

Sneed, Paul (2019). *Machine Gun Voices: Favelas and Utopia in Brazilian Gangster Funk*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2019, p. 467 (ISBN 9788952129499). Ebook.

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The undeclared postmodern war between Rio de Janeiro's favelas and *asfalto* (the wealthier formal city) that Zuenir Ventura depicted in his now classic 1994 book *Cidade Partida* rages on. In 2019, police in the state of Rio de Janeiro killed an average of five people per day, most of them poor young men of color. In this context, Paul Sneed's *Machine Gun Voices* offers an important look -- the first book-length study of its kind to be published in English -- at a central yet little studied cultural front in that war: *funk carioca* and the favela community *bailes* where it has been performed since the 1990s.

*Funk carioca* evolved as a "thoroughly carioca" cousin of styles such as reggaeton, Jamaican dance hall music, U.S. hip hop, and Miami bass, which was extremely popular in Rio's periphery from the late 1980s, with lyrics in Portuguese and Brazilian samples quickly emerging and dominating the scene by the mid-1990s. Like Miami bass, *funk* lyrics are less explicitly political than hip hop. They also convey more aggressive and confrontational expressions of the favela's power vis-à-vis the *asfalto* than those of earlier styles closely tied to favelas, such as samba de partido alto, which relied more on lighthearted and often ironic social commentary. Part of *funk*'s markedly carioca nature, moreover, lies in the lyrics' frequent references to the guns, gangs, and illicit drugs that have been part of the day-to-day reality of favela residents since the 1990s. Those themes, complete with machine-gun sound effects, are central to the sub-genre of *funk proibidão*, "a sort of forbidden, underground gangster rap," which is the main focus of this book (12). Many Brazilians, following the lead of Rio's mainstream media, have long dismissed *proibidão* and *funk carioca* more broadly as "violent, pornographic, and lacking in 'consciousness'" (55), as did Sneed when he first heard the music. Earlier Brazilian scholarship reflected this typical middle-class response, tending to treat *funk* as unworthy of serious academic inquiry (61). Sneed's perspective is more sympathetic: *funk* is not only a "cheap and sexualized commodity" and an apology of crime; it is also, more importantly, "a call to gather together in community, to love, to fight and to live" -- a crucial weapon in Rio's postmodern war (9).

A pioneer in scholarly studies of *funk carioca* since the early 2000s, when he completed his PhD dissertation (turned into this book) on the music, Sneed spent a total of approximately five years in Rocinha -- one of Rio's largest favelas, at an estimated over 100,000 residents -- between the early 1990s and mid 2000s, the heyday of *bailes de comunidade*. During that time, he was converted from skeptic to believer as he came to appreciate the power of the music. Sneed approached his research as a community member and activist, rather than an academic outsider, which is clearly reflected in the book.

Sneed presents *funk* and the favela community *bailes* where it has thrived as "a counter-hegemonic struggle against the conditions of social injustice and inequality in the city and an active attempt to interrogate existing notions of class, race, and gender in Brazil"(71); the dance parties, usually sponsored and attended by the favela's prominent drug traffickers, represent "community encounters in the everyday life, religious, and musical practices of the youth culture of the residents of Rio's favelas, as African Diaspora peoples" (14). The author identifies a "utopian impulse" in this culture, grounded in the music's "radical inversion of the social geography of Rio de Janeiro." Favela dwellers call the shots in Rio in these songs -- "*Nós não podemos ir na zona sul/A zona sul é que vem até nós*" (We can't go to the South Zone/ the South Zone comes to us) go the lyrics to one classic *funk* -- which project favelas, as opposed to the *asfalto*, as quintessentially Brazilian and pan-human social spaces (11-12).

In defending the "utopian impulse" of *funk*, Sneed does not argue that *funk carioca* and the *bailes* signify some sort of radical utopian future. Rather, they represent the "creation of a temporary collective space in which those gathered can lift one another above the limitations of their ordinary lives to an emotional state that enables them to feel what it is to live in a better world" (260). Importantly, the *bailes* are an intensely communal affair. While the music is most closely associated with youths from their early teens to early twenties (the main cohort Sneed interviewed for his ethnographic research, and also the majority of victims in Rio's undeclared war), children as young as seven and older favela residents also attend the *bailes*, which cultivate an irrepressible sense of communion and belonging, satisfying basic human needs for connection (5). The energy and sense of empowerment generated by that communion, fueled by blasting sound systems and the call and response that blurs performer and spectator, create a transcendent *funk* time-space that is lost if one analyzes the songs as isolated cultural artifacts (264-267).

Sneed draws connections between *funk* culture and Richard Dyer's understanding of the "utopian dimension of entertainment" as an "escapist flight from the stark inadequacies of real day-to-day life" (262-263), along with Paul Gilroy's exploration of utopia in parallel cultural expressions of the Black Atlantic. While Gilroy did not analyze *funk carioca*, Sneed calls *funk* a "quintessentially Black Atlantic cultural form," an inherently hybrid Black countercultural projection of an alternate Brazil and *brasilidade* itself. Through *funk*, marginalized favela residents reappropriate and reaffirm defining features of Brazilianness -- qualities such as racial openness, gregariousness, humor, and playful sensuality -- which largely emerged from working-class communities of color, but which, outside of utopian spaces like the *bailes*, have been rendered practically inaccessible for most favela residents by the brutal circumstances of this postmodern war (272).

Much of Rocinha, and Rio's favela population more broadly, is northeastern, with less clear connections to the African diaspora. Sneed accounts for that by portraying *funk* as a non-essentialist expression of Black culture, one which projects the favela loosely as a nonwhite "'brown' space" as opposed to middle and upper class "'white'" spaces (244-245). He argues that "by not making Blackness a requisite for participation in the *baile funk*, *funk* culture invited all those in attendance, whatever color they were, to share in its essence as an expression of Black culture, suggesting a blackening of racial identity that ran counter to the historical tendency of Brazilian society to whiten itself" (293). Above all, *funk* placed the poor, rather than the wealthy, at the top of its Brazilian social hierarchy, representing a revolutionary vision of Brazilianness (293).

In one of his central interventions, Sneed analyzes discourse in the lyrics of popular *proibidão* songs to argue that drug traffickers did not merely impose their power over favelas through sheer terror, in the kind of "narco-dictatorship model" endorsed by Brazil's mainstream media (118-119). *Funk* lyrics -- often written by favela residents with no involvement in crime -- reveal, rather, "bottom up pressure for actual responsibilities from drug traffickers," namely safety and protection (142). (Tellingly, ten-year-old boys Sneed interviewed were already terrified of state police forces, but not of local traffickers.) Drug traffickers are constructed in *funk* lyrics as not only Hobsbawmian "social bandits," but also messianic figures, "spiritual servants of a higher good and a social order that is not racially polarized or class stratified" (208), as in the popular *proibidão* "Bandits of Christ." Through such lyrics, community members established a standard for traffickers to live up to in this parallel, negotiated

*lei do morro* (law of the hill). In this way, *proibidão* not only reflected life in the favela, but also helped shape it (171).

Dramatic socioeconomic inequality and violence continue to define life in Rio to perhaps a greater extent than one could have imagined in 1994, the year that *funk* lyrics in Portuguese became popular, and that Zuenir Ventura's *Cidade Partida* was published. Many studies have focused on the socioeconomic sides of this war, but few have provided as extensive an analysis of a key cultural front. Sneed shows how *funk carioca* conveys expressions and negotiations of power and responsibility -- and alternative projections of carioca and Brazilian identity -- for millions of marginalized Black and brown Brazilians. It represents those who for decades have been caught between the sensational yet predictable and negotiable violence of drug traffickers and the constant and often indiscriminate violence of the state.