Queer sex vignettes from a Brazilian favela: An ethnographic striptease

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Abstract
This article presents episodes of gay sex in the daily lives of people from a Brazilian shantytown (favela). It does so through a writing genre I call ‘ethnographic striptease’, which offers a picture of sexuality that is less ‘clinical’ and more similar to the form of an ‘erotic art’. This is based on the Foucauldian proposed distinction between two forms of knowledge discussed in History of Sexuality, Volume I: ‘scientia sexualis’ and ‘ars erotica’. I ask what an understanding of sexuality based more on the latter would look like. The result is presented in six concrete examples of this ethnographic form, which are provided in the article. These are followed by some personal commentaries, rather than by a ‘scientific analysis’ of them. By disrupting the boundaries of established narrative genres, the article offers a contribution towards the expansion of the ways in which human sexuality can be addressed and communicated. In a game of hiding and revealing, an ethnographic striptease offers a different look at queer sex life emerging from a large favela in Rio de Janeiro.

Keywords
ars erotica, Brazil, favela, pleasure, queer, sexuality, striptease

I. The green room

Apart from making the title of an academic article sexier, what other contribution could be brought about by the use of the concept of ‘ethnographic striptease’ in a conversation regarding anthropology and sexuality? In this article, I would like to think of ‘striptease’ mostly in terms of a particular genre under which certain types of information can be displayed and apprehended by a given audience. In specific terms, the discussion will focus on the understanding of gay sex practices in a
shantytown (favela) called Rocinha and located in Rio de Janeiro, where I have
been conducting fieldwork since 2009.

In a historical study of the relationship between anthropology and sexuality,
Lyons and Lyons (2004) argue that after a more explicit sexual past (with
Malinowski and Mead, for example), anthropology lost its appeal to sex (and perhaps
much of its sex appeal) as part of the efforts deployed by anthropologists to be taken
more seriously by the wider public and to become more institutionalized. During this
period, references to sex became much more ‘de-sexualized’ and disguised under
other topics, such as kinship and environmental adaptation. It was not until the
1970s that sexuality would re-emerge as an important area of study within the dis-

cipline. This re-emergence, however, took place in a context in which the mainstream
genre of ethnographic writing was both more ‘scientific’ and more anxious to avoid
the possibility of being consumed as pornography than had been the case for
anthropological writings on sexuality during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In this piece, I rely on a specific type of aesthetic sensibility to consider more care-
fully what could be called the ‘striptease’ genre. Both informants (as performers or
audience) and ethnographers (as performers or audience) seem to deploy such a
genre at particular moments – the main characteristic of which lies in the excitement
generated through the art of skillfully showing and at the same time hiding certain
types of information that is of curiosity to others. When my friends in the favela are
willing to share certain sexual performances of theirs with a wider public, without
necessarily being willing to make sex in public, I would argue that they are perform-
ing within a genre that could both be apprehended as such and performed ethno-
graphically – instead of necessarily being reduced to a different genre.

2. Académie du Striptease: Warming up

The body of literature on the topic of striptease is larger than one would assume at
first. According to Shteir (2004), the French were the first to turn striptease into an
object of institutional inquiry. ‘On March 2, 1955, the Académie du Striptease, an
organization whose purpose was to promote and disseminate information about
the genre to the eager public, was founded’ (Shteir, 2004: 280). In 1957, Roland
Barthes published an essay entitled ‘Le Striptease’, in which he argued that ‘strip-
tease is based on a contradiction: woman is desexualized at the very moment when
she is stripped naked’ (Barthes, 1972: 84). The contradiction that Barthes so rightly
captures relates to the double movement of showing and hiding, which I argue to
be central to the genre and which seems to crosscut many different levels of experi-
ence. Umberto Eco (1962), in turn, provides a more Marxist reading of the practice
and its contradictions. He claims that members of the working class who fre-
quented clubs where strip-tease took place, after a somehow ‘cathartic’ experience,
tended to become even more dissatisfied with the conditions of their everyday lives
out of the clubs.

There is another aspect that Shteir (2004) sees as constitutive of the striptease
genre: its proximity to humor and the burlesque genre of comedy. The line between
the erotic and the burlesque could easily be crossed by performers, both on purpose (for the sake of the spectacle) or by chance, by the simple lack of ability of some performers in knowing what to show and what to hide at a particular time.

In Rocinha, the blurred borders between the erotic and the burlesque come out very clearly through the ethnographic register. In ‘Laughter Out of Place’, Donna Goldstein (2003) makes a broad analysis of the role of humor and laughter as important elements in the endurance of favela life. Some of the vignettes that I will present are filled with laughter, something that many could find out of place when it comes to ‘serious’ sexual practices. Perhaps some vignettes become more desexualized because of their burlesque dimension. As Barthes (1972) reminds us, though, this is not really a problem when it comes to striptease because the ‘sexualized/desexualized’ contradiction is a defining element of the genre. As regards Umberto Eco’s (1962) argument, it remains an open-ended question as to the extent to which my own ethnographic striptease can provoke dissatisfaction after readers are exposed to these many different expressions of sexuality and have a chance to compare them to their own daily sexual practices.

The ethnographic episodes that I will present are performed along another blurry border: that of public and private environments. In fact, it seems that it is exactly this ability to make experiences travel back and forth from the public to the private domains, through decisions over what to show and what to hide in public, that partly allows the genre to considerably expand our understandings of sexuality.

Other works already published on the topic of striptease offer a much more historical dimension of the practice, as is the case with the book *Stripping in Time: A History of Erotic Dancing* by Lucinda Jarret (1997). Some offer a more visual contribution to the theme. Through the abundant use of photographs, the latter could be considered some sort of historical archive of the practice. Works such as *A Pictorial History of Striptease: 100 Years of Undressing to Music*, by Wortley (1976), would be an obvious example of this type of approach. In common with my own enterprise, the many vignettes of gay sex life that I will introduce in section 4 could be seen as being inspired by a certain archive too: the archive of sexual events registered on my dusty field notes. However, instead of offering visual material on striptease performances itself, the main goal of my own enterprise is to offer a narrative picture of sexuality in a Brazilian favela following an expanded understanding of the striptease genre. While the photographic striptease records are more concerned with capturing the changing moments of a historical practice, I am more intrigued by the form under which striptease occurs and what can be learned from that form for the production of an ethnographic writing genre.

The recognition and understanding of ‘striptease’ as a particular genre of practice that permeates daily life and extends well beyond the better known circuits of private sex clubs may help us overcome some of the difficulties for anthropological research implied in the assumption that most people in fact prefer to keep their sexual practices private (Tuzin, 1991). Daily experiences of sex need to be
understood and represented far beyond the ‘scientific’ paradigm that is still dominant in anthropology. Our understanding of human sexuality could be much enriched if we were to seriously consider that sexual acts go well beyond ‘acts of copulation’ and include a wide array of aesthetic practices – whereas acts of copulation are usually kept more private, the latter are often dependent on a much wider audience than that of the private sphere.

If in its historical effort to become more ‘scientific’ anthropology has also become more insensitive to the understanding and representation of some sexual practices, the ‘ethnographic striptease’ genre aims to expand the ways in which sexuality can be presented. As a form, this ethnographic genre hopes to be able to capture and disclose a sense of pleasure that reverberates with the pleasure that is also often encountered in the aesthetic sexual practices in which anthropologists (intentionally or unintentionally) take part during fieldwork. For example, such a move will help readers to gain insight into the complexity of sex life in a Brazilian favela through the sharing of a variety of erotic experiences that are not necessarily scientific or rational, and which would be lost if they were to be ethnographically treated as such.

Although Richard Parker (2009) does express a clear concern with the dimension of sexual pleasure, in the book *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil*, the author is more focused on exploring what is the cultural logic that can offer a rational explanation of sexuality in Brazil, rather than focusing on a more aesthetic appreciation of such pleasures and passions under ethnographic form. Don Kulick (1998), for his part, presents lengthy discussions regarding the importance of aesthetics in the life of the Brazilian transgendered group of *travestis* with whom he conducted his study in Bahia, Brazil. However, the main goal in Kulick’s discussion seems to be a search for the reasons that make the existence of such a group possible in Brazil, and his ethnography is constructed around that goal. Kulick’s discussions of bodies and silicone implants, for example, become quite medicalized at many points along the way and end up producing images quite distant from what an ‘ethnographic striptease’ would seek to entertain.

Even though the studies above have certainly provided a great contribution to the understanding of sexuality in Brazil, it could also be argued that they resemble more the ‘confessional sciences’ in their form and will to know about sex and leave other dimensions of sexuality under-explored. I propose, alternatively, that more attention should be given to the issue of how ethnographic material on sex could be used to talk about sex and pleasure in themselves, and not just used to support different rational arguments and reductive analyses that aim at explaining sex. I would therefore like to concern myself with narrative depictions of sexual enjoyment instead. I will present sexual moments of daily life as lived by some of those with whom my ethnography was conducted in one of the biggest shantytowns of Latin America in 2009/2010, and parts of 2011. The objective here is to offer an alternative way of presenting and, at the same time, understanding human lived experience.
3. The venue

[In striptease,] to activate the world of fantasy, the fantasizer identifies with all the dramatic elements and varying social symbols that make up that scene, rather than with a single object or unified subject position alone. Desire is thus represented through an entire theatrical production of excess that runs counter to traditional psychoanalytical models that propose that desire is always portrayed and driven by lack. (Liepe-Levinson, 2002: 14)

The vignettes to follow are based on the particular sexual performances of self-identified dwellers of Favela da Rocinha as they move around different spaces in the city of Rio de Janeiro. I intentionally try to avoid a ‘culture of poverty’ (Lewis, 1959) approach in my broader academic work regarding favelas. Rather than looking at Rocinha as a ‘culture’ that shares certain characteristic traces of poverty, for example, my ‘ethnographic striptease’ seeks to emphasize the complexities and richness presented by different favela dwellers’ lives:

The lights were dazzling my eyes, the smoke in the air was taking my breath away, and the music was so loud that it could not only be heard but also felt as vibrations going through my whole body. Sweat was dripping out of hundreds of figures moving around in circles within this vast indoor party place called ‘Emoções’ (Emotions). A shirtless torso passed me by; then a taller one; then one more muscled. The boys kept moving around the space. Bodies kept following one another, one behind the other, like a dancing train made up of toned and tanned physiques. Sweat was exchanged as they pushed their way through the crowd. I saw a glimpse of an automatic machine gun, was that an AK-47? I thought: a dancing AK-47? At the same time all the backsides in Emoções were shaking; some to the sides, others up and down. ‘Lower! Lower!’ – the DJ ordered. Could they touch the ground? A girl slowly hit the ground with her bum and danced back up while turning her neck to look at the boys behind her. Another one danced with her right middle finger stuck into her mouth. And then the DJ played another funk track, and another one, but that last one was not the funk rhythm. What was that? Pagode? I turned to Ricky and asked: what’s with the slow pagode rhythm now? He replied: it is time for people to catch their breath, man! And I smiled. The main ‘baile funk’ (funk party) took place weekly in that big former industrial shed located by Estrada da Gávea (Gávea Road) in the shantytown. Not far down from Emoções there was a little square called Largo da Macumba Square, a place in between Favela da Rocinha and the upper middle-class neighborhood of Sã0 Conrado in Rio de Janeiro.

In 2000, Favela da Rocinha was one of the 516 shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro, according to official numbers published by the Brazilian government. Of course, the official figures were only of relative value when it came to ‘informal’ settlements because the access of the state to those places was usually restricted, even for the purpose of conducting the national census. In any case, it has never been clear how
to exactly draw the line that identifies a favela as such in order to even count how many favelas there were in a given city, and how many people inhabited them. Different research institutes have adopted various methodologies in more than 100 years of discussions about favelas (see Alvito and Zaluar, 1998). However, arguably, none of them have been quite able to appropriately locate the borders between different favelas and the so-called formal city. This is not just because these borders change location very quickly in topographic terms, but also because to a certain extent favela dwellers could be argued to be those who make these borders in and for themselves. In that sense, borders are always in a state of flux as people cross daily between these once illegal settlements and other parts of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

4. Showtime
4.1 Shelly Sword

Shelly Sword was cycling down to the end of Cucumber Beach. Every night she used to cycle from Rocinha to the beach, a short distance. Long hair, thick legs showing, big boobs, and some teeth missing. She got off her bicycle for a moment, just to talk to us on the way: ‘Já foram nas pedras? Tá movimentado hoje? Deu sorte? (Have you been to the rocks yet? How busy is it today? Any luck?)’. Priscilla, the transvestite friend who was walking with me, replied: ‘Só aquele taxista horroroso de pinto pequeno tá vagando por lá! (There is only that ugly taxi-driver with a small cock hanging out there right now!).’

Shelly took a deep breath and lamented, shaking her head. My friend asked her: ‘E cadê seu marido, mulher? (And where is your husband, woman?)’. Shelly whispered: ‘Em casa, cuidando da nossa filha! (At home, looking after our daughter!).’ Priscilla laughed, Shelly slowly got back on her pink bicycle and headed to the end of the beach, where big rocks lay and very little light could reach the figures of the men who used to hang around looking for sex ‘al fresco’. Priscilla and I kept walking towards the shantytown, slowly traversing the black and white cobblestone pavement. Priscilla remarked:

Eu amo a Shelly! Que vadaria doida! Ele se casou há pouco tempo com esse garoto! Ele é de família evangélica e acabou casando com uma travesti cheia de fogo no rabo! Shelly me disse que ele adora levar dedada enquanto come o cu dela... E dizem que o pau dele é um braço, mona! Só de pensar meu próprio cu pisca de prazer!

[I love Shelly! What a crazy bitch! She found herself this boy to marry her recently! He is from an evangelical family and ended up marrying a horny transvestite! Shelly told me that he loves to have her fingering his ass while he fucks her hole...And I
heard that his cock is of the length of an arm, darling! Just to think of it my own ass hole starts winking out of pleasure!]

We both laughed and kept walking back home. At that point, a middle-aged man passed by us and stared at my friend. He was running two big black dogs to the rocks. I made it back to the favela alone that night.

4.2 Professional pleasure provider

Walking around with Auro in Rocinha was often very fun. He knew so many people that for me it was a big social event just to be with him. All sorts of people used to stop us to chat and Auro introduced me to a wide range of favela dwellers. There was an evening that Auro and I stopped to talk to an old lady who had a ponytail of long dyed black hair. She was wearing big gold earrings and bright red lipstick. Auro asked her if she was going out to work or coming back home from some meeting. She told him that she was going to Barra da Tijuca (a nouveau riche neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro). ‘Indo para a batalha, né, nega? (Going to work, right, dear?)’. She replied: ‘Tem que trabalhar, né, Auro! (We got to work, right, Auro!)’. They waved good-bye and soon Auro turned to me, whispering:

Viu essa senhorinha? Ela é já é avó… Sabe como que ela sustenta a família dela? Ela é uma profissional do prazer! Ela vive de realizar as fantasias sexuais dos outros, meu bem! Sei que ela participa das brincadeiras também, se precisar de uma velhinha na fantasia e tal… Mas o negócio dela mesmo é organizar tudo o que o cliente pedir em termos de sexo. Por exemplo, tem cliente que quer transar com uma travesti com um pênis bem grande e que também seja violenta, que tenha um chicote. Ai, essa senhora conhece o pessoal e arruma a travesti, sacou? Essa senhora é do barulho! Realiza qualquer fantasia de homens e mulheres… Claro, nisso ela ganha muita grana também!

[Did you see that old lady? She is a grandmother already… Do you have any idea of how she makes money to keep her family? She is a professional pleasure provider! She makes a living out of making people’s sexual fantasies come true, darling! I know that she joins the fun too, when they require an old lady for the fantasy and so on… But her main business is to make happen everything that clients ask her in terms of sex. For example, there could be a client who wants to have sex with a travesti hung like a horse, one that will act violently and carry a whip; then, this old lady knows people that can do all that and she provides the right travesti to the client, do you get it? She is hard core, this lady! She makes any fantasy of men and women come true… Of course, she makes a lot of money out of that too!]
4.3 Men dancing

When the show started again, there were three boys on the stage. One of them started to sing loud funk music; the others were there to dance. And they knew what they were doing. The crowd went wild when the boys lifted their t-shirts to show their very fit sixpacks. A group of girls to my left started cheering very loudly when the boys on stage grabbed their bulge as part of the choreography. Most people in ‘Emoções’ had their eyes glued to the boys. The music suddenly stopped but, before people stopped moving, the singer started a new one. The lyrics of which said: ‘Tim, tim, tim… Os bonitinho tão virando vinhadinho! Os bonitinho tão virando vinhadinho! Veja só…(Ah, ah, ah… The good-looking ones are becoming little fags! The good-looking ones are becoming little fags! Look at that…)’. Then, the two dancers on the stage took off their shirts and held them in their mouths in between their teeth. The crowd went crazy again and cheered even more. The dancers started moving their hips and slowly moved towards the center of the stage. There, they rubbed their half naked bodies on one another. To my surprise, even the group of girls near me seemed to somehow approve of the choreography – they kept cheering. The singer kept looking at the dancers and flashed a big smile. One of the dancers dropped his t-shirt on the ground. He quickly bent over to grab it but as soon as he went down, the other dancer grabbed him from behind. By then, it seemed that they were no longer following any choreography. The crowd went absolutely crazy and it felt like the party place was on fire. That one song did not last much longer, though. As soon as it was over, the dancers quickly moved back to their original position on the stage. It took a while for the crowd to calm down. The boys on the stage danced some more, but did not touch each other for the remainder of the show.

4.4 Mazinho wants him

Ricky was in his late teens when I moved to Rocinha. His square jaw was remarkable. He was tall and lean, with a slightly muscular tanned body that he kept on display as he walked around the favela wearing football shorts, a gold chain around his neck, and nothing else. Ricky was a beach boy; he simply loved São Conrado beach and could almost always be found there. Sometimes, he would stop by my house to check if I would like to come to the beach with him. I was often happy to accept the invitation. We were walking down to the beach one afternoon when we met another friend of mine, Mazinho. Mazinho had a crush on Ricky and had told me that before. As the three of us talked near an open sewage canal in Rocinha, Mazinho barely looked at me. For most of the time, he had his eyes glued to Ricky’s bulge. I quickly noticed that fact and smiled.

I wasn’t sure if Ricky noticed it, but I guess he did. Ricky knew that he was an attractive guy and sometimes he seemed to derive pleasure out of showing off his body. ‘Vai para a praia? (Going to the beach?)’ – Mazinho asked us. ‘Com certeza! É a vida, né! (For sure! That is the life, right!)’ – Ricky replied while rubbing his chest
with his right hand. Mazinho replied with a long sound of agreement: ‘Éééé… (Yeaah… )’. I was keen to get to the beach before the sun went down. While the two of them kept talking about nothing, I was eager to keep moving. Ricky was not in a rush, though. Mazinho even less so. By the time we managed to get moving again, Ricky had rubbed his whole body in front of Mazinho. The latter had happily followed with his eyes every single movement of Ricky’s hand. Ricky never said a word about Mazinho to me. I don’t think he was at all interested in Mazinho per se. Ricky just had a strong sex appeal, and he was aware of that fact. Later on that same day, Mazinho came to visit me in my house. When he arrived, the first thing that he asked me was: ‘Cadê o Ricky? (Where is Ricky?)’. I said: ‘Deve estar na casa dele! (He must be at his house!)’. Mazinho was disappointed. He looked at me and confessed: ‘Porra, fico louco com aquele garoto! Ele me deixa maluco! Mas acho que ele não está interessado nãoo… Ai, ele é muito gostoso! Eu querooo!!! (Fuck, that guy drives me mad! He makes me so crazy for him! But I think he is not really interested… Oh, he is so delicious! I want him!!!)’.

4.5 Together in the bathroom

He arrived with a shy smile. Only the left side of his dark lips moved. He stood quietly by the door and stared inside. I invited him to come in but was not sure he heard me. The smell of paint was intoxicating. I kept working and he kept looking at me through the window. ‘Você veio ajudar ou vai ficar só me olhando, Marcos? (Did you come to help or to stare at me, Marcos?)’ – I asked him. He stopped smiling, and quickly walked into my house in the favela. ‘Cara, foi mal, cheguei atrasado, né? Tive que levar minha esposa para a casa da mãe dela primeiro! (Dude, sorry, I am late, right? I had to take my wife to her mother’s house first!)’. It was my turn to smile. I told him to relax and to make himself comfortable. He nervously grabbed a glass of water in the kitchen. The reddish-brown wall of my bedroom was slowly turning mint green. Marcos did not touch the brush that afternoon, though. He just kept me company. He talked about his wife, about how difficu difficult she was at times. For example, she liked to follow him around. She wanted to be with him at all times. ‘Sabia que as vezes eu quero mijar e ela entra no banheiro comigo para na só ficar sozinha? (Did you know that sometimes I want to take a piss and she comes into the bathroom with me so that she will not feel lonely?)’. I laughed but he did not. Marcos kept looking deeply into my eyes. I finished painting the last bit of the wall while he was getting more comfortable sitting on my bed. I put the painting material away and cleaned up the mess on the tile floor.

It was another moist day in Rio de Janeiro. I felt tired, sweaty and really needed a shower. Marcos kept complaining about his wife while staring at me – his eyes were all over my body now. It was almost getting dark when I told him that I did not mean to be rude but I would like to have a shower. He smiled and I replied: ‘Não estou te mandado embora mas já está ficando um pouco tarde, Marcos… (I am not kicking you out but it is getting a bit late, Marcos…)’. He replied by saying
that he had taken the day off to be with me. His wife would spend that night at her mother’s house. I did not reply then. He stood up from the bed. I said I would go ahead and have a shower if he did not mind staying by himself for a moment. He laughed and moved closer towards me. I pretended I did not understand what was going on: ‘O que foi? (What is going on?)’ – I asked him. In his deep voice he shyly replied: ‘In my house, people do not wait while others use the bathroom, everybody goes into the bathroom together!’ We both laughed.

4.6 Alleyways of fun

It was past midnight. The group of people chatting on the corner of a narrow dirty alleyway of the favela only kept growing. Most of them were under 18 years old. Most of them were talking about sex adventures. I had joined them that night by invitation of Mary, a self-declared bi-sexual friend of mine. Someone decided to buy and share a big Coca-Cola bottle with the group. Moving from hand to hand, the shape of the bottle was causing some commotion. One of the guys grabbed the bottle, put it on the ground and started dancing, touching his ass on the bright red top of the bottle. Up and down, up and down he moved. Some people laughed at him, others wanted to grab the bottle for themselves. The dancer was not even a meter and a half tall and very thin. He wore very tight jeans, sneakers, an orange tank top, and a big and beautiful round pair of earrings.

His hair was short, curly and bleached. Someone grabbed the bottle by force. The dancer screamed: ‘Ai, quero peruuu!!! (Oh, I want coooock!!!)’. Some of the passers-by turned to look at him. He kept jumping up and down moving his ass violently. To my left, Mary talked to a guy featuring a Mohican. In a low voice he told us that he had spent last night at a very wild party. He said that more than 50 straight men had gathered in a house on the top part of the favela for the event. Some of them were drug traffickers, he said. He shouted, saying that he loved traffickers: ‘Delícia! (Delicious!)’ – in his words. Lots of men, lots of whiskey and Red Bull for everyone: ‘Era o paraíso, mona! (It was paradise, darling!)’ – he told us, smiling. ‘E você estava fazendo o que lá? (And what were you doing there?)’ – Mary asked him. He replied that he was one of the few lucky fags to have been invited to join them that night. ‘Mas agora meu édi está todo ardido, todo arrebentado, mona! Era homem demais para pouco viado! Ai, deliciiaaaaa… (But now my asshole is on fire, all fucked up, darling! Too many men for too few fags! Oh, deliciousssss…)’. Mary shook her head, saying that they were crazy to attend parties like that. I kept imagining the scene of these young guys being gang fucked by muscular drug traffickers. A few seconds later I turned to Mary and asked her: ‘É mentira essa história, né? (That story was a lie, right?)’. She replied: ‘Mentira sempre pode ser… Mas esses meninos fazem coisas que nem o Diabo faria! (It could always be a lie… But these boys do things that not even the Devil would do!)’. I got a bit worried about the whole thing. Mary noticed my expression and added: ‘Eu também me preocupo com eles, mas fazer o quê? Eles só pensam em gozar gostoso e eles gozam muito! (I also worry about them, but what can I do? All they think
about is a nice cum and they cum all the time!). *Mas vai que é exagero também? Sei lá! Tudo é diversão para eles!* (But maybe they exaggerate? I don’t know! It is all fun for them!)

5. Porn, no porn, and better porn

How pornographic is the ‘ethnographic striptease’ genre meant to be? When it comes to pornography, academic production on the topic has been abundant, even if often marked by a certain discomfort with such an engagement. I would like to briefly revisit some debates that have been taking place around the topic as it concerns our discussion.

Lyons and Lyons (2004) remind us that, in the 19th century, the audience for anthropological publications on sexual practices extended far beyond those interested in the scientific aspects of the topic. In fact, they suggest that many readers were drawn to anthropological writings exactly because this was one of the few genres in which questions of sexuality could be published, openly debated, and at the same time consumed for sexual satisfaction. More recently, there have been loud academic arguments made against any form of pornography. These arguments are mostly the outcome of a combination of views coming from some feminist scholars – who suggest that pornography is an odious expression of male supremacy – with a more generalized desire for the ‘professionalization’ of studies on sexuality. As a consequence, the anthropology of sexual life lost much of the massive popularity that it once had.¹ I argue that the anthropological overvaluation of a de-sexualized scientific genre – coupled with the undervaluation of the pornographic as genre – also led to an undesirable limitation in the production of knowledge within the area of sexuality studies.

A considerable body of literature on striptease is devoted to the treatment of the practice as a subgenre of pornography. Books such as *Hot Strip Tease and Other Notes on American Culture* (Gorer, 1937), *Stripping in Time: A History of Erotic Dancing* (Jarret, 1997), and *Striptease Culture* (McNair, 2002) have in common the fact that, in one way or another, the theme of striptease leads the writers and readers into discussions on the theme of pornography. Judith Hanna (2012), however, claims that the exotic dance industry does not consider striptease pornographic, although the Christian Right and other religiously conservative groups tend to disagree with that position.

In practice, an ‘ethnographic striptease’ genre needs to be less anxious about the possibility of it being mistaken as pornography. This is not to say that I am proposing a return to the anthropological genre of sexual studies that was common in the 19th century. Nevertheless, I do believe that the link established between the genre of striptease and the genre of pornography is an important one. In fact, I argue that it is possible to profit from this connection for the purposes of my argument. Annie Sprinkle (in Frank, 2002: 273) offers an important suggestion: ‘The answer to bad porn isn’t no porn. It is better porn.’ In this sense, what an ‘ethnographic striptease’ genre needs to consider is what elements of pornography
can enrich its possibilities to understand sexual practices and what elements could foreclose those possibilities.

An interesting set of debates around the theme of pornography, and somehow distinct from those concerns mentioned above, emerged out of the influence of the oeuvre of Michel Foucault and his writings on the history of sexuality (Foucault, 1976, 1990, 1992). As an example of these sorts of debates, I would like to focus on a particular argument that was held by the philosopher Chloe Taylor (2009) with film studies scholar Linda Williams (1989), which ended up giving me more of the necessary confidence to think of my ethnographic material on sex in Brazil through borderline pornographic lenses.

In a widely discussed analysis of the genre of pornography, Williams (1989: 3) states:

> If we speak incessantly today about sex in all sorts of modes, including pornography, to Foucault this only means that a machinery of power has encroached further on bodies and their pleasures. Through the osmosis of a pleasure feeding into power and a power feeding into pleasure, an ‘implantation of perversions’ takes place, with sexualities rigidifying into identities that are then further institutionalized by discourses of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution ... and pornography.

Taylor (2009: 18) disagrees with Williams regarding the scientific ‘perversion’ argued to be supported by pornography and responds: ‘consumption rather than confession is the mechanism through which both prostitution and pornography deploy sexualities within a disciplinary system of power’. For Taylor (2009: 41), porn ‘allows viewers to realize a sexuality or taxonomical sexual type, providing them with the opportunity to identify with one of many kinds of sexuality’.

Clearly, there is a variety of roles that could be played by pornography to expand our understanding of sexuality, and not all of them must operate towards the ‘implantation of perversions’. This is particularly the case if we further consider that a basic distinction could be made between knowledge of sex as ‘scientia sexualis’ and knowledge of sex as an ‘ars erotica’. Foucault famously proposed such a differentiation in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* series:

> China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies ... endowed themselves with an ars erotica. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience, pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul. Moreover, this knowledge must be deflected back into sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects ... our civilization possesses no ars erotica. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a scientia sexualis; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the
centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations. (Foucault, 1976: 57–8)

There are many criticisms that could and have already been made in relation to the Foucauldian position above. Mark Johnson (2005: 29), for instance, states that the argued distinction between ‘sexual sciences’ and ‘erotic arts’: ‘too easily falls into a kind of essentialist and essentializing Occidentalist/Orientalist, East/West divide, which is not only politically suspect but also empirically dubious and theoretically unproductive’. Beyond these criticisms, however, I would like to draw attention to the two categories in themselves (although the possibility of hybridization between the two should not be discarded) and the different types of knowledge that they suggest. In doing so, I am also thinking of ethnography as a way of knowing and the different forms through which an ethnography of sex could possibly operate.

Considering the well-known problem of first-hand access to sexual practices, I will stop short of any detailed first-handed depiction of certain types of sexual acts. Regardless of agreement on whether or not striptease is a form of pornography, the vignettes presented earlier were meant to provoke the readers with sensations and ideas of what it would be like if ethnographies of sex would be written as a means of communication more geared towards the exploration of experiences and cultivation of the aesthetic dimensions of sexual practices. If anything, I hope that these vignettes will bring some sense of what is considered pleasurable and desirable in terms of queer sex in the favela, although they may also offer a good sense of the burlesque dimensions of sex in Rocinha. If the ethnographic striptease that I propose risks being considered pornographic at all, it is in the sense of pornography as ‘ars erotica’ – rather than pornography as ‘scientia sexualis’ – that it is intended.

6. Was it good for you? On the limits of rational analysis

In what ways can gay sexual fantasies, pleasures, and desires in Rocinha be apprehended ethnographically (without necessarily depending on what happens within the ‘private’ sphere) and best revealed to readers (most of whom have never been to a favela before)? I am concerned with the fact that most scientific or clinical analyses of sexuality fail to grasp many of the dimensions of pleasure, desire and fun that are often revealed to the ethnographer as part of the daily dance of life for people living in favelas. Often, the focus of studies regarding life in favelas is very much concentrated on questions such as violence, poverty, death, and other similar topics. The pleasurable dimensions of life in those places are therefore practically rendered invisible in most cases. I argue that it would be really regrettable if we were to miss the pleasurable dimensions of sexuality in a study of gay life in favelas too. In this sense, I believe that the concept of ‘ethnographic striptease’ can help us focus our attention on other important issues in the lives of those with whom we share life as anthropologists.

The vignettes presented above are in themselves a register of the existence of a variety of forms of excitement, fun and pleasure in Rocinha. A question that
remains, however, is how far can we go with our understanding of queer sex life in the favela if we consider that I am advocating an approach to sexuality that should be less scientific and more alike to an ‘ars erotica’ in its form and objectives? I would argue that a ‘scientific analysis’ of the ethnographic material above is not the most (or the only) desirable option to pursue. However, would there be a different way to follow up on the ethnographic vignettes presented above? What can be said about these vignettes? Perhaps one way to tackle this question would be to approach the ethnographic material much more from the standpoint of a commentator who is willing to engage in discussions about how fun, pleasure, excitement, and beauty are lived through sexuality, rather than trying to make a rational argument for a scientific truth in relation to queer sex life in the favela.

Following the lines of what Foucault (1976) already proposed, I suggest that this type of commentary should focus on the different dimensions of the experience of pleasure as revealed by the vignettes themselves. The commentator could, for example, focus on the intensity and the specific qualities of these sexual practices; however, his or her objective would be the cultivation of pleasure – any understanding of pleasure in sexuality should ‘be deflected back into sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects’ (Foucault, 1976: 58).

Many elements presented in the vignettes above will not come as a surprise to the reader. Preoccupation with cock size, the prominent role of *travestis* as elements that excite the Brazilian sex scene, and gay eroticism around ‘straight men’ are nothing new to most people with some knowledge of the country. Nonetheless, I would like to focus on a few points that emerge from several vignettes at the same time.

Although I am proposing a genre of ethnographic presentation more similar to a ‘striptease’, there are, in fact, many different ways of doing striptease. Our show started with a certain excess of elements and this excess can be seen in many other vignettes. Sometime there is an excess of stimulus in the composition of a certain scene, an excess of sound, images, and smells. At other times, excess is concentrated around particular elements such as cock size or the number of men with whom someone says they have had sex. Excess seemed to excite most of my gay friends in a way that it does not seem to excite all tastes. My friends in Rocinha appreciated excess either because it led to some form of burlesque pleasure or because it worked as a way to reveal certain private fantasies, with which the public could often relate. When striptease turned into humor, it also caused excitement in the favela. Marcos was so nervous in the vignette in which he visits me that he made me laugh. A nervous and not very experienced stripper can be very funny, and can easily cross the line of the erotic towards the burlesque.

There should remain no doubt about the importance and prevalence of *travestis* in the gay sex scene of Rocinha. Likewise, the importance that ‘surprise’ elements have in the sexual life of my friends in Rocinha. *Travestis* could be argued to excite for what they reveal (a feminine appearance) and what people think they hide (a cock). The moment in which a *travesti* chooses to reveal her cock was often
spoken as a key moment to my gay friends (exactly what some other people would find a big turn off). Another pleasurable surprise element could be seen when my friends were talking about the straight evangelical boy who was not just extremely well hung but was also married to a *travesti*. Against the clarity that some academics attempt to confer to sexuality, it was exactly a certain lack of clarity in sexual classification and the crossing of expected boundaries that seemed to excite people in Rocinha the most.

The crossing of the private and public boundaries seemed to be another source of pleasure in Rocinha. In fact, most of the vignettes reveal that often my friends did not want to keep their sexual lives private. What they seemed to want was to play a certain game of crossing the line between private sexual acts and public sexual acts. This can be seen in all the talk around sex, but also in the more concrete example of having sex (more often than not a private act) at the beach (a public location in Brazil). This definitely excited them. Also, sex with unfamiliar people (those that did not belong to their private lives) was another source of pleasure and fantasies.

As Ricky walked around the favela showing off his body, others lusted after him. He seemed to be perfectly aware of the situation and actually seemed to be taking pleasure from his ‘striptease’, while unpretentiously rubbing himself in public. Ricky seemed to have been a very successful performer. Even if he probably did not want to actually have sex with Mazinho, his erotic game had the effect of making himself desired by the gay public. There was an abundance of half naked male bodies to be seen and to be desired in the favela. Certainly, some guys like Ricky were also there to be touched and enjoyed. For most of my friends, this was an exciting and sometimes crazy-making game to know who was exactly interested in taking matters into other sexual forms. It was quite clear that the masculine ‘straight’ man type tended to be successful in the gay scene. Nevertheless, the big teaser was to know, in different situations, who could be touched and who could not.

I heard a lot of sex stories and a lot of sex talk during fieldwork in the favela. Part of the narrative style used by my friends is reproduced as a feature of my ‘ethnographic striptease’. Apart from the pleasure derived from using a certain type of language, it is also clear from the vignettes that the extent to which some stories were fact or fantasy is hard to judge, and beyond the point, as sexual fantasies are known to be highly pleasurable. It was clear that people had a lot of fun talking about sex in general; gay sex was one of the favorite topics of conversation for most of my friends in the favela. That type of conversation played with fantasies, excited different groups, and made them laugh too. These almost daily experiences in the alleyways of Rocinha could be thought of as a form of sexual expression in themselves. At the same time, the genre used to derive pleasure from a lot of the sex talk was one related to ‘strip-tease’: the trick of pleasure was for the performer to know how much of ‘reality’ to show or to hide versus how much of ‘fantasy’ to display or to conceal at a given moment. The fact that even the closest friends could not tell whether a certain sexual narrative
actually took place worked as a great excitement to the sexual life of my gay friends in Rocinha.

Finally, the reflections in this essay offer an opportunity to consider the anthropologist and his/her role as part of certain sexual performances during fieldwork. As we know, much of ethnographic research relies on the use of the body of the ethnographer as some sort of tool for investigation. However, one must be reminded that these same bodies are not neutral objects of research. As highlighted by the works of Newton (1993), and also Markowitz and Ashkenazi (1999), these are sexualized bodies that are subject to the (intentional or unintentional) creation of sexual desire, and also prompted to feel sexual desire for others. In the same vein, these bodies are very capable of having sexual pleasure and giving sexual pleasure to others. The ways in which this is done, though, goes well beyond the obvious case of the ethnographer having sex with people in the field. More attention to daily sex life as a form of striptease during fieldwork, as an ‘ars erotica’, would certainly give us more insights about this particular dimension of ethnographic research.

Notes
1. During the times of Malinowski and Mead, for example.
2. An issue worth highlighting here is that, as Foucault himself acknowledged, the multiplication of various scientific and intellectualized discourses about sex since the 19th century has also produced its own pleasures, transforming ‘scientia sexualis’ into a kind of discursive ‘ars erotica’. This is because ‘scientia sexualis’ ended up creating the possibility that some particularly situated individuals (academics, for example) could cultivate ‘pleasure in the truth of pleasure’ (Foucault, 1976). By shifting the focus from a discursive/intellectual pursuit of ‘pleasure in truth’ in favor of an approach that seeks to elicit pleasure as a goal in and of itself, anthropologists have a great opportunity to close the gap that exists between researchers and researched when the objective is to understand pleasure as it is lived by ‘the other’, particularly when ‘the other’ does not seem to derive much sexual pleasure out of searching for truth.

References


**Author’s biography**

**Moises Lino e Silva** is an anthropologist who specializes in the topic of freedom and its relationship to different pressing topics such as poverty, violence, sexuality, and social justice. His current research is centered on issues of freedom as experienced by favela dwellers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He recently completed a Postdoc Fellowship at Harvard University and currently teaches anthropology at Brandeis University. In 2013, he was selected a World Social Science Fellow by the International Social Science Council (UNESCO).