death policies. In Fluxo, crack abuse – which, as noted, involves self-destruction and stigmatization – fails to qualify entirely as a fall into the domain of death. The same zone of dealing and consumption is traversed by vital and joyful experiences that involve the *usuarios* on an almost constant basis; film screenings, soccer matches, singing contests, theatrical performances, *rodas de samba*, and more. Again, one does not want to romanticize a context of enormous pain and violence, where people suffer and sometimes act out, endure abuses of all sorts, and are united by stories of terrible suffering. But one only wants to reiterate how this characterizes all of Brazil's last people, while simply some of those here have also found and built something else, a shelter and community that end up being the only targets of repression, since neither misery nor brutality is subject to police intervention. "Put and end to Cracolandia" does not mean saving these thousands of people from crack. Instead, it means routing a community of the last – in other words, trivially, clearing out a Quilombo.

e. Conclusions

In these pages, the aim has been to show how remaining in the city center represents a survival strategy for members of the Cracolândia. If it is true, as Amanda Amparo demonstrates, that Cracolândia constitutes a form of *aquilombamento* for bodies subjected to various forms of necropolitics, then it becomes essential to understand the importance of the geographic location of this *aquilombamento*. The center functions as a survival technique because it allows access to the wealth of the metropolis – however precarious and insufficient; because it makes possible the formation of a strong community – however contradictory and violent; and because it limits, to some extent, the most brutal forms of police violence – however present and dramatic. Political disappearance is the first step toward biological death, and it is precisely this that the Fluxo rejects by asserting its presence in the center of the country's economic capital, challenging the spatial structures that enable the functioning of the necropolitical apparatus.

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