WOMEN FIELDING DANGER

NEGOTIATING ETHNOGRAPHIC IDENTITIES IN FIELD RESEARCH

edited by

MARTHA K. HUGGINS

and MARIE-LOUISE GLEBBEEK

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

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Perils of Witnessing and Ambivalence of Writing: Whiteness, Sexuality, and Violence in Rio de Janeiro Shantytowns

Donna M. Goldstein

I want to use the space provided to me in this collection to reflect critically on my own insertion into the urban milieu of Rio de Janeiro, a site where the rule of law is thin, where racism is expressed in popular culture through the linkage of race/color and crime, where the police are brutal and are considered by the poor to be their mortal enemies, and where the possibility of being in the wrong place at the wrong time is high. The women I worked with struggle to maintain a sense of dignity and a sense of humor in the face of both police and gang-based brutality in their neighborhoods, and they use tough love as a deterrent on their young children in order to keep them off the streets and distant from the gangs' promise of easy money. These are women who are doing the best they can to keep themselves and their children out of the way of violent, male-dominated institutions. In the context of Rio de Janeiro, there are two factions at war: the police versus the drug-trafficking gangs that are embedded in local communities.

In my ethnography *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Goldstein 2003), I devote a great deal of the prose to documenting and analyzing the cyclical nature of poverty, violence, and revenge that characterizes the everyday lives of women living in the urban shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where I carried out fieldwork in the early 1990s. While I addressed some of the reflexive issues that most immediately required clarification when writing *Laughter Out of Place*, I have not yet had an opportunity to reflect more fully on my own coping strategies in this particular fieldwork context—a context that required constant negotiating of my own identity not only in relation to the people I worked with most directly, but also in relation to the society at large that informed our interpretations of one another, in particular our understandings of race.

Nor have I had the opportunity in writing to explore more fully the profound personal effects that this kind of research produces on the soul.

In this chapter, then, I want to write more explicitly about my own imperfect choices of racial and sexual identification while in the field. I would like to reflect on some of the more submerged aspects of fieldwork behavior—on the time I spent dressing and presenting myself and on the ways in which my own whiteness, perceived femininity, and foreignness worked mostly to privilege me in this setting. It is through these reflections that I have also become even more acutely aware of the power dynamics existing in this particular field site. This essay thus addresses the ways in which this form of long-term engagement throughout years of fieldwork affected my psyche, my research, and the kinds of intimacies I was ultimately able to develop.

THE CONTEXT

Some time ago I was able to view the quite remarkable 2002 documentary film titled *Bus 174*, directed by the *Carioca* (from Rio de Janeiro) director José Padilha. The film's focus is a bus hijacking that took place in a middle-class Rio de Janeiro neighborhood in June of 2000, in which a twenty-one-year-old man named Sandro do Nascimento took several passengers hostage. The documentary draws from the actual footage of the event, filmed by television journalists who arrived on the scene at the same time as the police. The event was broadcast live for more than four hours on Brazilian television as approximately 35 million viewers nationwide tuned in. Most importantly, however, the film documents the cruel and harsh life of the lone hijacker Sandro, interspersing footage of the live hostage standoff with interviews from individuals who had known the perpetrator intimately over the course of his life.

Sandro had grown up as one of Rio's numerous street children. His early life was marked by movement in and out of juvenile and adult correctional institutions. As a young man, he was one of the few survivors of the famed Candelária massacre that took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1993. This was an internationally publicized event during which hooded members of a death squad—later discovered to be off-duty police—killed seven homeless boys and wounded two others, spraying them with gunfire as they lay sleeping in front of the Candelária Church in the commercial center of Rio de Janeiro. The Candelária massacre—as it was called at the time—transfixed the Brazilian nation in 1993, causing the country to question its treatment of street children, poverty, cyclical violence, and the flawed nature of Rio de Janeiro's police forces. The June 2000 bus hijacking documented in *Bus 174* was connected to the Candelária massacre through the emergence of Sandro as both a survivor of Candelária in 1993 and the lone hijacker of *Bus 174* in 2000. If there had been any uncertainty that the cycles of violence and revenge taking place in Rio were deeply connected to the collective despair of Rio's angry and impoverished young men, the second event—now shockingly told in this documentary film—extinguishes that doubt.

The documentary challenges its audience to look closely at Sandro's life and at the various ways in which young men like Sandro are ultimately excluded from social life and condemned by Brazilian society. The audience learns that at a young age, Sandro was a witness to the brutal murder of his mother and soon after wound up living on the streets. The audience also learns that although Sandro, like many street children, had developed a serious and chronic drug-use problem, he was not regarded by his peers or the professionals in either the juvenile or adult correctional system as an organically violent individual. The audience also learns that much of what Sandro is performing in front of the live television cameras—threatening each of the hostages with a bullet to the head—is undone privately as survivors later reveal that Sandro is calmly reassuring the hostages that he does not want to harm them; that he just wants to be able to escape alive from this situation. Personally traumatized by the violent events in his own life—namely, the death of his mother and of his friends at Candelária—Sandro has a particularly contentious relationship with the police with whom he finds himself in negotiations. His repeated hysterical outbursts to the police are revealing: He berates them for being cowards and for killing his sleeping comrades at the church; he chastises them for later killing witnesses who were scheduled to go to court to identify the police responsible for the Candelária massacre. All 35 million Brazilians watching know—as does Sandro himself—that no matter what happens to the hostages in his control, the likelihood that Sandro will emerge alive from this event is practically nil. As a young, dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian man from the Rio shantytowns with no education and with a long life on the street, there is little hope for his long-term survival or success in Rio's hierarchized structures of class and race.

I am grateful to the filmmakers for putting together this remarkable document and for once again stimulating discussion among middle- and upper-class Brazilians about police violence and the relationship of this violence to impoverished, racially marked young men. This film speaks to some of the central tensions in contemporary Brazilian society: that is, how to think about violence, race, human rights, and justice in a society with a long history of colonialism, racial inequality, and class bifurcation. Despite the viewing audience's generalized sympathy for the hostages, a number of other issues surface and become defining as the film heads toward its tragic climax: in particular, the irreversibility of Sandro's life circumstances and the structure of police brutality and incompetence.

The police remain poised outside of the bus until eventually Sandro tires of his situation and emerges with his pistol pointed at the head of one of the hostages, a girl named Geísa. A "sharpshooter" of the police forces comes within shooting range of Sandro, fires, and misses him, accidentally shooting Geísa instead. According to the official autopsy, Sandro's gun had also fired into the head of the hostage before he was "neutralized" at the scene. In spite of the fact that there are numerous opportunities throughout the event for the police to shoot Sandro—sharpshooters are within range at all times—there seems to be an unspoken agreement that Sandro should not be murdered in front of 35 million television viewers. In the last few scenes, the police are shown holding back the lynch mob that forms to kill Sandro. Sandro makes it alive into the back of a police car, only so that minutes later the police can smother and murder Sandro themselves, off camera. Unfortunately, as my work and that of other scholars interested in extralegal violence in Latin America have shown (e.g., Caldeira 2000; Goldstein 2003; Holloway 1993; Holston and Caldeira 1998; Huggins 1991; Leeds 1996; Pinheiro 1991; Zaluar 1994), the policing institutions in the region have remained problematic from the colonial period through to the present.

FIELDWORK INTERLUDE

In the course of my fieldwork in Brazil, I met many men like Sandro do Nascimento because the "subjects" of my research were their mothers. Glória, a dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian woman in her late forties who worked as a domestic worker her entire life and who is the central character in *Laughter Out of Place*, had raised one of the most notorious drug gang leaders in Rio de Janeiro, Pedro Paulo, who I had the opportunity to meet and interview during an overnight visit at Ilha Grande (Big Island) Prison (also known as the Devil's Cauldron) in September of 1992. Glória planned the weekend trip and insisted that I accompany her, her boyfriend at the time, and her two youngest children in exercising this family visiting privilege. We cooked food all night long and then early in the morning made our way to the ferryboat landing and paid for our voyage on the boat that makes the trip between the mainland and the island. When we docked on the island, it was about nine o'clock in the morning, and a female security guard employed by the prison was waiting at the pier to greet us. At that hour, most of the passengers on the boat were coming to the island to visit imprisoned loved ones, alongside a few tourists and residents. There on the pier, in full public view, the security guard began to match her list—the prisoners—with those of us who had come as their visitors. After she marched us briskly to a security headquarters especially for visitors and

divided the men from the women, I found myself waiting with Glória and about thirty other women for the next eight hours. Everyone in our room was placing towels or small blankets they had brought with them on the floor, attempting to claim precious space for lounging and a possible nap. They all seemed to know the routine and were prepared for the long day of waiting. One woman, who saw me standing and waiting patiently for the process to begin, called out to me, "Ohh, *Neguinha* [Little Blackie, a term of endearment], sit down," in a thoughtful attempt to let me know that it would be a lot more comfortable to claim a space to park myself in for the rest of the day instead of standing the entire time. There were a few chuckles when she called me *Neguinha* because I was one of only two or three whiter-skinned women in the room, and I definitely stood out. One by one we were called into a tiny office, where we were asked to strip completely naked. Then flashlights were beamed onto all our private parts to make sure we had not smuggled in a prohibited object, such as a knife. Glória was not the only one who had brought gifts and pots of food; the inspection of everything we had brought with us then commenced and took hours, and I was forced to leave my camera and tape recorder in the security area. Finally, at about five o'clock, a minivan from the prison came to pick us up, and we all piled in, exhausted by the long day of waiting and anticipating the reunion with loved ones. The climb to the prison seemed long and treacherous—more than a half hour of rugged driving through thick tropical vegetation. The curves on the road were sharp and dangerous and fed the anxiety quietly brewing in my stomach.

Upon arriving at the prison, we were led to what was known as the *área de lazer* (recreation area) and served a sweet drink similar to Kool-Aid. Pedro Paulo had not been certain that we were coming, and he had to be summoned to the area, which was actually a long, narrow hallway with twenty to twenty-five small rooms spread out along two sides. Iron bars were welded onto the padded doors of the rooms, but the doors were left swinging open at this time of the day, and one could peek in and see that some of the rooms were quite spruced up, with television sets and throw rugs on the floor. Unfortunately we were issued one of the worst cubicles, one that was quite dirty and had years' worth of tropical fungus growing in every corner. There was a set of bunk beds, a sink, and a little cooking area where we were able to set our pots to warm.

In our room that night was Amélia, another guest at the prison, a young woman who was there on her birthday to visit her long-lost brother, Adhmar. She claimed that she had not seen him since they were children of three or four years of age, more than two decades ago. According to Amélia, she and Adhmar were separated as children when, after the death of their mother, she was given to one family, and he to another. Adhmar was a heavyset, soft-spoken man who grew up on the streets and was now serving

a long prison sentence. I never asked what his crime had been; it would have gone against the prevailing etiquette. Amélia brought to mind the images I had stored in my mind of Catholic novitiates, young nuns-in-training I had known in other Latin American contexts; she appeared innocent to an extreme, almost otherworldly. I doubted that she actually was Adhmar's sister. I had heard about women who were drawn to and eventually became involved with men in prison from women in Felicidade Eterna (Eternal Happiness, the name of the Rio shantytown I did my fieldwork in) who knew of such cases. Glória's daughters, Soneca and Anita, believed that a certain kind of woman—and they even hinted that it might especially be common among women who had recently become *crentes* (literally: believers, religious converts)—hope that through their faith they can redeem another person from a criminal life. Likewise, I had read an abundance of popular articles that spoke of the sweeping religious conversion movement within Rio's prisons. Thus, I wondered whether Amélia was really related to Adhmar or whether perhaps she was one of the women I had heard about. She kept repeating clichéd phrases such as "When a woman loves, she really loves, and it is one person." Somehow I did not believe that they were siblings, but this was a story I would not be able to confirm in either direction. In any case, Amélia's optimism and faith in the goodness of human nature, as well as her seemingly spiritual approach to the world, made an interesting contrast that night to the combined cynicism of Pedro Paulo and Adhmar.

Having been informed at the last minute that he had visitors, Pedro Paulo arrived at the recreation area from the bowels of the prison. Pedro Paulo was a young man of about thirty, extremely tall and muscular, and the most articulate of Glória's children. She introduced me to him as her *filha branca* (white daughter), and this puzzled him for a moment and made him pause, I believe because he was wondering whether it was possible that Glória actually gave birth to someone as white as me. Perhaps because he had been out of touch with her for so many years, he thought anything was possible. After letting him wonder for a bit, Glória laughed loudly and explained that I was like a daughter to her, and that I was in fact an anthropologist writing a book about women in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro. Pedro Paulo immediately understood my presence as a chance for him to be remembered and perhaps even immortalized in my book. He seemed like a young man who was used to being listened to, and he had much to say. Unfortunately, we were all exhausted. None of us had eaten more than a few salty crackers during the entire day, and I felt dizzy with hunger. The children, Zeca and Félix, were even too tired to wait for the beans and rice to be heated, and they opted for bed before dinner. They were all too used to days like this, when one's body becomes tired and ultimately disinterested by what often turned into an all-too-long and familiar wait between meals.

Pedro Paulo was a fan of reggae music, and one of the first things he requested from me was to find him a Jamaican-colored *boné*, or cap, similar to the one Bob Marley wore. He seemed to have an affinity not only for the music but also for the politics that reggae music represents. Compared with the many other friends I had known in the shantytowns who were of Pedro Paulo's generation, he seemed far more politicized and aware of the absurd nature of the poverty in Rio. One could see in his body language and hear in his monologues that Pedro Paulo was a young and energetic man, filled with anger. He had recently learned that his "woman" in Rocinha (the largest *favela* or urban shantytown in Brazil), Josilene, was pregnant with his child and was considering having an abortion. Pedro Paulo threatened that if she aborted his child, the first thing he would do upon leaving prison would be to kill her: "*Ela matou o meu filho. Agora vou ter que matar ela.* [She killed my child. Now, I am going to have to kill her.]" He felt that when a woman has sex with a man, she ought to know the consequences, a comment that forced the women in the room out of their listening mode and into verbal battle. Glória and Amélia countered that men ought to take part in birth control as well—that it should not fall only within the domain of women. Soon, however, Pedro Paulo launched into another long harangue, this time about Rocinha's Comando Vermelho (Red Command, the most well-known imperialist drug gang in Rio de Janeiro) and how this particular gang acts to preserve "family values." Pedro Paulo connected his own personal position on abortion to his sense that Red Command, as a group sharing a set of core values, promoted his particular sense of right and wrong. He told us how much he hated abortion and equally despised women who were not monogamous. For Pedro Paulo, the job of "the man" is to put the food on the table for his family, and as long as this is taken care of, it is fine for that man to have as many women as he wants—as long as they "don't lack anything," of course. I was surprised by how well he was able to articulate the male double standard on fidelity, making it sound as if it were a unique, well-developed doctrine emanating from Red Command rather than a more generalized cultural norm.

At midnight, the visitors are locked into the cubicles together with the prisoners, a fate that seemed daunting to me after having spent the evening chatting with Pedro Paulo and Adhı ıar. I was forced by Glória into taking a section of the bottom bunk bed; he was concerned that her "white daughter" sleep comfortably. Meanwhi e, she and her boyfriend, Zezinho, unrolled some blankets and spread themselves out on the floor. Shortly after the lights went out and as I was dozing, I noticed the smell of cigarettes close to me and felt a man attempting to place his hands on my body. It was extremely dark in the room, and I was guessing that the hands were Pedro Paulo's. I whispered to the transgressor that I was "like a sister" to him and that he should treat me with a little more respect.

Finally, I threatened to wake Glória and tell her what he was doing, at which point he immediately pulled away and moved back sheepishly to the other bed. I was momentarily giddy for having thought of using Glória as a threat against Pedro Paulo, but I realized early in the morning that the intruder actually had been Adhmar! Nevertheless, I am guessing that through his friendship with Pedro Paulo, he had understood that Glória was not someone to cross, and my threat to expose him had indeed functioned almost magically. I decided, wisely, I believe, to refrain from telling Glória about the episode until we were safely in the minivan heading back down the road from the prison, so as not to disturb the rest of our visit. Her response was what I had suspected. She would have liked to "break his face" for trying something like that with me, and she probably would have wanted to cut short our visit—or worse, she might have entered into some kind of violent physical battle in that tiny room. In any case, I was glad I did not ruin the trip, and I made her swear and promise never to mention the incident to Pedro Paulo either, since I did not want Adhmar to suffer any for his momentary transgression.

Upon his release from prison in 1995, Pedro Paulo went back to his gang and his old life in Rocinha. Josilene, the woman Pedro Paulo had referred to as his "woman," had not followed through with the abortion, and Pedro Paulo returned to her and responsibly took over his fatherly obligation to his son, Raul, which included teaching him how to distinguish between different kinds of guns. During our brief prison visit, Pedro Paulo had made it clear that he was not interested in working for slave wages, as his mother had done her entire life. He openly scorned Glória's definition of "honest" work and quite articulately described the impossibility of any self-respecting man supporting a family on a Brazilian minimum wage (which at the time hovered around $100 U.S. per month). He was angry and impulsive, but I found his analysis of minimum-wage work to be quite accurate. In 1995, only a few months after being released from prison, he was killed in a shootout with police in Rocinha. Glória had no tears left to shed over Pedro Paulo, perhaps because she had tried so hard over the years to reason with him and had come to accept their differing perspectives of the world.

Over the years, Glória's lament about Pedro Paulo had been constant. She tried to understand why her firstborn had turned out to be a *marginal* (marginal person, criminal). She considered him the most intelligent of all her children—he had completed his secondary schooling and could read and write at a relatively sophisticated level. But, according to Glória, early in life he exhibited his love for "the street," and this tendency, finally, was the strongest influence on his character. In many of the life stories of the women in Glória's network of friends and family, the women had worked in the homes of others, raising the children of strangers but being forced themselves to leave their own children with an older sister, a grandmother,

or "the street." Glória herself was raised by her grandmother while her mother worked in Rio de Janeiro to earn enough money to move the entire family. In reflecting on her own work-filled life, she also attributes the loss of Pedro Paulo to "the street" and its violence to the fact that she was too busy to keep track of him as much as she would have liked.

According to Glória, Pedro Paulo spent a good portion of his youth in and out of the state's child correctional institution—Fundação Nacional do Bem-Estar do Menor (FUNABEM). He seemed to have emerged from that experience even angrier than when he went in, and upon finishing his time there, he quickly returned to Rocinha and became involved with the infamous Red Command. From that time on, Glória knew that his life would be a short one. She had always told her children, using Pedro Paulo as a negative role model, that "*bandido não tem amigo* [bandits have no friends]." Pedro Paulo was known to sleep restlessly, with a gun under his pillow in constant expectation of trouble.

Pedro Paulo had watched Glória and her entire generation slave away as domestic workers in the homes of the wealthy in the Zona Sul (South Zone, signifying the wealthy neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro) for barely subsistence wages. He was not moved, either, by the men he knew in Rocinha who worked at honest jobs. Men like Pedro Paulo felt they had been cheated out of their own futures. Further, Pedro Paulo had figured out early on that those of his class and background do not have a great deal of social mobility. Those whom he knew in "honest" professions—domestic workers, construction workers, security guards, and so forth—struggled their entire lives, working hard but still barely making a living for themselves and their families. My sense is that what marks Pedro Paulo's generation is the recognition, although in some ways inarticulable, of the impossibility of "the good life" for those of his race and background. In places like Rocinha, gang leaders and some "successful" gang members have built large houses for themselves and have been able to acquire a piece of "the good life" that is so central to Carioca identity. More than anyone else, Pedro Paulo had a sense of the riches and the good life of the *bacanas*, those who lived on the asphalt streets, the wealthy people in the Zona Sul, as he referred to them. His descriptions of apartments he had robbed were filled with details about electronic devices, clothes, and other elements of "the good life" that he believed these people inhabited. His anger seemed somehow justified to me because I knew of few cases of social mobility out of the *favela* and safely into middle-class existence. It surely did happen, but the route was treacherous and reserved for a lucky few. As an intelligent young man growing up in Rocinha, Pedro Paulo found the allure of gang life to be irresistible. It seemed to offer an alternative to backbreaking manual labor, at the same time promising a decent wage and offering instant economic improvement.

THE SPACE OF FIELDWORK

The fieldwork space that proved to be most challenging for me was the *favela* I came to know through Glória and her family, Felicidade Eterna, situated some fifty kilometers from central Rio de Janeiro. During my extended stays with Glória, I would nestle in with her family at night in their tiny shack, sleeping, as they did, on my side, curled up like a spoon so as to make enough room for anywhere between eight and fourteen of us on the makeshift bed, a foam mattress thrown on the floor with bedding. I had chosen this kind of personalized fieldwork because, after carrying out a great deal of survey research on the spread of HIV/AIDS and women's sexual culture in the shantytowns, I felt the need to go further and get closer. I wanted to find out how the working poor experienced living within the social apartheid that characterized Rio de Janeiro—how they understood it, tolerated it, and even, at times, made fun of it. I wanted to know how these working women organized their lives in communities that were known by the middle classes for high levels of violence. Getting that close, however, also required some compromise on my part: a willingness to follow the myriad and specific cues to what my friends would see as appropriate behavior. In fact, much of the behavior my young women friends advocated to me at the time, particularly appropriate "female" behavior, got them into trouble with their boyfriends, their spouses, and sometimes with the local gang. One among the many challenges I faced, then, was to fit in within the boundaries of good ethnographic practice known as participant observation—that is, to do as others do—and yet to stay safe at the same time.

During my first extended period of fieldwork I experienced Felicidade Eterna as a remarkably safe place. My experience there was similar to that of Janice Perlman, whose classic work about three Rio *favelas*, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (1976), describes them as "internally safe and relatively free from crime and interpersonal violence" (136). As a foreign researcher, I felt safe in a small shantytown where everyone knew who I was. Nevertheless, in the years that followed, I realized that the peaceful moment I had experienced in Felicidade Eterna during the early 1990s was not necessarily a stable one. Felicidade Eterna experienced distinct cycles of calm and violence that were not immediately perceivable in any one time period. In those later years, residents described to me their feeling that their own situation was deteriorating. They referred to what they perceived as an inability for the honest worker to remain outside the cycles of violence between warring and territorially based drug gangs as well as between those gangs and the police that regulated daily life in these areas. Residents felt that the violence of the 1990s was becoming increasingly unpredictable, drawing in targets and victims who had nothing to do with drugs or violence. In fact, Glória had moved her entire family

away from Rocinha to another shantytown in the late 1980s because she saw that her son Pedro Paulo was gaining notoriety in the Red Command. She wanted to shield the rest of her family from his ongoing battles and prevent his lifestyle from seducing her younger boys into the gang life. A later move from this second home was precipitated by a robbery and the rape of her two daughters, which she took as evidence that the situation in that neighborhood too was deteriorating.

During return visits to Brazil in 1995 and 1998, I discovered that there were many sorts of relationships that had to be precariously balanced in order to achieve periods of peacefulness such as the one I had experienced in the early 1990s. For one thing, having a local gang that was led by a reasonable person was key to the stability and safety of Felicidade Eterna residents. Later, when the boss of the *favela* was killed and replaced by younger men, there was less predictability and stability. These poorest working-class sectors experience levels of everyday crime and violence that are in a completely different realm from those experienced by the middle and upper classes. Such everyday experiences of violence have compelled these populations to embrace solutions that seem paradoxical but upon closer examination make good sense, given the absurd situation residents find themselves in—a situation characterized by stifling poverty, profound class inequities, alarming levels of domestic violence, and racism.

THE RULE OF LAW AND ITS EMPTINESS IN CERTAIN SPACES

Although talk about violence and crime proliferates across classes, the forms and levels of daily violence and suffering in the city of Rio de Janeiro are experienced differently according to class, race, gender, and location. As Anthony Pereira (1997) explains, the rule of law, so often touted as the measure of a consolidated democracy, is applied differentially in Brazil.[1] One of the reasons such a wide gap exists between the universalism of formal legality and the actual extension of citizenship rights is due to the country's hugely inequitable economy, statistically represented in its extraordinarily high Gini coefficient (0.63), which surpasses those of both South Africa and India.

Pereira (1997) dubs the differential application of the rule of law "elitist liberalism," or "the granting of the right to civil liberties on a differential basis depending on some aspect of the person's social status and identity (be it neighborhood, profession, skin color, gender, or something else)" (9). This elitist liberalism is not merely some conspiracy of the middle and upper classes against the poor to hold back the consolidation of democracy; deeply rooted (hegemonic) historical and structural factors make a transition to a more inclusive liberalism difficult to achieve.

During the early 1990s, when I was carrying out my initial fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, Felicidade Eterna had no more than a few hundred residents, and the gang consisted of a man named Dilmar and four young men. Very soon after I started visiting Glória in the shantytown, she insisted on bringing me by Dilmar's tiny shack and making the appropriate introductions. His name was often spoken in a whisper, as if to mention him at all was to ask for trouble. In his mid-thirties, Dilmar was tall, charming, and handsome, with olive-colored skin. He seemed to hang around the shantytown most days, making many *pssssssiu* sounds to passersby with whom he had business. Dilmar, like many in Felicidade Eterna, shuffled around the hardened dirt alleyways, which turned to mud during the rainy season, in his trademark yellow flip-flops. The only sign of wealth I could see was the expensive-looking watch on his wrist, and I was surprised to find that his shack was almost as bare as Glória's—it had a stove, a bed, and a slightly better television and stereo system, but not much else. If Dilmar was making money from his position as a gang leader, he was not investing it in his daily life in Felicidade Eterna. Because I had seen the homes and sensed a different kind of wealth among the members of the larger, more imperialist drug-trafficking gangs in Rocinha and Vidigal—mostly members of Comando Vermelho—I had expected him to be better off economically. His wife was younger than he was and pregnant when I first met him, but if I had not been told that he was the *chefe* (boss), I would never have guessed it from his appearance and his home.

I was encouraged—or, more accurately, obliged—by Glória and my other friends in Felicidade Eterna to introduce myself to Dilmar right away, as nobody wanted me to be mistaken for somebody I was not. My friends wanted to make sure that Dilmar knew that I was a friend and a person to trust who was not connected to the police in any way. Of course, the most compelling reason to meet with Dilmar was to gain permission to live in Felicidade Eterna and to gain some form of protection as a citizen of the shantytown. After introducing myself as an anthropologist and outlining, however feebly and inadequately, what anthropologists do, I explained to Dilmar that I was interested in writing about how the poorest segments of the working classes in Rio live. I told him that I was especially interested in the lives of women like Glória. Dilmar thought this was a fine project. He gave me the names of some of the elders who had participated in the first land invasions in Felicidade Eterna and who could provide me with some "local history." He also asked that I not take pictures of him or his *turma* (group), a request I readily agreed to. He seemed to be pleased to help me in my request to "hang out" in the *favela*, and because I spoke mostly with women, he was satisfied that I was not a snoop or a spy for the police. Both Dilmar and the residents of Felicidade Eterna understood the complicated nature of police-gang relations and wanted to be careful that my presence would not upset the balance that they had achieved during this period. At the time, I had little perspective on how violent the situation could become in these seemingly out-of-the-way areas, and I had readily dismissed the warnings from middle-class friends about the potential dangers of this kind of work.

What was in fact most shocking to me about the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro was just how fragile the rule of law really was—that is, how empty these spaces were of any tangible rule of law as I had known it. I was profoundly reminded of how "raced" and "classed" the legal system is, not just in Brazil, but in my own country, the United States. I found that political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell (1993) was correct in codifying this idea of a differential rule of law into his notion of zones, color coded according to the degree of the rule of law and state presence. In his taxonomy, "blue" zones are areas that have a high degree of state presence, effective bureaucracy, and a properly functioning legal system; "green" zones are those with a high degree of territorial penetration and a lower presence of the state in functional and class terms; and "brown" zones are those with a very low or negligible state presence in both dimensions. O'Donnell's analysis of democratization suggests that the brown zones are characterized by a number of distinct properties: "personalism, familism, prebendalism, clientelism, and the like" (1359). In these brown areas, O'Donnell points out, the state is unable to enforce its legality, so while it may be possible for an individual to vote freely in elections and have one's vote counted, one cannot expect proper treatment from the police or the courts. Accordingly, these zones, represented by shantytowns in urban areas or by rural areas where feudal relations predominate, offer a kind of "low-intensity citizenship" (1360). The state is unable to enforce its legality and therefore it is expected—even predicted—that it will use extralegal force against the populations in these areas. This is what makes such populations so vulnerable to abusive elements within the police forces. This creates a situation whereby large segments of the population experience the police forces as oppressive, or, even more pointedly, as the other team in a long, drawn-out battle for justice in the homeland.

In the absence of a reliable state presence, the drug gangs have evolved over time to fill a role beyond simple trafficking in illegal goods. They are called upon to right the wrongs of everyday life, and in this role they are tolerated and sometimes even venerated. Further, because they provide favors and help in times of emergency, they are often perceived as "good bandits" or "good criminals." The low-intensity citizenship of the residents in the brown zones means that they must depend on the gangs not only to provide an alternative rule of law but also to fill in whenever the state is absent or even oppressive. Residents depend on their local gangs for protection from outsiders of all kinds who, like many invading armies, do not

respect the citizens of the locale they hope to conquer. I was often surprised that friends of mine in the shantytown would fear the demise of their own local gang, not so much out of any kind of affection for its members, but rather out of fear of what it means for a community to be without protection. Invading gangs are believed to be disrespectful of residents, conducting illegal business in inappropriate places and engaging in shootouts with police without first warning residents.

The fragility of the rule of law and the gross violation of human rights that inevitably accompanies this context is less visible to the middle and upper classes, who live in central urban settings and who are more likely to be able to use their class position to intimidate or to buy their way out of inconvenient rules enforced by police, such as traffic violations. Partially it is their class position and place of residence that immunizes them from experiencing what it means to live in an area ruled by adolescent boys. The situation of the poor and working classes is made visible only through events such as those represented in the film *Bus 174*, where the public comes in touch with, or is reminded of, the incompetence and corruption that characterizes the police forces. In 1997, for example, the people of Brazil were able to watch a video recording of a middle-class motorist being harassed and eventually shot by a policeman who was trying to extort money from the driver for no apparent reason.[2] The scene, played repeatedly on television, caused a stir throughout the country. I was not in Brazil at the time, but I tried to imagine how different segments of the population might have viewed this event. Given the experiences of my friends in Felicidade Eterna with local police over the years, the broadcast must have been received as quite familiar. The poor and working classes are routinely criminalized by the middle and elite classes and by the police forces. In these brown zones that are removed from the benefits of economic well-being and the institutions and organizations that make up "civil society," a different set of actors are gaining local powers of their own. The absence of the state in such areas means that these local gangs provide a parallel or alternative rule of law that deals with all kinds of "private matters"—theft, domestic violence, infidelity, rape—that the state is unable and unwilling to address.

BEING ABLE TO LEAVE

My fieldwork situation involved living for extended periods of time in regions that were ruled by gangs and frequented by policing forces. Often they were calm and stable places with minimum violence; at other times they were unpredictable, highly violent, and tense. My greatest privilege, in contrast to my friends in the shantytown, was being able to leave Felicidade

Eterna and sleep in a comparatively secure middle-class neighborhood whenever I felt there was a potential for violence. During my return visit to Rio de Janeiro in 1998, Glória's son-in-law, Adilson, was shot and killed in Felicidade Eterna in a revenge killing, an event that sent Glória, her family, and some of her neighbors to find refuge among relatives living in other places. I rented a hotel room for the month and heeded Glória's warnings to stay away from Felicidade Eterna for a while. Throughout this time I was faced with specific ethical questions. I had my suspicions regarding who might have been involved in the murder, but, like my friends in the shantytown, I had become completely disillusioned with the "authorities" and chose to keep quiet. I had come to believe that police involvement usually made things worse for residents. Many of my friends from the shantytown came to visit me in my hotel room, and it was in the private interviews I conducted there, far from Felicidade Eterna, that I was able to piece together a more complete picture of the effects of urban violence on the women I had known. I was often asked to turn off my tape recorder whenever anyone would bring up events or themes related to the gangs, as most of my interviewees adhered to the *favela*'s law of silence about gang activities. If not for the privacy of the hotel room in the distant South Zone of the city, far away from the problems of the brown zone, the friends I had come to know over the years might never have felt safe enough to share their narratives about gangs and police in such intimate detail.

IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS

The women I worked with in Felicidade Eterna had to develop strategies to keep themselves safe and out of range of warfare between opposing gangs and between gangs and police. Sometimes this involved fleeing for a time and waiting until things cooled down. But I have witnessed other strategies as well, such as becoming a *crente* or religious convert—that is, declaring loyalty to one of the many evangelical religious denominations that are highly visible in these communities. As a *crente*, an individual is motivated to dress more conservatively: women with long skirts and men with button-down white shirts, jackets, and ties. These visual cues communicate to both the gangs and the police that the person has decided to exit the game and have nothing to do with any of the activities that motivate these warring factions—drugs, alcohol, infidelity. While conducting fieldwork in the shantytowns of urban Rio de Janeiro, I too had to make some decisions, some of which were conscious, about how to present myself in these public arenas in order to remain safe. Early on in my fieldwork I had made a decision not to discuss two important aspects of my personal identity that were meaningful to me in the United States: my cultural/religious background

and my sexual orientation. The people I knew in the shantytowns therefore assumed that I was Catholic and heterosexual, as those are the default categories of identity operating there. At the time, I was preoccupied with fitting in and not drawing attention to myself.

My relationship with Glória and her family stood somewhat apart from this early self-inflicted edict. When I first met Glória, she had been a domestic worker for many of the AIDS activists living in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, most of whom were gay men and lesbians. Glória knew that these were my friends and that there was probably a good chance that I was a lesbian too, but she was always careful to ask me about my "boyfriend." In the beginning stages of our friendship, I let her know that the "boyfriend" I was mourning after a long-distance breakup had been a woman, but she was not really interested in that, nor did she want to pursue the topic. In other words, I took it for granted that Glória long knew "the truth," but was choosing to ignore it for various reasons that I will discuss momentarily. It seemed that she very much wanted to engage with me publicly as a heterosexual; if I was something else, it was not necessarily something she needed to acknowledge publicly or talk about with others. Glória was my friend, but she was also my vital link to everyone else in the community, and above all else she wanted me to be respectable. Had I been adamant about sharing the details of my lesbian partnership with Glória, I might have put her in an awkward position vis-à-vis her friends and all of the people with whom she put me in contact.

Having once been heterosexual, I was able to amply participate with my friends in their romantic pleasures and pains, but I could not honestly share the gender of my partner with them, nor any of the details of that aspect of my life in the United States. I imagine that this is not a huge issue when the research involves short-term interviewing intimacy, but because my fieldwork was one of immersion and long-term engagement, I had to be at peace with denying this particular aspect of my identity, even among people who were extremely curious about my life. Glória communicated to me her need to keep my sexual identity an unacknowledged secret between us by continually ignoring all of my attempts to tell her the truth. I believe now that this was Glória's way of protecting both of us. Being perceived as a lesbian would have depleted my status as a privileged white North American woman. It would have put Glória and myself in a kind of danger that would have been subtle yet palpable. Perceived as a deviant of sorts, I would have opened myself up to the psychological and physical risks of those who are considered less worthy and whose bodies and persons might be more easily transgressed. It is perhaps too culturally specific to call this homophobia, but both of us understood the danger nonetheless of admitting to my lowly place in the Brazilian sexual hierarchy.

When asked about my personal life at home in the United States, I tried to answer as honestly as I could within the boundaries of the context I was participating in. This was complicated at times because there were two *travesti* (transgendered men) living in Felicidade Eterna who were the subjects of constant jokes and teasing, as well as a lesbian mother who, after having been beaten various times by her husband, had run away with a policewoman and left all her children behind. I therefore felt dishonest at times for not standing in some kind of solidarity with these other "deviants," but convinced myself that this was the best thing to do given my situation. By staying "closeted" and allowing others to think of me as heterosexual, I was able to maintain a higher degree of respectability. But it has also occurred to me that Glória and my other dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian friends might have felt their own respectability compromised if it had become widely known that I was sexually different. Part of my safety and my place in the hierarchy of social relations in Felicidade Eterna was built around my whiteness and foreignness. To have been known as a lesbian would have compromised my relatively high position in this hierarchy and quite possibly my safety, as well as the safety of my friends.

Similarly, it also seemed more "respectable" to leave my cultural/religious background as a Jew out of my self-presentation. I had learned throughout my travels that there were incredible ideas about Jews, some of which were simply strange, others of which bordered on anti-Semitism. Throughout the many years I spent in and out of Brazil, I had found that Glória, her family, and her network of friends had changed religious affiliations various times and that religious affinity was dependent on a number of factors. Many of them had become devoutly religious and had temporarily become members of evangelical denominations. Somehow, because of the fluidity of this identity, my own religious affiliation seemed like an easy aspect of my own identity to refrain from talking about. While my friends assumed that I was a secular person without strong religious convictions, they also assumed that I shared a working knowledge of Catholicism and other forms of popular religion that are part of the everyday fabric of Felicidade Eterna.

These sorts of reflections on fieldwork and on ethnographic production have gained a visible and important place in anthropology, drawing force from both feminist theory[3] and the first two volumes associated with the crisis of representation that were published in the mid-1980s (*Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* and *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*). The flurry of discussion surrounding these two volumes coincided with my entry into graduate school, and I incorporated some of the suggestions offered by these critiques and those that followed them into *Laughter Out of Place*. But I have always been reluctant to enter into "agonistic confession" (Pels

2000) without a clear ethnographic purpose. As I was writing this essay, I heard a fascinating lecture by Haitian-born and U.S.–trained anthropologist Gina Ulysse, who carried out fieldwork in Jamaica. Her project is to harness the power of reflexivity in the service of furthering the analysis of power relations in localized contexts, which she discusses as the "political economy of reflexivity" (Ulysse 2004). In particular, she writes about her own experiences as a black woman in the field—for example, how her race, class, nationality, and dress affected her interactions with the people she worked with—in order to illuminate the hierarchical structures that function in Jamaican society. Her work solidifies the necessity for certain kinds of reflexive engagements for approaching difficult-to-grasp racial power dynamics. I had for a long time been aware of the privilege my white foreign status afforded me in this particular fieldwork situation, but in hearing her presentation, I further recognized the analytical importance of writing about these relations as part of a broader power dynamic.

One of the most profound lessons I learned in the course of my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro is how closely race or color is aligned with class, and how both are tied into underlying notions of sexuality in the Brazilian context. In *Laughter Out of Place*, I examine the idea of black female sexual allure and its relation to the maintenance of racism in Brazil. Specifically, I explore the ways in which Glória and her friends harness their sexual capital and fantasize about certain forms of race-based social mobility. As a white North American woman carrying out research in Brazil, my range of movement within the highly "classed" Brazilian society was extraordinarily broad, ranging from contacts with elite intellectuals and AIDS activists (the majority of whom were white) living in security-guarded condominium complexes to infamous drug gang leaders living in high-security prisons (many of whom were not white). My foreignness and whiteness proved to be a cloak of privilege in a range of contexts. As the shantytown was filled with a good proportion of white immigrants from northeast Brazil (as well as Afro-Brazilians from Rio and from nearby states), I was able to "blend in" quite easily as a light-skinned person from the northeast. Glória enjoyed having me in her company and telling everyone we met that I was her "white daughter," a comment that drew many double-takes and follow-up questions, but which also, it seems, lent her a good deal of status in Felicidade Eterna.

My whiteness also carried specific benefits to Glória in the society at large. When Glória needed to apply for an identity card for her son Félix, for example, I was a useful person to have along. In those situations, I appeared to be a white middle-class woman either of Carioca or foreign origin in a line of poor darker-skinned women, all of whom were hoping that by obtaining an identity card for their child, they would be buying a bit of protection. The identity card proved to the police that the carrier was

a member of a legitimate household and was under the age of eighteen. It was something that a gang member probably would not have. Glória, for example, understood the code and the need for the identity card very well. Félix had always been a bit sloppy with his dress and was also tall and very thin; most important, he was very dark-skinned, a characteristic that made him particularly vulnerable to police harassment. From the perspective of the police, Félix had the look of a young scoundrel, and Glória worried about his fate. The identity card served as an added bit of protection. In many instances, so did I. Glória often asked me to accompany her children to various places around town, knowing that my white phenotype was assurance that nothing bad would happen to her children.

My whiteness afforded me a kind of automatic "respectability" in middle-class Rio, no matter what clothes I was wearing. Often during this period of fieldwork, my dress consisted of tight spandex shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops—a standard uniform for both middle-class beachgoers and young women from the shantytown heading in to the South Zone to work in middle-class homes. But as I eventually understood it, the exact same outfit on a young dark-skinned woman would be enough to cause suspicion in the upscale South Zone boutiques and in some cases even prevent entry. Nobody ever told me that my whiteness worked to erase such suspicions, but I experienced it everywhere, especially in daily interactions that took place in middle-class communities.

Once I invited a few of Glória's children with me into a McDonald's restaurant after a day at the beach. While the majority of patrons in the restaurant were also entering in slightly sandy beach clothes, all eyes were on us. This restaurant is generally out of the economic reach of the poorest classes. While beach clothes signify a day at the beach for a white person, they signify poverty for young, dark-skinned Brazilians. Because of this, Glória's children had rarely been to the beach because she feared what could happen to them. They could be mistaken for street children, for instance, and wind up in a difficult situation. In this context then, my white presence functioned as protection against the police.

My whiteness also enabled me to conform easily to casual forms of white femininity and respectability, as long as I wore long hair and tight-fitting jeans. During a preliminary research visit to Brazil in 1988, I arrived in Rio de Janeiro with the short haircut that was stylish at the time in Berkeley, California. In Rio, however, this haircut was read as unfeminine, boyish, and possibly lesbian, and I abandoned this style during subsequent field trips. At the beginning of my fieldwork I wore American-style, loose-fitting jeans, which quickly marked me as an outsider and was also perceived as unfeminine, unattractive, and decidedly not sexy. I eventually bought a few pairs of Brazilian jeans. I made sure I used appropriate make-up for different occasions, which proved to be particularly important across classes for

going out in the evening. Being "not sexy" in Rio is the last thing one wants to be, because attractiveness functions as a protection of sorts—people want to be more polite to you, men want to help you, and even potential robbers might treat you better. In the early 1990s, for instance, I was robbed in broad daylight with a friend in Copacabana, a neighborhood in the wealthy South Zone of the city. Two men pointed a gun at our stomachs, where our money belts were, and asked us to give over everything to them, a request we hurriedly aquiesced to. Not long after this incident, the same friend was robbed in her own apartment in Leblon, another wealthy South Zone neighborhood. As a linguist, she was amused by the fact that the robber had called her by the name *Gatinha*, a term that translates as "Little Cat" but that is also a form of address for an attractive woman. Although the robber forcibly locked her into a bedroom closet, she knew that she would not be harmed by an intruder who found her attractive.

Basically, the women in Felicidade Eterna, much like myself, attempted to keep themselves "safe" from the various forms of urban violence encountered in everyday life. Glória and her daughters would always advise me about appropriate places to hide my money when we entered a public bus. They had been robbed on public buses numerous times, and they were especially careful on paydays to take the more expensive bus that made fewer stops. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I thought my friends were exaggerating their stories of theft on public buses, but I later learned that this was one of the most routine forms of theft. The women I knew who worked hard all month long as domestic workers in the homes of the wealthy were not happy to lose their monthly pay in this predictable manner.

Theft was not the most upsetting crime, however. Over time I discovered that many of my closest informants had been raped in territorial or drug gang wars, and that this was far more common than I had earlier thought. Some of these young women were attached to gang members as a form of protection. They felt that being the wife or girlfriend of some "big man" would protect them from harm (i.e., they could always threaten their assailants with revenge), but in fact it probably made them more vulnerable as targets in the endless quest for territory and power. In my own case, I found it prudent to present myself as a woman who was working in Brazil temporarily, and who was in a serious relationship back home and therefore not interested in having a Brazilian boyfriend. I wore a ring and sometimes claimed to be married.

Presenting myself as a serious social scientist embedded in my work and disinterested in romance provided its own kind of shield from much of the violence that took place in Felicidade Eterna. So much of the violence between civilians in the shantytown—not necessarily even between gang members—had to do with romantic affections and affiliations. Both men and women hated to be cuckolded or dumped by a partner, and many of

the violent scenes that took place during my time in the field had to do with failed romance of one kind or another. The women I knew would often engage in making offerings or obtaining the advice of a practitioner of black magic in order to bring bad luck, bad health, or even death to a rival woman. But men would often take the next step of confronting a romantic rival with physical violence, which in turn sometimes meant getting the local gang—and occasionally even the police—involved. Men would call in the local gang—and the violence system it offered—in order to punish an adulteress. As I have described in detail in *Laughter Out of Place*, there is a great deal of complicity in the shantytown that what the gang metes out as a form of justice is better than what the police could or would do.

Brazilian state and municipal authorities are emphatically detached from addressing an entire host of problems that people living in Felicidade Eterna must deal with on a daily basis. In countries that have far-reaching social service systems, sexual abuse and violence are often addressed from within the system. But in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro, such affairs are considered to be private issues and therefore outside of the purview of the public legal system. Nevertheless, without the intervention of social service institutions and a reliable policing system, these kinds of problems create their own cycles of revenge and involve the gangs as on-hand substitutes.

In concluding this set of reflections on my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, I want to return for a brief moment to the Bus 174 incident. Some of the images of events captured in the documentary film have stayed with me. Early on in the standoff with the police, Sandro allowed the men on the bus to exit but kept six women as hostages. In his rantings, Sandro urged the police to give into his demands for a safe exit and to not force him to blow the head off of a pretty young woman. I could not help but notice that all of the women Sandro kept hostage on the bus were young and light-skinned, somewhere further up the Brazilian hierarchy of race and class than Sandro himself, but not quite white enough within the Rio race and class hierarchy to be driving in their own cars. I wonder whether the police noticed this as well, and were therefore less careful about placing the hostages in further danger. I thought again about my own whiteness and how my friends in Felicidade Eterna on occasion used it and their relationship with me in order to protect themselves and their children.

In one of the most haunting scenes of the film, the camera enters one of the prisons where Sandro had spent some time, providing the viewer a glimpse of the crowded and inhumane conditions that typify these institutions. The entire filming of the prison, including the faces of the inmates, are altered by switching the camera into "negative" mode, thus preserving the anonymity of the prisoners while providing a ghostly representation of their existence. The prison is filled with angry young men like Sandro—men like Glória's son Pedro Paulo—all of whom had been taken hostage

in an undeclared civil war fueled by poverty, racism, and anger. My foreign and white presence in the neighborhoods that nurtured these young men and their police enemies served as a temporary safety charm for the women I came to know. These women both love and fear these angry young men and often find their own bodies as pawns on the urban battlefield. As an anthropologist, I tried to understand their ambiguous emotions and act as a witness to their struggle, never losing sight of the fact that I could exit their lives and this war at any time.

NOTES

1. I draw here from Pereira's (1997) working definition of the rule of law:

> The ideal of the rule of law is not simply that the actions who control the state are legal in some technical sense. Instead, it is that law forms a complex and interlocking pyramid of rules in which the state itself is bound, and in which the constitution is the ultimate authority to which subordinate statutes, regulations, administrative rules, and judicial sentences are in compliance. State power is exercised within this pyramid of rules, from which it derives its legitimacy. Laws are clear, publicly available, and consistently applied, and they reflect some degree of popular consensus and normative allegiance. Rather than being merely the rationalization of the prerogatives of those who rule, the rule of law represents a fusion of and compromise between the "peoples" and the "state;" law. (2)

2. See *New York Times* (1997).
3. See Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen's (1989) insightful article on the contributions of feminist theory and the erasure of this body of work from consideration by the new ethnographers.

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