

# Fatal blow: Urbicidal geographies, pax colonial and black sovereignty in the Colombian city

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**Jaime Amparo Alves**   
University of California, USA

## Abstract

This article gives ethnographic form to Fanon’s warning that in the colonial world, “zombies are more terrifying than settlers,” by analyzing how racial mythologies produce spatial classifications of Black urban communities as unruly places and how Black individuals challenge their wretched condition by embracing a “program of complete disorder.” To do so, the article analyzes the short(ened) life of Paco, a young Black man under house arrest whose retaliatory violence against, and territorial dispute with, the police is an entry point for exploring resistance to urban coloniality in Santiago de Cali/Colombia. The article engages with the field of Black geography to propose a Fanonian reading of contemporary cityscapes as colonial spaces. Such colonial spatialities, it is argued, are not defined merely by subjugation to death but also, as Paco’s refusal to be killed may reveal, by an insurgent spatial praxis that might reposition the Black subject in relation to the city and the regime of Law.

## Keywords

Fanon, Black geographies, gang violence, urbicide, Afro-Colombia, Black ontology

Pablo left home around two in the afternoon. He put on his football jersey and grabbed the few Colombian pesos that his mother, Ester, left inside the bible on the table. He then took a taxi to his childhood friend’s salon. Pablo had made this trip several times in the last year. His stylish black hair was always impeccable. Ester, always on alert, cautioned him not to cross the

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## Corresponding author:

Jaime Amparo Alves, Department of Black Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.  
Email: [jaimealves@ucsb.edu](mailto:jaimealves@ucsb.edu)

“frontera invisible,” as the lines dividing gang territories in Santiago de Cali’s eastside are known. As a member of La Quinta, a local gang that controlled most of the neighborhood of El Guayacán,<sup>1</sup> Pablo was always in danger of being arrested by the police or killed by rival gang members. Ester’s fear came true on that day. The details of Pablo’s death are unclear, but according to rumors, he was shot three times by a man riding a motorcycle while waiting for a taxi pirata (unregistered cab) to return home. Filled with resentment she could not convince him to stay home that day, Ester promised me that she “would avenge Paco” (as she called him). Ester recalls “the cowardice of these monsters who killed my boy as if he was prey, an animal.” Paco laid in agony in the streets until someone brought him to the overcrowded and ill-equipped eastside hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

In bringing Paco’s shorted life to the forefront, it is not my intention to turn pain and tragedy into an object of an academic voyeuristic gaze (for a critique, Bourgois, 2001), an epistemic violence that further colonizes and dehumanizes Black lives. Welcoming these warnings and recognizing the asymmetric relation between myself as a (mobile) university-based activist researcher and my interlocutors confined in spaces of urban precarity, I hope contextualizing Paco’s fate within the long history of structural antiblackness and Black spatial politics will stimulate further research on the relationship between ganging and insurgent spatial politics in some dystopic urban geographies. Timely, racialized gang members from the urban margins have more recently occupied the center of city security politics in an embattled Colombia. A case in point is the 2021 multicultural protest (known as the *Paro Nacional* or National Strike) against a tax and health care reform bill proposed by right-wing president Ivan Duque, when armored with homemade shields and helmets, gang members put their bodies in the frontline to cunningly protect demonstrators from police repression. Although the collective resistance that emerged from a tacit solidarity between local gangs, students, and other collective groups was short-lived and highly problematic—the main monument built by activists in one of the city’s main highways to honor those fallen to state repression (a white raising first) forgot to include the primary victims (Informe Afro, 2021) who continue to be targeted by police and vigilant groups—this fleeting solidarity further complicates the question of how individuals like Paco (who did not live to join the *Paro*) challenge conventional politics of resistance and reclaim Black sovereignty from these zones of spatial captivities.

Following the lead of scholar John Márquez—to whom gang violence must be understood neither as a pathological expression of an urban subculture or a utilitarian response to economic condition and rather an at times self-destructive enactment of the “racial state of expendability” that render Black and racialized gang members as colonial subjects (2012: 638–639)—I propose a reading of Paco’s participation in retaliatory violence against the police as well as his gang’s dispute over spatial resources and territorial control as a (elusive) challenge to an ongoing neocolonial regime of urban governance. I do so through a Fanonian informed engagement with Black geography. As an important field of intellectual intervention, this scholarship has expanded our understanding of racism as a socio-spatial practice that determinates differential access to power and opportunity, while refusing hegemonic narratives of Black people as people without a spatial history. Space structures Black suffering as much as it shapes social struggles to create livable Black geographies (Bledsoe, 2017; Gilmore, 2002; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011). As Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods assert,

Black geographies disclose how the racialized production of space is made possible in the explicit demarcations of the spaces of *les damnés* as invisible/forgettable at the same time as the invisible/forgettable is producing space – always, and in all sorts of ways. (2007: 4).

In locating these alternative spatial imaginaries in the outlawed practices of *damnés* youth resisting urban pax colonial, the article echoes a renewed call for decolonization as a decisive geographic and ontological struggle between two irreconcilable spatialities, the settler town and the native town (Fanon, 1963: 39). Although Fanon's writings were contextually specific to the war of decolonization in the French colonies, his insistence on the sociospatial configurations of racism is useful for understanding contemporary cityscapes as colonial spaces where life is lived under siege, constant urban struggles for decolonization notwithstanding. As political geographer Stefan Kipfer argues, Fanon regarded racism "as an alienating spatial relation, treated colonization as spatial organization, and viewed decolonization in part as a form of transforming spatial relations in the colonial city and constructing nationwide sociospatial alliances" (2007: 703). By centering Fanon, I hope to highlight both the enduring coloniality of urban space—constituted, for instance through processes of economic, infrastructural and social abandonment (Danewid, 2020; Gibson, 2012; Kimari, 2020; Márquez, 2012)—and ongoing insurgent spatial practices that resuscitate "conditions of marronage" (Bledsoe, 2017: 42) making Black urban life possible.

The article is based on several years of political activism and ethnographic fieldwork (from 2013 to the present) in El Guayacán, a predominantly Black neighborhood located in the eastside of Cali. While it centers on the perspective of a particular *damnés* subject, my friend Paco, his life trajectory is an entry point to a critique of much broader (city-making) racial dynamics that eviscerate Black lives. Likewise, while the focus on a Black man may, on the one hand, involuntarily reinforce racialized narratives of deviance (ganging is not a phenomenon one can associate with a particular racial group) and, on the other, invest in a male-centric narrative that cancels Black women participation in outlawed forms of resistance (see Gross, 2006),<sup>2</sup> Paco's experience still merits attention for what his short(ened) life tells us about racial domination and the limits of emancipatory politics in the multicultural polity. The spatial history of colonial Cali, its current physical and political landscape, and the place that Black young men like Pablo occupy in the city's imaginaries of crime and fear all allow us to deploy Frantz Fanon's geographical perspective on racial domination in the colony to understand the predicament of post-colonial Cali's damned of the earth.

## The damned of the city

We grabbed a beer and sat on the side of the road. Pablo kept alert, looking for each sign of danger. He had a gun in his waistband "to protect the barrio against the *liebres* [the rival gangs and officers]," he explained. This protection had cost him a lung and several assassination attempts that were registered on his scarred body. He laughed while pointing to the scars: "This one on my chest almost hit my heart. This one destroyed my left lung [and] this one broke my leg." While comporting other interpretations, I read the marks Paco carried on his body as an index of larger urbidical dynamics here defined as the deadly entanglement of power, space and racial dispossession resulting in "sites of environmental, social, and infrastructural deterioration and geographic surveillance that demarcate many black geographies and their inhabitants (McKittrick, 2011: 951)." In a never-ending cycle, as a racialized space, Black El Guayacán is socially abandoned, all while its inhabitants are further dehumanized (thus vulnerable to physical harms) by narratives of spatial decay and by (the lack of) infrastructural policies facilitated by these very processes of spatial exclusion and erasure. It is worth recuperating, even briefly, how Cali's colonial occupation by the Spaniards, the reorganization of its economy by the white/elite mestizo in the post-independence period, and current processes of racial dispossession and resistance intersect in the urbidical geographies and structural conditions in which Paco and other residents live their lives.

The city of Cali was founded in 1536 by Spanish conquistador Sebastian de Belcalazar. Located in the foothills of the Andean Mountains, the city was originally the land of the indigenous Timbas, Jamundíes, and Lilíes people until it fell in the hands of conquistadores, soon to become the “headquarters of the conquest of all the territory” in present-day southwestern Colombia (Gómez and Martínez, 1985: 66). As Spain extended its territorial control, Black slavery became the basis of a highly profitable mining and sugarcane economy for at least three hundred years. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Cali was an important hub and the epicenter of several rebellions by indigenous groups, poor peasants, and the formerly enslaved, who fought Simon Bolívar’s war of independence with the unfulfilled promise of manumission (Mina, 1975). There are mentions, for instance, of the “hordes of facinorous” gangs of Blacks whose fate under abolition continued to be tied to the agrarian structure of Cali. The sugarcane agroindustry took control of the arable land surrounding the city, and the formerly enslaved ended up working in the mills that continue to be an important part of Cali’s economy today. The slave-like exploitative labor, the cost of food, and the denial of access to land produced an explosive combination of rage and violence that resulted in assassinations, the burning of farms, and the partial destruction of the city (Pacheco, 1987: 222–224). Popular urban rebellions did not succeed in democratizing access to the city, however. The “headquarters of the colonial conquest” is nowadays a city with extreme economic inequality; of 2.4 million inhabitants, 37% live in poverty. The extreme poverty rate is 126.3% higher among Blacks than whites. The Black population is 26% of the city’s residents and 70% of the city’s poorest borough of Aguablanca (Hurtado and Mornan, 2015; Viáfara, 2017).

The Black presence in Cali is intrinsically linked to slavery and more recent dynamics of racial capitalism. According to Afro-Colombian historian Santiago Arboleda, by the second half of the last century, the international price of sugar (the region’s main commodity), the establishment of processing plants, and the proximity to the Port city of Buenaventura, a gateway to transpacific markets, turned Cali into an important industrial hub (Arboleda, 1998: 48–61). It also accelerated a process of urban sprawl toward the lowland eastside, the main destination of Black families from the Pacific coast escaping natural disasters and the destruction of their means of living by foreign fishing companies and technological advances that made wood too cheap to be extracted. Adding to that, the armed conflict on the Pacific coast violently displaced thousands of families from their ancestral lands, causing them to occupy the eastside of Cali (Arboleda, 1998: 52–55). At the time, local elites were not concerned with the informal settlement since the lowland was unfit to use (as it was flooded by the Cauca River) and Cali was a growing urban center in need of cheap labor.

Notwithstanding the functionality of labor surplus, as more Black folks arrived from the Pacific coast, the eastside became a “no-go” zone, or, as Fanon might call the wretched city, “the enemy citadel,” a place inhabited by a kind of “absolute evil” (1963: 40–41). For instance, even though it bears a reputation for being a violent city mainly as a result of the drug-cartels of the late 1980s and counter-insurgency tactics targeting leftist groups in the urban terrain (see Guzmán Barney, 2018; Muñoz, 1998), a recurring popular periodization for the urban violence that would mark Cali’s international image is tied to the waves of Black migration from the Pacific region. According to my interlocutors in El Guayacán, however, as white-mestizos store-owners (loosely known as “paisas”) began to arrive in the eastside, vigilant groups began to carry what is known as “limpiezas sociales” or social cleansing against local youth to protect local business. “People would often say, *la migración negra vino a cagar el barrio* [the black migration turned it into a shitty barrio], when in fact they were the ones arriving after us,” explained Jorge, a community organizer.

According to Jorge, since the barrio was stigmatized as violent, city officials abandoned it, and some even encouraged acts of vigilantism that continue to take the lives of poor and

predominantly Black youth like Paco. Even teenagers who were spending time hanging out on the sidewalk became viewed as a problem by then. The “big man” took control of the barrio and imposed a new spatial order through terror. Ovidio, a local school principal, also confirms this process. According to him, the sidewalks, once a place of youth socialization, were now stigmatized as a place for jobless youth who congregated in gangs to protect themselves for fear of being killed. “The fights that were with punches are now with guns.” Then, territorial contests among gangs created “fronteras invisibles” (invisible borders), an emic term that refers to the spatial limits between gang-controlled areas. It can also be understood as a spatial metaphor for the frontiers emanating from the infrastructural design—e.g., the Simón Bolívar highway—that isolates the eastside from Cali. Indeed, the material landscape of the city is revealing: the predominantly white/mestizo boroughs in the north-south axis concentrate the best quality of life indexes, such as air quality, formal education, access to health, better jobs, and urban safety. Conversely, the east-west extremes house the highest rates of unemployment, homicidal violence and a precarious urban structure (Alves and Vergara, 2018; Urrea-Giraldo et al., 2015). Mirroring Fanon’s geographical reference to the colonial world, the scars from urbicidal and bodily violence that individuals like Paco bear reveal that in El Guayacán life is lived in the time-space coordinate of slavery. Still, their wretched condition does not prevent them from engaging in alternative spatial imaginaries that may challenge historical and ongoing coloniality.

## Pax colonial

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon elaborates on the role of mythologies and rituals in “ensuring the instability of the colonial world.” He argues that in the colonial city, governance is enforced through police violence, religion, and “terrifying myths” that demobilize the struggle of the “victims of unspeakable terror” (1963: 56). In the case of El Guayacán, the “myth” of Black criminality informs peace-building projects aiming to “save” the city from individuals like Paco, whose death was one of the 14,484 murders documented in Cali within a 10-year period, between 2011 to 2020 (Observatorio, 2021). As in other racialized urban contexts where scholars have denounced all-encompassing policing projects based on a neoliberal “revanchist” territorial ordering that produces insiders and outsiders, namely the subjects of interventions and those to be banished with prison or death (Bloch and Meyer, 2019; Herbert and Brown, 2006; Vigneswaran, 2014), in postconflict Cali racial mythologies of Black criminality inform security strategies of urban peace-making aiming to turn the city from “the epicenter of crime” to the Colombian “capital of security.”<sup>3</sup>

The securitization of Cali—and the banishment of its undesired Black youth—is an ongoing tactic of urban governance that has intensified after the celebration of a precarious peace deal between the Colombian government and part of the FARC guerrilla in 2016 to put an end to the 50-year long armed conflict. Although the provisions of the accord did not include a chapter on the urban dimensions of the conflict, as peripheries of Colombian cities like Cali are becoming the center of new territorial disputes between state forces and other armed groups including demobilized guerrilla members and transnational drug-traffickers, racialized gang members have been elected the main target of these postconflict security strategies (see Kerr, 2019; Valencia, 2015; Moreno et al., forthcoming)

Long before the peace accord, the eastside was a laboratory for urban peace-making. It intensified in the post-deal momentum when supported by international donors, NGO practitioners, local and foreign researchers, including myself, embraced the euphoric and elusive promises of the transitional period. Within this context, I attempted to approach gang members with the tools of activist scholarship, the grammar of human rights, and a

sympathetic attitude towards their marginal position in the city's politics. Several times, way before the liberal peace panacea, I invited Paco to attend activities at the community center, where the grupo de jóvenes (youth group) meet regularly to discuss social justice issues. Now I was excited with a new collaborative research project between the community and a local university and wanted him to join our talleres (workshops) on urban peace-building. Paco did not live long to participate but, during the time he was around, like other gang members, he did not buy into our politics. 'Bad youth' usually respected, protected, and were friendly with the grassroots projects, and they sporadically attended some of its activities such as movie sessions, art performances, and street festivals. Predictably, they steered clear of the research talleres, crafted in a neoliberal capacity-building approach, to supporting local (right to the city) youth activism.

Not only that, they also associated us with the "jalecos" (as they negatively referred to NGO staff and city officials associated with social intervention programs that have inundated the eastside). Peace was an empty word and even the ludic community activities were seen to be too detached from the embattled context of police vigilantism and gangs rivalry. This is not an argument against the painfully crafted strategies developed by local activists to build 'peace from below' but, at least from the perspective of some transgressive subjects, ordinary wars turned it into a "paz de mierda" (shitty peace), the phrase with which Paco once met my somehow naïve enthusiasm with the newly celebrated peace deal. To be fair, their realism was shared by 'good youth' from the grupo de jóvenes, attending the talleres at the community center, who, like other activists in the community, were also critical of the liberal peace project proposed by the Colombian elite. Multiple times, they challenged our policy-oriented research group for "investing too much hope in the state while the state is the first to violate the rights of the people," as Teo, a community organizer told me after a workshop to enhance Black youth legal activism in the arena of educational rights. Evoking a critique by peace activists who insisted on the need for state recognition of Black victimization in the urban front, a young Black man commented that "we are also victimized by the war, arrinconados [spatially confined], without a way out. We should have a space to express our frustrations. What is the government doing here? Paz con hambre [peace with hunger]?" Mirna, a young Black woman, added that "the state refuses to make peace with the youth." She also argued that "it is hard to feel free when one is afraid she will be killed." This was not an unreasonable fear given the regular recurrence of people being killed in the territorial contests between gangs and police raids in the community. That was also the point made by Paco and by other residents on multiple occasions (Alves, 2019), insisting "this is a fake peace" since local youth were the target of the "new" urban warfare.

Indeed, in El Guayacán, peacetime is demystified by a permanent police checkpoint near the community center where we met weekly. While we carried out our activities, uniformed officers stood by the nearby wall. My colleagues complained in vain that their presence discouraged youth from attending activities and placed the center in danger by association. I asked them about the purpose of their presence, and one officer said they were just following residents' call for protection against gang confrontations. Since the community center is close to the "border" where gang confrontations usually took place, that would have been a reasonable explanation if not for the fact that residents also complained that the police were harassing local youth—not protecting them. They were there to "sapear" (to snitch) about wanted youth. We were in the odd position of working to "build peace" while being protected by war-makers.

Though such a "protection" did not prevent local youth, activists and residents in general from being indiscriminately subjected to police and gang violence, the interventions to curb juvenile violence by focusing on training "good" youth to participate in city politics placed the initiative within the very dynamics of racial governability and expendability that state

and civil society rely on to police colonial urban space. In such a structure, John Márquez argues, racialized youth's encounter with violence is crafted as exceptional and/or ordinary according to a moral economy of deserveness that underpins the distribution of life (to good) and death (to bad) victims. In thesis, exceptional, peaceful youth can be rescued by the state while their "bloody" ungovernable peers can be killed or left to die (Márquez, 2012: 626). In El Guayacán, our well-intentioned interventions fell into the logic of expendability to be quickly recalibrated by a logic of fungibility in which the "racial state of expendability" expands "the horizon of death" to all and any inhabitant of the colonial city for if by one hand it ranks colonized life through conceptions of domesticity and unsavability, it also regards any and all Black bodies and place as fungible geographies that invite terror.

In Cali's Black geography, as in the colonial world—"a world cut into two" and separated by checkpoints and police stations (Fanon, 1963:38)—the police enforce geo-ontological boundaries through structural banishment by mundane spatial exclusions, incarceration and death. Local youth were usually taken to the police station "to double-check" their background. They were often left there for hours until someone would come to rescue them. Without money to return to the barrio, the irony is that to come home, they would have to commit a crime. "Offended, raged . . . coming walking from the puta mierda [from very far away] . . . one has to hacerle la voladora [take a cab and run away without paying the fare]." In the words of Paco, "La policia la odio (I hate the police) . . . the police here are a sapa hijueputa (son of a bitch) . . . Here the police are brutal; they come to search you treating you like shit, hitting you . . . talking shit [and] hitting you." Again, these violent encounters are not unique to those suspected of being gang members. A comprehensive qualitative study by scholars Yukyan Lam and Camilo Avila, and Andres Ceballos on Afro-Colombians' experience with police in Cali indicates that this is a daily occurrence. The authors collected several cases of abuse, including the recurring racial insult "Afrodelinquent" (2013: 34). Local residents also expressed frustration about how the police always target "the first Black person they find in the street," for in the eyes of the police, "any black person is a thief" (2013: 37). The police respond to these complaints by arguing that in marginal areas like the eastside, where the majority of the population is Black, people undermine the authority of Black officers, expecting "protection from them" or expecting them "to evade the crime being committed." As the report shows, this assumption is complicated by the fact that Black officers also suffer discrimination within the institution and that regardless of their skin color, "the uniform says officer, not a Black officer" (2013: 39). The antagonism between Black officers and residents is, perhaps ironically, explored by police authority to advance the narrative of racial progress, thus dismissing the weight of race in the election of the bodies and spaces to be policed. It is also usually used to blame residents for their fate, disregarding the fact that in the postcolony policing may vary in tactics, uniforms, and faces, but the victims of state delinquency remain the same.

The police, Paco told me, kept him constantly distressed. He stood his ground and did not succumb to the police or to the "big men", but he was always on the edge. Before he became a gang member, his dream was to become a soccer player. This dream faded away when he broke his left leg during an informal soccer game in the middle of the street. Paco underwent surgery that never corrected the broken bone, and so he gave up doing what he liked most. His frustration became anger, especially because it meant he could no longer help support his mother, Ester, and his little daughter, Anita. While Ester consumed her life working nonstop for a white mestizo family in the wealthy southside, Paco fell short in fulfilling the gendered expectation of man as the provider. Contrary to the sensationalist narratives that gangs in Latin America mobilize large amounts of money in trafficking,

dealing, and other illegal transactions (for a discussion, Rodgers and Baird, 2016), Paco was always broken. He worked now and then making bricks, earning COP 20,000 (approximately 5 US dollars) daily. Even dealing drugs is not an option for local youth anymore. It had been extremely dangerous due to the disputes among “big men” hoping to control the eastside. “Now, if you want to sell, you have to pay the quota to the oficinas de cobro (offices where gunmen enforce debt collection), or they will kill you.” The control of the territory has shifted from small gangs like his to the “big men” that have controlled access to guns and drugs. In this broader criminal economy, while the police focus on repressing individuals like Paco, they turn a blind eye to the mostly white mestizo “big men.”

Paco was arrested on several occasions. Before his death, he was under house arrest for being caught with a gun. This arrest, however, did not prevent him from keeping his promise to defend El Guayacán “con uñas y dientes” (fighting tooth and nail) against the liebres (rival gangs). He celebrated the “balaceras” (shootings) when he fearlessly embraced deadly confrontations with police and gangs from the other block. Rather than supporting the culture of violence argument that, while old-fashioned, is recurring in media narratives about street gangs, Pablo’s explanation for constantly walking toward death is revealing: society considers him “malo”<sup>4</sup> (evil) for his refusal to be killed; “plomo” (the bullet) was his response to the deadly interpellations of Black youth by legal and extralegal forces in this urban front. “Because one refuses to be killed . . . That’s it, they want us to be willing to be killed—to just let them come and kill one’s family. La chimba! [fuck it!].” Pablo was a defiantly “jodido y malo” (an enraged and evil) person. Inverting and embracing Fanon’s warnings that colonial mythologies make zombies more terrifying than settlers (1963: 56), and aware not to romanticize gang violence, one can argue that the damned of Cali are socially dead (zombies) individuals who reaffirm their livingness by terrifying the murderous forces that want them killed.

## Defending the dead

I was co-organizing a meeting with grieving mothers and colleagues at a local university<sup>5</sup> when the news about Paco’s assassination broke. There were also rumors that Ester was thinking about avenging her son’s death. In a session I was co-facilitating discussion, mothers were not sure how to react to the rumors. Someone interjected that we should tell her not to avenge, for mothers are the ones that promote life and that this endless cycle of violence could only be stopped with maternal love. Someone evoked the Christian tradition to make the point that she should turn the other cheek and that her son was now in a better place looking after her. And finally, someone contended that she had the right to be vengeful. “I would do the same if it were me; only a mother knows what that means to have a life stolen.” Making a compromise between these various positions, the mothers wrote Ester a letter in solidarity with her pain and invited her to join their struggle against state violence. The letter was delivered at Paco’s funeral when we congregated around Ester up by the casket while in the sidewalks, his friends cried, sang, and drunk for the dead.

Days later, I paid Ester a visit. She was stubborn. “I have told my children ‘give me a gun, and I will kill them all. I’ll take all of them to hell,’” she told me crying. I failed to respond to her comments, other than trying to contextualize her rage within an emotional continuum of frustration, despair, and pain. After all, Paco was the second child stolen from her, and her grandson had just survived an assassination attempt. At the same time that Ester sought revenge for the killings of her son, she also tried to participate in our effort to organize a social movement of childless mothers on the eastside. We had planned several meetings, but most of them had meager attendance. Mothers were either too terrorized and too distressed



copied with their pain or, as in the case of Ester, were extremely busy making ends meet. Within this context, Ester and the other mothers' reactions to Paco's death are not strange to the radical tradition of Black maternal activism. Black maternity may also be "a militarist endeavor that can harbor the murderous. Black maternal love may manifest itself through the commitment to compassion or as a redemption through violence" (James, 2014: 88). Patriarchal conceptions of motherhood frame compassion as a natural characteristic, but embracing violence is indeed another political possibility. As part of the efforts to organize mothers, in April 2019, Debora Silva, a prominent Afro-Brazilian activist whose son was killed by the police, paid yet another visit to the mothers of El Guayacán, including Ester. At that time, she expressed that she was "pissed off" with mainstream social movements that asked mothers to embrace peace. "I am not peaceful. Who told them I am peaceful? I am a warrior. The mothers are ungovernable," said Debora. She also joked that "we are mothers *pandilleras* (gang mothers)." This call for ungovernability, which she has reiterated on different occasions, has the radical potential to bring together "good" and "bad" victims of state terror, thus repositioning the dynamic of racial fungibility that turns any Black person a potential victim. Instead of embracing respectability, Debora suggested, mothers *pandilleras* have to "detener el llanto y defender su muerto" (hold their tears and defend the dead) regardless of his or her (criminal) biography.

Ester was fearless and determined to avenge the murder of her child, but she did not go after the killers after all. Whenever we met, she did not hold back her tears and showed deep sadness for the lack of response from the public persecutor, who failed to investigate Paco's death and bring the killers to "justice." "I don't trust justice. It doesn't work for the poor," she told me several months after her son's assassination. Pablo's death continues to be unaddressed in a place where thousands of murders go unpunished every year. Simplistically treated as black-on-black violence ("se matando entre ellos mismos"), rather than a state-facilitated diffused condition of racial expendability, gang members are policed, incarcerated and killed, while the criminal structure controlled by the "big men" and police vigilantism continue untouched.

Black lives' unworthiness has such a commonsensical acceptance that it is openly articulated in social media to justify massacres that are all too common in the eastside. For instance, in August 2020, when five young Black men were killed in what came to be known as the Llano Verde massacre, comments abounded and quickly spread via social media celebrating their fate. "Yes, it is social cleansing, good! We can no longer endure crime," noted someone. Another person added that these deaths were not unjustified. "Rest assured that no one would bother to take five men, shoot them, chop them with a machete, and then throw them at a mangón just for pleasure (. . .). Social cleansing when justice does not work."<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the five youth were killed when trespassing on the sugarcane field surrounding the eastside to eat sugar and fly kites—the very fields generations have consumed their lives harvesting—speaks volumes on the bodily economy of physical and ontological dispossession that governs the city. When Paco was killed, Ester's patrona (boss) allowed her to go home for two days and even called her to offer some money for the coffin. Five days later, Ester came back to work but did not stop crying, which angered her boss. According to Ester, she advised her to stop crying and suggested that "it was enough . . . that Paco was involved in trouble, that I should pray to God and take care of my other children." Days later, when the teenage son of her boss was involved in a car accident, Ester extended her work hours to help her boss deal with the anxiety of almost having lost her child. At the end

of the month, when Ester received her salary, she was surprised that the patrona had deducted the money she had given her for the coffin.

According to Frank Wilderson,

the explanatory power of Humanist discourse is bankrupt in the face of the Black. It is inadequate and inessential to, as well as parasitic on, the ensemble of questions which the dead but a sentient thing, the Black, struggles to articulate in a world of living subjects. (2010: 55)

The youth of Llano Verde, Paco, Ester, all occupy a zone of death that reaffirms the life-worlds of whiteness, a world made possible through the endless reenactment of gratuitous violence against the Black body (Wilderson, 2010: 56).

This article echoes the above Afropessimistic proposition to refuse and provincialize the Human—in Fanon’s words, “the Black represents a kind of insurance for humanity (1967: 224)” —while attempting to locate insurgent spatial praxes that interrogate conditions of coloniality and reaffirm Black life. In Cali, urban blackness is made possible by the insistence of long-term activists, newly arrived internally displaced Black populations, gang members, gang mothers, youth engaged in grassroots initiatives, and so on to reinvent life and reclaim Black humanity against all odds. Working “within and against the grain of dominant modes of power, knowledge, and space, these black geographic narratives and lived experiences need to be taken seriously because they reconfigure classificatory spatial practices” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007: 5). If the corpography of Black youth, again considered as the “quintessential evil” of urban life, is the locus of these violent spatial classifications, it is also a political resource for reclaiming a different ontology.

Scholars of *pandillas* (street gangs) in Latin America usually argue that it is a multicausal and multifaceted phenomenon intertwined with the culture of *machismo*, police vigilantism, and structural inequalities (for an overview, Rodgers and Baird, 2016). While these approaches have enhanced our understanding of gangs as a socio-political practice, this article centers on the question of racism—and antiblackness in particular—vis-à-vis outlawed forms of spatial agency in antiblack urban contexts. Some scholars have considered how criminality has become a way out for Black and marginalized youth living in the context of racial discrimination, social abandonment, and police violence (e.g., Bourgois, 2003; Goldstein, 2013; Muñoz, 1998; Pertuz, 2008). For instance, in her decades-old study on outlawry and racism in Jamaica, anthropologist Faye Harrison has noted that black young men exercise autonomy over their territory by embracing deviant practices that, although they may be seen at first as “parasitic economic opportunism,” can also be viewed as “an alternative outlet for political expression” (Harrison, 1988: 263). Ganging, she suggests, must be understood as a response to broader political contexts such as the neoliberal reforms that endanger the lives of millions of poor Kingstonians.

Building on these and parallel perspectives, I regard the question of Black agency outside the law not only as a struggle for urban citizenship under the violence of neoliberalism but also, in Fanon’s terms, a struggle of radical repositioning of the Black nonbeing in relation to the politically charged domains of Law and Humanity. Here I take the lead from Black scholars who have forcefully elaborated on the question of Black sovereignty and/as Black ungovernability.<sup>7</sup> As Ronald Judy notes,

the bad nigger frightens both white planter and the other slaves because he/she reveals the impossibility of completely subjugating will; it can only be eliminated in death, and the bad nigger, by definition, does not fear death. The bad nigger embraces death, and in that embrace steps beyond standing-in-reserve, beyond thingness. (1994: 225)

If in the (post)colonial city, governmentality and unruliness are defined in terms of the nigga's acceptance/refusal to be "good" and "peaceful" (Judy, 1994: 230), or to be bounded in the Fanonian zones of nonbeing—what have been the collective responses of Black El Guayacán to these spatio-ontological classifications?

The barrio is historically considered "ungovernable" by the police and city government for its refusal of disciplinary practices such as the community police and other programs of social control. While, as I have shown elsewhere, crafting them as unruliness is part of the urban mythologies that criminalize Black urban life, residents do undermine state efforts to govern this Black space. Confrontations with the police, for instance, happened quite often during my fieldwork. One day I was in the community center when a friend arrived panting to tell us that officers had closed the street and randomly "picked up" youth to be taken to the police station for verification of their criminal status. As the officers loaded the police truck with "suspicious" youth, mothers armed with rocks and clubs formed a human belt around the car to free their kids. The officers attempted to proceed with the arrests, but as more and more residents closed the circle and tensions escalated, they had no choice but to unlock the doors.

In one of many confrontations between La Quinta members and the police, two officers entered the barrio pursuing a man. Everyone ran into the streets to see what was happening when the officers began to fire randomly, and people retreated to shelters. The officers got off the motorcycle and continued to shot in the direction of the escapee. When residents realized that Mari, a 14-year-old girl who was coming home from school, was shot by a stray bullet, they ran in front of the two officers, blocking their way as they usually did when local youth were about to be arrested. As an officer jumped on the motorcycle attempting to leave, La Quinta members surrendered him. "Nooooo! Look, you hit the peladita [little girl]. Now take her to the hospital," they insisted. The officers complained that it was not their fault and that there was no way to know from where the bullet came. "We were enraged," a member of La Quinta explained. "Bing bang, bing bang, bing bang . . . punches, kicks . . . we destroyed the motorcycle . . . Of course, how could they hit the peladita and then tell us that they would not take her to the hospital?"

This gang member's question is at the crux of the matter. While members of civil society may peacefully protest and demand that state officials abide by the contractual deal that governs the citizen/state relationship, this strategy is rarely an option for residents of racialized spaces where police violence is not only "a law unto itself" (Martinot and Sexton, 2003: 171) but also a productive tool for the constitution of the regime of right and the territory of justice (Da Silva, 2009). I do not mean that residents of El Guayacán draw only on violence to express their demands. Residents seek to pursue political ends by other means, such as joining community activism and participating in larger civic demonstrations such as the Nacional Strike mentioned above, but their demands are often met with violence or disdain. For instance, on one occasion, I attended a hunger strike in front of the city hall mainly by Black residents resisting an urban development project that would result in the homelessness of at least 300 families. After 65 days of protest, activists declared a hunger strike. Cali's mayor not only continued unmoved to their claims, but he was also insensitive to the death-threatening condition of mostly Black women and men who, chained in chairs in front of the main entrance to the city hall, pushed on with the strike until they reached the limits of their existence. Having not succeeded in mobilizing civil society or city authorities, the humiliated and demoralized protestors had to give up. The families lost their land.

Society, in general, has reacted differently to Black people's protests and to demonstrations by the vibrant social movements for which Cali is famous. For example, in November 2019, social movements from a broad political spectrum occupied the main public squares in a month-long wave of demonstrations for social justice. At first, the multiracial protest was

met with enthusiasm by the mayor, news commentators, and even by the Colombian President, who asserted that this action demonstrated that democracy works in his country. As the demonstrations intensified and escalated into violence, residents of the oriente (east-side) were blamed on social media for “disturbing” public life and “spreading terror” in the city. The widely manifest long-standing fear of the eastside came in full force, and residents of the white/mestizo southside began to employ security tactics to protect their properties against terrifying invaders. In an interview on a local TV station, the mayor announced curfew legislation and threatened the “vandals” who were “attacking and looting residences” with the “full weight of law.” He also lamented that while “the majority of the caleños marched peacefully, the *desadaptados* [maladapted] made us make this painful decision” to shut down the city (Caracol, 2019). While the mayor announced an increase in the number of police officers and called for the National Army to secure the city, the local TV station showed white/mestizo residents armed with pieces of wood and guns waiting to protect their property against Black invasion. A resident from a gated community justified their actions by saying that “property owners are scared . . . delinquents are coming, we are alert to save our things, our residences . . . that is why we are here protecting our [residential] unity to prevent vandalism and looting.” Another resident lamented that “they come to *dañar* [to spoil] our *barrio*” (Caracol, 2019).

There was indeed Black rage at the time of the demonstrations. Videos on social media showed an unapologetic protest mostly by Black young men throwing rocks at the police, burning down trafficking signals, and looting some stores located by the highway that separates the two parts of the city; in the predominantly white/mestizo southside, however, such violence was overestimated and fueled by a moral panic mobilized by city authorities and the media against those historically crafted as the source of urban insecurity. This racialized spatialization of fear was widely criticized by black activists, who organized an independent demonstration calling attention to the criminalization of black life in the city. Tellingly, the multicultural protest was called into question by a deep racial divide manifest in the widely shared fear that eastsiders “*ha entrado, han entrado*” (they invaded, they invaded). As Vice, one of the organizers and member of the community center in El Guayacán, said,

We are calling attention to all the racist practices that exist in this city and to the fact that racism kills because it does kill. Injustices against us are normalized even among our White/mestizo peers in the social movement. They keep insulting us, killing us . . . as if we haven't given so much to this city. (CaliTV, 2019)

The appraisal of the civic demonstrations (again, when it broke down, the media and the government praised the protests as a signal that democracy is working in Colombia), the criminalization of Black youth, and the lack of political response to continuous outcries, including hunger strikes, by Black communities in defense of their territories, all reveal the precarious position of Black politics within the colonized White/mestizo city. Rather than a justification for the mayor's restoration of urban order, insurgent actions by Black youth who did storm police patrols, break down traffic lights, and loot stores beg the question of why the colonized black subject should comply with an urban order that requires Black spatio-ontological erasures.

## **Conclusion: Frontline**

It was amazingly chaotic. No traffic-lights, no police patrols in the streets, no military checkpoints, no legal public transportation. Gang members celebrated a truce in the

name of “confronting a common enemy, the police,” as one member told me, and guarded barricades in intersections of highways, bridges and avenues, turning the eastside into a police-free territory. Gangs were far from being the only force to guard this part of the city from police terror at those troubling 60 days of the *Paro* (national strike) in Cali. Students, activists from a myriad of organizations, and residents in general gave their lives to the *primera linea* (frontline). Still, gang members played a prominent role in securing, despite the deadly assaults launched by state forces and vigilante groups, the occupied and barricaded territories across the eastside. Why were they there even after protests quieted down? Some had no other place to go besides returning to the blocks where they were spatially confined. Activists denounced that some were instrumentalized by criminal organizations, which saw the urban riot as an opportunity to redraw lines of territorial control and drug-trafficking operations in the eastside. People also told me that some were in the frontline because now they were eating better than ever before (referring to the community potluck organized to feed demonstrators). In my fragmented interactions with primarily (but not exclusively) Black youth in two of the gang-controlled blockades — I was joined by a local activist in each of these spaces—, it was rage toward the police (not tax reform or electoral politics) that motivated them to stay in the frontline. Even when the city government wavered with the possibility of some odd jobs, they refused; avenging police terror and reclaiming their part of the inaccessible city was the main prize. They reasoned that “*hay que aguantar por el territorio*” (You have to hold out for the territory) and enthusiastically celebrated how they “*pusieron los tombos a correr*” (made the cops run away). When I interjected about the exit plan now that the movement seemed to lose traction and the *primera linea* (frontline) was left alone, a Black young man holding a bullet-screened shield sharply returned the question, “*y los muertos que* (how about the dead)?” “*Si no por nosotros por lo menos por los que muerrieron y por los que vienen*” (If not for us at least for those who died and for those to come), completed one of the few mestizo members of his front at the tense street intersection. While part of the youth was engaging in a sort of agreement with the city government to abandon the barricade, this front, they told us, was ready waiting for the police.

Although they recognized the agency of Black youth in the frontline, some Black activists were highly skeptical of the celebrated “*primera linea*”, and advocated discouraging Black youth from joining it saying they were “cannon fodder” in a war that has invisibilized Black suffering. They complained that “Black youth has always occupied the front line of death,” as voiced by Vice, a social activist in the eastside. Now at the local grassroots center, I found myself around Black youth activists paying tribute to the forgotten victims of Black eastside. Photos of those killed during the *Paro* were displayed together with images of those devoured by the normalized regime of racial expendability and fungibility that makes Cali a viable city. Led by Luna, a young Black woman, we lighted our candles while taking turns in demanding justice and reparation. Luna reminded us all of “the front line, the *Llano Verde* massacre, the youth daily killed in our territory. We have to politicize these deaths too.” I could not help but remember Paco’s forgotten life and death.

How does this ontological position—being permanently placed in the frontline of death—inform Black and other racialized youth’s embracing of deadly politics? Paco not only refused to be a “peace-builder,” but he also claimed that making war was the only way possible to change his condition. He was an enraged person, one that in Fanon’s colonial subject formation was “overpowered by not tamed” (1963: 53). Indeed, in his words, he was “*arrinconado*” (spatially captive) in the few blocks of *El Guayacán*, but he still had some control over his life. I recalled Paco telling me that if one day he managed to leave the *barrio*, he would come back and “kill all who have offended me”. His goal, however, was to

stay to defend the barrio against the external threats posed by rival gangs and the police. Interpreting his militaristic response to his condition as spatial insurgency makes one vulnerable to the welcome critique of naively romanticizing gang violence and thus overlooking intra-community dynamics of power along racial, gendered, and sexual lines (CEAF, 2021; Hurtado and Mornan, 2015). There is also the danger of involuntarily underscoring racist narratives of Black men as urban criminals. My context-specific analysis of Black youth spatial politics vis-à-vis Black men's participation in retaliatory violence against the police is not comprehensive of the Black experience in El Guayacán. It is instead an invitation to the question of why some Black subjects mobilize violence in response to their captive conditions and, in doing so, as Black geographers would perhaps agree, open new spaces of freedom (Bledsoe, 2017; McKittrick, 2011). Even if such insurgent praxes fall short in the larger project of Black liberation, they continue to be (perhaps dystopian) insurgency for refusing the police state and its antiblack ordinary wars. Within Colombia's politically charged semantic terrain of "insurgency," one may be hesitant to consider their practices insurgent. Fine. Still, it does not change the fact that they are killed as enemies of civil society in antiblack counter-insurgency urban warfares by state and popular vigilantism.

Finally, if in the white imagination of the colonizer, "the native is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values" (Fanon, 1963: 6), then it is outside the realm of white morality that one must understand Paco's embracing of deadly politics instead of the (rights-based) politics of dead ends, insofar as blackness is concerned. Indeed, if one considers his condition through the lens of refusal—a refusal to be a victim, a refusal to be governed, a refusal to comply with white morality, and a refusal to be a thing (Vargas and James, 2012; Gardner II, 2004; Judy, 1994; Moura, 1977)—then we can regard him as an insurgent "bad nigga" whose very existence poses a threat to pax colonial. The "bad nigga" embraces pure violence as the creative force that will reverse the order of the world and give birth to a new society. What is more, in this act of refusal, the "bad nigga" burns the plantation, refuses "urbicide," and transcends current ontological captivity in the colonial world. Then, the mythical classification of Black bodies and geographies as evil comes into full realization and the bad nigga becomes—in Fanon's warnings—"more terrifying than the settlers" (1963: 56). As Ronald Judy, Joy James and others after them teach us, since the horizon of death is always already part of the black condition, the "bad nigga" is better positioned, by definition, to embrace this liminal condition. "The willingness to meet violence with violence at all levels is what renders her or him mechanical, and thus divine, above moral law or the laws of man" (James, 2013: 66).

This juncture is where Walter Benjamin's divine violence meets Frantz Fanon's Black rage.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin advocated for "the politics of pure means" as the radical embracing of a transcendental violence that, located outside the realm of legality, challenges the law-making/law-preserving violence represented by the work of policing. The mythic-legal violence that found the Law is met with the divine violence that rejects it altogether, for it is free from ethics and beyond any instrumental justification (Benjamin, 2007: 280). Fanon saw the war of liberation as a bloody struggle aiming at striking a "fatal blow" against the settler world (Fanon, 1963: 37). Only pure violence, the language of the colonizer, could produce a radically new political order, sprang up "out of the rotting corpses of the settlers" (1963: 93). To risk stretching an interpretation too far, and while attentive to not trivializing his death or further colonize his life with the European-based Benjaminian critique of violence, Paco's rage and his fate suggest the embodiment of a timeless wretched condition of coloniality and a refusal to surrender to the mythical power of the sovereign police state. Via divine violence, he claims sovereignty over his life, rejects plantation logics, and interrupts his social suffering. His urban condition may not be generalized to understand the complexities of

black geographies, but his short(ed) rebel life timely reminds us of Fanon's desperate call: decolonization is a program of complete disorder...the great shutdown cannot be postponed!

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### ORCID iD

Jaime Amparo Alves  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3231-1693>

### Notes

1. All names in this piece are pseudonyms. La Quinta is not a racially homogenous group and not all its members were engaged in criminal/ized violence by the time of this research. At times it is regarded as a *parche*, a Spanish word for a gathering of friends. Attentive to the criminalization of racialized youth's behavior, I follow the scholarly definition of "gang" as a spatially-bounded group engaged (even if sporadically) in outlawed activities and retaining control over a given territory (see Perea Restrepo, 2004).
2. Although La Quinta is largely a male-dominated *pandilla*, some women sporadically participated in "vueltas" (small time stickups) with male members. Some were associated to the group due to their emotional bounds with male gang members. On the gendered dynamics of gang membership in Cali, see among others Domínguez (2003).
3. Besides Cali (Colombia), the UN has assisted local governments of Querétaro (Mexico) and Durban (South Africa) to fight urban crime in order to 'secure' urban development (UNODOC, 2019).
4. On the self-claimed category "evil" or malo see Baird (2018) and Perea Restrepo (2004).
5. I co-organized the event with Aurora Vergara, Tathagatan Ravindran, Yanilda Gonzalez and Joy James.
6. These and other social media comments generated intense debate among Black activists who appealed, with no avail, to the youth's humanity (see Ibargüen and Sinistierra, 2020).
7. African diaspora scholars have long engaged with the question of Black refusal/Black sovereignty. I am inspired among others by Brazilian scholar Abdias Nascimento (1980)'s conceptualization of marronage (quilombismo) as a social praxis and Clovis Moura (1977)'s theorizing on the "good slave/bad negro." My interventions here and elsewhere (Alves, 2015) are also especially indebted to Helen Quan (2013)'s Robinsonian discussion on 'state-addiction' and Black autonomy outside its domains.

8. My reading is informed by James (2013) and Judy (1994)'s explorations of transcendental Blackness as well as by Denise Ferreira Da Silva's rather dense discussion of Benjamin, racial sovereignty, and the engendering limits of justice (see Da Silva, 2013).

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**Jaime Amparo Alves** teaches Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.