

“AVERSÃO OFICIAL: resumida” – A new perspective on favelados

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DUTRA, Paulo. *Aversão Oficial: resumida*. Rio de Janeiro: Malê, 2018.

Paulo Dutra's *Aversão Oficial: resumida* is a tribute to life in the poor áreas of Rio de Janeiro. Published in 2018, the book is structured as a collection of vignettes, or interconnected short stories, that heavily relies on poetic language, metaphors and imagery, blurring the lines that separate poetry and prose. The author's style also combines colloquial language and challenges the strictness of grammar by dissolving the frontiers that demarcate high and low cultures. This eclecticism is also reflected on the content of Dutra's stories, which reveals the novel's paradoxical, controversial nature.

Divided into eight parts, the book consists of a warning to the reader, two prologues, the first and second parts of the novel, as well as an epilogue, an interview with the author – titled “Brevidades” – and a review by Pedro Antônio Freire. The short stories are organized in two sections: the first one focuses on the characters that compose the kaleidoscopic reality of a marginalized neighborhood; and the second centers on the events of the protagonist's life, whose fragmented story – starting in Rio, moving to Vitória, then to the academic environment of the Rio de Janeiro State University, and finally to the detailed description of a trip to the beach – exposes the difficult access to education, entertainment, respect and justice. The epilogue, “Eu”, emphasizes the lyrical-I's struggle to survive the many situations in which he could have died, such as by falling off a bus, the shootings, and even a drowning in the Barra canal (p. 77). Although they can be read separately, each section operates as a crucial piece to understand the narrative puzzle.

The narrative style is reminiscent of oral tradition, given its repetitions and the interconnectedness of the stories. The constant echoes of “itens que não duram para sempre” (“items that won't last forever”),

“quem sabe não diz” (“whoever knows it won’t say it”) and “nunca mais vi” (“I have never seen again”) give the novel a nostalgic tone. Nostalgia and sadness are also present in “Gabe”, one of the many characters whose death is unexplained. The repetitions create a feeling that the stories are being told by a work of memory – as if the narrator is trying to remember them while also repeating passages so that the reader can memorize them too. The warning stating “qualquer semelhança com a vida real não é mera nem coincidência” (“any similarities with real life is not mere coincidence or coincidence itself”, p. 15) calls attention to the ordinary but factual aspect of these vignettes. The stories shock and entertain, since they illustrate a marginalized neighborhood and its inhabitants, and ask the reader not to forget their lives and dramas, as a call to action to a society where these same lives can be spared.

The dissolution of traditional boundaries extends to the subject matter of the stories. In the prologue “Do narrador ao leitor, com afeição à feição”, the narrator claims that this is a book for men (p. 18), displaying a misogynist attitude towards his imagined readership. However, the vignette “A culpa deve ser do sol” condemns the absence of streets named after women in Rio de Janeiro. Also, the story of Tchatinha – as just another pregnant elementary school girl – brings sexual, gender and class issues to the forefront, which combined complicate the lives of poor women in this context. If, at first, the readers cringe at that chauvinist statement, they can later read it as a cultural product ingrained in the protagonist – and perhaps even in the author – for being a member of a sexist culture. The book does not have clear heroes or villains; rather, it presents a realistic and legitimate view of a society that is imbued with inequality and prejudice.

Aversão heavily relies on local color. The first part of the narrative prescribes a readership familiar with the life and customs of Rio de Janeiro in the 90s. It focuses on the local culture and the interactions among characters to provide a sketch of the life of people who usually do not receive the honor of becoming protagonists of stories. With a focus on the marginalized, the novel can be seen as a contemporary version of Aluisio Azevedo’s *O Cortiço* mixed with something of Machado de Assis and Borges. The first vignette, “Boquinha”, is narrated from a criminal’s perspective. The use of short sentences mirrors Boquinha’s brief life and how it was interrupted. The reasons and the events leading to his death are not elucidated, but the author emphasizes the character’s

philosophy regarding the ups and downs of life, and his acceptance of the condition of the struggle for survival: "um dia da caça. Outro do caçador" (p. 23) – that is, every dog has its day. As well as in "Boquinha", the narrative of "Negócio" is interrupted. Readers unfamiliar with the setting and local customs may find the chapter difficult to understand, since the story makes very specific references to cultural icons such as "Tcho tcho meri" – which refers to a famous *funk* song of the 90s – and to slang terms such as "dar janelão". "Magalhães" also requires familiarity with the setting. Narrated in a stream-of-consciousness style – in which a train trip is described through sales pitch and descriptions of the neighborhood and train stops –, this story exposes the arduous reality of informal workers in Brazil. The hardworking Magalhães cannot make a living by selling ice cream and candy, and lives with the constant fear of having his merchandise apprehended by police officers. "Claudio" focuses on kite flying, a very common sport for children, teenagers and even adults in the suburban areas of Rio de Janeiro in the 90s. It is worth reminding the reader that kites are cheap toys that can be made or purchased by the less affluent people. It is also an activity of manual dexterity which may serve as mechanism for sublimation of aggressive tendencies, since fighting other people's kites – the reason why "cerol", an abrasive string, is used – has as objective to cut other player's lines and thus "kill" their kite.

Aggression and violence pervade in the majority of the stories. "Xará" and "Ratinho" display the triviality of violence and disrespect in every aspect of these lives – from children being bullied by their teachers to the bus collector harassing Xará, who is not depicted as a hero, since he does not have a clear reason for not paying the bus fare. "Chico" is no anti-hero either, even though he steals his friends' money to buy "Danoninho", a yogurt-like dairy product. As in other stories, contextual knowledge is vital to understand that "Danoninho" was a very expensive dairy dessert for poor children in Brazil. At this point, the narrative exposes social inequalities, thus suggesting that stealing and robberies may be caused by a desire to obtain what the upper classes have.

The stories presented in *Aversão* disclose and criticize the state of social oblivion in which the characters live. "Pessanha" evinces the lack of trust in legal authorities – such as the police and the justice system – as it emphasizes the fear of speaking up and being called a 'rat'. "Gil" also exposes the professionalization of drug dealing in Rio by showing how the mandatory army service teaches the poor young men skills that

will later be used by the criminals (p. 47). The factual description of the shootings between the police and the drug dealers in “Tchatinha” and “Professor” contributes to the sense of the ordinariness of violence in those communities. The latter indicates homophobia and the (im)possibility of love in such a dire context. When the lesbian Jámorreu displays an internalized hatred towards homosexuals saying she does not like gay people (p. 55), the text suggests that crossing gender boundaries to act in a masculine way, such as the butch Jámorreu, is tolerable, but a man who exhibits sensitivity and can read poetry could not be socially accepted. The characters’ references to their relationships as “aquela vida” (“that life”, p. 56) indicate the inability to accept their love and the impossibility to flourish when it happens between men. In an environment of extreme violence and hardship, toxic masculinity prevails.

In the stories, nobody is free from the effects of a racist and sexist society. The first part ends with the story of Professor, a gay man who left the poor neighborhood to pursue his studies in the United States. In the second part, the reader sees the protagonist’s trajectory from Rio – where grammar is abandoned to give voice to local color – to Vitória, to Rio again in the academic setting of the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), where the language now fully obeys the grammatical rules. In all three settings, however, the narrator exposes the racism and internalized prejudice embedded in society. If the black character in “Fala, Fera!” is discriminated by the doorman because of his color, he discriminates the doorman himself when saying “seu paraíba toco de amarrar jegue” (“you, redneck, stump to tie up an ass”, p. 64), showing the struggle for power in society, where the one who is discriminated must enforce their value by reducing the other – here, the use of ‘toco’ or ‘stump’ is a representation of that reduction. “Fala, Fera!” also criticizes the elitism and whitening of the academia, and uses the technique of embedded narratives, telling stories within stories that subsequently combine to emphasize the racism in both situations. As the narrative develops in the second part of the book, its style changes. The stories become longer and more detailed. The events are more explained and the language turns into a less oral and more mannered discourse, which reflects the narrator’s journey – now more educated – and his new audience – once members of the poor community, now members of the academia. At this point, even the narrator ends up conforming to the formal use of Portuguese, what may unfortunately reinforce the division between high and low cultures.

The epilogue of the story attempts to embrace the many contradictions present throughout the text. As the narrative concludes, it combines the two identities displayed by the protagonist: the bohemian *malandro* – the trickster, or rascal – and the scholar. It also draws the reader's attention to the glamorization of death, albeit the decease of the criminal Boquinha, as compared to living an ordinary life as the protagonist, who chooses to go to school. In its final blow, the narrative hypothesizes on the reasons why young people in marginalized areas are attracted to a life of crime. By claiming he wanted to die like Boquinha and repeating "quem sabe o porquê não diz" ("who knows why won't tell", p. 78) the main character returns to the first stories in a circular motion that connects the beginning of his trajectory to the end.

Overall, the book offers a journey through the life of the protagonist and encourages the reader to empathize with other characters that have influenced him. In focusing on poor people, criminals, and women, the narrator invites the reader to a social critique of the mechanisms that have placed these people in marginalized positions and continue to restrict them. *Aversão Oficial: Resumida* was published in a critical moment in history, particularly given the current challenges the population in Brazil and especially in Rio de Janeiro are facing. With the military intervention and the growing violence in the city, sentences as "a good criminal is a dead criminal" and "human rights to righteous humans" can be frequently heard on the streets by people of all classes and on the news by regional, state and federal politicians. Such discourse enlarges the disparity between the people in favelas and the ones living outside them. The book runs counter discriminatory beliefs, contributing to a humanization of the poor people of Rio de Janeiro by exposing social discrepancies that may be responsible for some of the problems the city have been facing. *Aversão* forces the reader to think critically about the characters' situation and the role of education as a possible means to transform the system of oppression and violence into which a large section of the *carioca* population falls. Presenting the possibility of a different, though ordinary life, the book inspires the reader to fight for education and thus offer respect, dignity and equality for all.

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