Earlier on that day, gossip had reached us to the effect that the Special Operations Police Force of Rio de Janeiro (known as BOPE) would ‘invade’ the favela (slum) at any moment. Considering that the whole territory of Rocinha was under the control of heavily armed drug-dealers during the years that I lived there (in 2009 and 2010), any incursion of the police into the favela would be considered a form of invasion. ‘Can you hear the helicopter? I think they have arrived!’ – Amélia announced nervously, just a short while after she had turned on her gas cooker to boil some pasta for lunch.

‘Run! Oh my God! Run!’ – a mother kept forcefully pushing her three young children from behind, trying to escape trouble. Fireworks kept being discharged, making a peculiar rhythmic sound used to alert the slum dwellers that trouble was imminent. The children kept moving too slowly, though, as if they did not care much about what was happening in that cloudy afternoon in Favela da Rocinha (Rio de Janeiro). Perhaps, they were already walking as fast as their short legs would allow. ‘They are coming! Run! Run!’ – announced another lady rushing through the alley where I lived. ‘Are you ok, [author]?’ – asked my good neighbour Amélia, looking curiously through a window, just above my one-bedroom home.

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Amélia’s daughter, Maria Beatriz, had been forbidden to go to school that day and the three of us were stuck at home, while
Amélia’s husband had managed to go out to work very early in the morning, nobody knew when exactly he would be able to get back home again: it all depended on how long the police operations would last and how violent the conflict with the traffickers would be. That day I felt that my upstairs neighbours kept me company much more than I could do to them. They seemed more annoyed than desperate with the whole situation outside. Whenever we heard bullets being fired, I looked at Maria Beatriz with obvious fear in my eyes. Each time, she started to laugh at me.

Violence in Question

‘Violence’ – this one word – is the title on the cover of a book published by Zizek in 2008. But violence is not one, Zizek argues, violence is one but three. He proposes the separation of violence into a triumvirate: subjective violence would be the violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent, such as the father who is caught abusing his own child. Another type of violence would belong to the realm of language and to its imposition of universes of meaning. Zizek proceeds to identify a third type of violence that he calls ‘systemic’ – which others have previously called ‘structural violence’ – and meant to relate to the violent operations performed by different economic and political systems.

Following up on the metaphysical problem raised by Zizek (2008), I shall argue that the understanding of violence as one entity or many entities has critical consequences for research and knowledge production on the theme of violence. In this article, one could understand ‘violence’ as one entity to the extent that it is one signifier (violência, in the language spoken by my Brazilian friends). However, the more plural and detailed our appreciation of the daily meanings of violence, the less violence researchers risk imposing themselves on the lives of people being researched, whose daily experiences of violence are often enmeshed in universes of meaning that frequently escape predetermined categories of analysis.

The observation above may inform a more sensitive and ethical approach to research in urban areas that are often perceived as plagued by violence, such as Brazilian favelas. If we are to adequately tackle issues of poverty, sickness and lack of opportunities in poor communities around the globe, some researchers have suggested that first we need to reveal what are the deep structural processes of violence affecting these places (Farmer, 2004). In response, I wonder if the very formalization of violence as some sort of structure to be revealed does not end up being a violent strategy. Some level of violence seems to be necessary in order to ‘purify’ these structures, by forcing some elements to be kept inside and others outside the proposed scheme. This article ethno-graphically explores violence as a complex category and exposes some of the limitations of the ‘structural violence’ approach to the understanding of life experiences in cities.

Language, Performance and Violence

Most anthropological approaches to violence tend to argue that violence is not an independent entity that exists in the world but is a property manifested under given circumstances. David Riches (1986) talks about the necessary ‘triangle’ of violence, while others, such as Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), go further to argue that ‘rather than sui generis, violence is in the eye of the beholder’. Does violence have one or many ontological dimensions? Does it exist independently of the subject’s knowledge of its existence? Does the attribution of a structural form to violence make it any more real? What metaphysical approach to the problem of violence would do greater justice to people living in one of the largest shantytowns in Latin America?

J.L. Austin’s (1962) work is a landmark in challenging the separation between language and action. What does language do in our case? Can language do violence? Beatriz
that the subjection of the poor to a particular situation of structural violence not only hides the complexity of other types of violence operating in Brazilian favelas, it also has very important practical consequences to the lives of favela dwellers.

The Predicament of ‘Structural Violence’

Paul Farmer (2004, p. 307) explains that the concept of structural violence dates back at least to the 1960s when it was first used by Latin American liberation theologians to refer to ‘sinful social structures characterized by poverty’. He then sums up by saying that ‘the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression’. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Phillippe Bourgois (2004, p. 13) also adopt the same image of ‘social machinery’ in relation to the question of ‘structural violence, but add another dimension to it, namely, the problem of its invisibility, which equates ‘structural violence’ to ‘the invisible social machinery of inequality’.

A strong link between ‘poverty’ and ‘structural violence’ is presented in most discussions around the latter concept. Farmer (2004), however, goes on to name the environments where the problem of ‘structural violence’ is manifested. He says:

…the impact of extreme poverty and social marginalization is profound in many of the settlings in which anthropologists work. These settings include not only the growing slums and shrinking villages of the Third World (or whatever it is called these days) but also, often, the cities of the United States.

Despite the lack of precision and refinement in the way that Farmer refers to the ‘Third World (or whatever it is called these days)’, it is important for my argument here that in discussions of ‘structural violence’ the author often makes a clear link between ‘violence’, ‘poverty’ and ‘slums’. It is exactly at this point that, having lived in a major Brazilian slum for an extended period of time, I feel the need to address the nature of
instances of liberation. One day in September 2009, I spent the whole afternoon having a conversation with a friend from Rocinha called Aldo. He complained about our mutual friend called Marcos and the relationship this mutual friend had with a woman called Lara Marilac, who did not live in Rocinha. I had never met the woman in person but had heard a lot about her from both Aldo and Marcos. That day Aldo told me:

Marcos wants to have some link with the elite. However, this woman is obsessed with material goods, darling! Lara Marilac would die if candle wax would drop on top of one of her dresses! I am so glad to be free from these problems! I am not attached to these stupid things, thank God!!! I keep telling Marcos that he needs to liberate himself from material needs too!

Certainly, many of the favela dwellers with whom I spent time in Rocinha could be classified as ‘poor’ according to different measurements. However, at the same time, many of these people did not see themselves as living in poverty. The question seems to rest on what measurement is used to determine who ‘the poor’ are. From what perspective did Farmer (2004) and many others narrate the slums of ‘Third World’ as loci of extreme poverty? I am certain that
many anthropologists, including Farmer, have conducted competent long-term fieldwork in many slums around the world and I take their work very seriously. The question, however, is how do these researchers find so much poverty where others do not? It is exactly around this point that a main issue with structural approaches to violence arises. An a priori type of generalized poverty in slums emerges exactly because of the global structures of violence that are established by authors such as Farmer. It is a well-known fact that it is only in relation to a given structure that people can be classified as poor or not poor. When the operative classificatory structure is one established through a ‘structural violence’ approach, Rocinha as a whole could be seen to take part in an unequal relationship to the ‘formal city’ of Rio de Janeiro and to other more developed places. A ‘structural violence’ approach would argue that if people in Rocinha do not consider themselves to be poor, this is just another symptom of their very structural condition, considering that one of the main tasks of the social machinery of inequality is exactly to render poverty invisible.

As an anthropologist, however, a question that I ask myself in such a situation is what connections among issues of violence, poverty and freedom would do greater justice both to my lived experience in the favela and to my friends in Rocinha? Who deserves my loyalty when I write about the many encounters that taught me so much about life in a favela? Above all, what is the most ethical position that I can take towards people who are now my friends, and for whom I deeply care? Do I believe in how people choose to self-fashion and to present themselves or do I believe that people in Rocinha actually suffer from ‘false consciousness’, and are unable to identify the state of structural violence under which they live? Could Paul Farmer, myself, or any other researcher know better than people in Rocinha about their own condition because we are in a somehow privileged position? These questions can only be answered within wider ethical considerations.

**Structural versus Post-structural Ethics**

Escobar (1995) and also Sachs (1992) discuss at length the moral and historical basis on which ideas such as ‘development’, ‘poverty’, and ‘violence’ stand. These discussions support the argument that the establishment of
some countries in the northern hemisphere as ‘developed’ as opposed to other ‘underdeveloped’ areas of the world was established right after World War II. It was as part of President Truman’s inaugural speech on 20 January 1949 that a new era of global development was launched. The message was clear: that the United States of America should be regarded as the standard of a ‘developed’ nation and other places or other people around the world were expected (and would also receive aid) to ‘catch up’ with the American standard of living. Many years have passed since Truman’s speech but the narrative that the world is structurally divided between the ‘developed’ and the ‘underdeveloped’ remains. Although the history of the division between the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor’ dates much further back than Truman’s speech, the expectation that the ‘poor’ should ‘catch up’ with those that are not judged to be ‘poor’ could still be seen as a reflection of the development era launched after World War II.

The theory that describes a state of affairs in which the world works in a linear progressive manner from ‘underdevelopment’ to ‘development’ could be classified as what Lyotard (1979) calls a grand narrative, in this case, one that for a long time has been serving as a form of legitimization for the intervention of the so-called ‘developed’ countries into the affairs of the so-called ‘underdeveloped’ countries. The establishment that ‘structural violence’ is a clear instantiation of violence in the life of the global poor, although ethically committed to improving the situation of those identified as ‘underprivileged’, runs the risk of trapping itself in the same sort grand scheme that divides the world into those that are assumed to be ‘good’ and those that still need to catch up with a certain ideal of ‘goodness’. In that sense, narratives of structural violence seem to derive legitimacy from a similarly grand narrative to the one that states: the life lived by some people in the world is more appropriate than other forms of life and everybody should have the same standard of living whether they want it or not.

An alternative ethics would be informed not by the values of grand narratives or large structures established by academics, but by the specific daily narratives that arise during research, and not before it. Ethically, such an approach would try to avoid the creation of a differend in between anthropologists and the people with whom we conduct fieldwork. Ethics in this case operates not as a universal category on which the researcher bases him or herself, but as a particular commitment within each particular encounter, each particular conversation, and each particular meaning that is conferred on lived situations. Instead of establishing an *a priori* rigid meaning of violence under the terms set by a given structure, this other approach would make sure that if violence might come to be understood as one, it is as one signifier. One signifier that is capable of acquiring a radical variety of meanings in daily life. This type of ethical commitment would try, as much as possible, to avoid a situation in which the people with whom we live and narrate become the victims of the violence perpetrated by our own narratives.

Lyotard (1988) puts it in his own words:

I would like to call a differend the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. A case of differend between two parties takes place when the regulation of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.

In the case of ‘structural violence’, the ethical problem that this post-structural approach exposes is that the poor when subjected to poverty against their consent have already been deprived of freedom, of agency, of power over their own lives. When those called ‘poor’ cannot argue back with the anthropologist using the same idiom, a case of differend is established.

Majid Rahnema (in Sachs 1992) points out that the main problem with the definitions
searching for stolen motorcycles, arms, illegal drugs, and people at large who used to hide in the *favela*. It was still bright outside, around 5 pm in the afternoon, when Amélia’s husband got home.

Bezerra was slightly short of breath and reported that he had to run home using a back alleyway, instead of going down the main Canal Street (Rua do Valão). A large group of heavily armed policemen had concentrated at the beginning of Canal Street, right at one of the main entrances to the *favela*. When Bezerra finally got near our house, he could see that at the very end of Canal Street, near one of the major dumps for the lower part of the *favela*, there was another massive gathering of people. These were traffickers, with all their weapons pointed towards the entrance of the *favela*, just waiting for a sign that it was the right time to attack. Bezerra seemed worried, but he kept his after-work routine. He got into the shower, washed himself, and gave his dirty uniform to Amélia to wash. He then sat by the small round table near the window and waited for his wife to serve him dinner. Meanwhile, he watched a TV channel that had some live scenes of the police operation in Rocinha. Amélia served him some of the pasta left over from lunch together with black beans and a piece of pork. Amélia offered me some food too, but I declined. She said she did not feel like eating either; she was now feeling anxious about the situation outside.

Amélia walked back to stare through the window. Maria Beatriz took the opportunity to make fun of her, telling her that if she kept sticking her head out of the window all the time, she would soon find herself face-to-face with a bullet. Bezerra smiled and kept eating his food, as if nothing much had been bothering him. I asked Amélia if she had seen any changes in the situation outside. She replied by saying that there was a lady talking to our next-door neighbour. This red-haired lady was reported to be standing in the middle of the alleyway without any apparent fear of the situation. Amélia wondered if the
The woman lit another cigarette and replied: ‘Not at all… I admire my boys and I trust that they will put the police to flight!’

I kept silent, impressed by what I was hearing. The women laughed and seemed to enjoy the conversation. Two children riding an old bicycle interrupted the moment, making the red-haired woman move out of the way so that they could pass. Amélia scolded them: ‘What are you doing in this alleyway by yourselves? The police are here! Go home!!! Where is your mother?’ The two boys promptly replied: ‘Go look after your own life… You are not our mother! We have no mother!!!’ Amélia shook her head in disapproval and the red-haired woman added: ‘Me? I am a proud mother! I better get going…’. I remember looking at her leaving towards Canal Street and wondering if I would ever see her again.

As soon as she left, my two neighbours started to gossip again: ‘She is my friend, she is nice to me, but she is crazy to be walking around at this time… Best thing is to be at home under this situation!’ Amélia agreed. ‘Do you know her sons?’ – asked the next-door neighbour. Amélia replied: ‘Yes, I know one of them… A good looking one!’ The neighbour said: ‘They are both strong and good-looking! In fact, there is a line of muscled men around the corner near the dump. They are all there waiting to fight with the police!’ Amélia nodded with a mischievous smile. The neighbour had to leave the window and go back inside her house; one of her daughters kept shouting for her. Amélia stared deeply at me and asked: ‘Let’s go throw the trash?’ I assumed I did not really understand the question and said: ‘Go where?!?’ She replied: ‘I have all this trash in my kitchen that I need to throw out! Do you want to come with me?’ I did not know what to reply. I was shocked. I did not even know if Amélia had been serious or was simply making fun of me.

She went upstairs and soon returned with a white plastic bag filled with trash. I started to nervously laugh: ‘Are you serious,
Amélia? Where are we going to throw that? She replied with a mischievous smile: ‘Where do you think? At the dump!’ I laughed even more and told her I would not go. She replied that she did not want to go alone. I felt bad about letting her go by herself and staying behind. I worried that something could happen to her and at the same I definitely did not want to miss what seemed to be a rare moment in the life of that group of people. ‘Invasions’ like that only happened a couple of times in 2009. Then, I asked Amélia to wait that I would put on my shoes. Once I was done, I asked her again if she was not joking. She said she really wanted to go out for a minute after spending the whole day at home. I feared for my life and thought that we were doing something very stupid but very brave at the same time.

I clearly remember the fear of opening the gate and stepping out into the alleyway. Amélia walked ahead slowly but with confidence. I followed her very closely and very uncertain about myself. As soon as we turned right at the end of our alleyway, we were faced with a line of heavily armed traffickers leaning against the wall. I tried not to stare at them but it was almost impossible not to look at the heavy and shiny golden chains around their necks. Amélia passed by
the men (and I only recall one woman among them) as if they were ordinary presence in that place. My heart was beating very fast. I expected the worst at any moment. Some traffickers talked to each other and laughed out loud. Risking my life to throw away the trash made me feel incredibly stupid. At the same time, that was certainly one of those unique life experiences that anthropological fieldwork seems to be able to provide.

We walked slowly all the way to the dump. Some traffickers greeted us as we passed by them: ‘Good afternoon!’ Amélia replied to each one of them with a firm voice and a serious expression: ‘Good afternoon!’ Each time they recognized our presence, fear rushed through my whole body. At the same time, I tried to keep a friendly face. As we got closer to one of the overflown rusty metal containers used for trash collection, I rushed and took the white plastic bag from Amélia’s hands, and quickly threw it on top of a huge and smelly trash pile. Mission accomplished! We could quickly go back home. I walked ahead this time, leading the way and trying to dictate a faster pace. I took a different route going back, avoiding the main concentration of traffickers and arms. A few minutes later, we were opening our gate again. Amélia welcomed me into her house and I asked her for a glass of cold water. I could not really believe what we had just done and seen. As soon as I stopped sweating and my heart started to beat at a lower rate, I looked around me and the thought of spending the rest of the day and night locked indoors made me feel extremely bored. Amélia asked me: ‘Wasn’t it good to throw the trash? Things like that don’t happen everyday!’ She laughed.

Alternative Analyses of Violence
An analysis of the ethnographic episode above in terms of structural violence would lead us to question what are the historical structures of oppression that give rise to the situation described. In itself, this is certainly not a futile exercise, quite the contrary. For example, one could imagine what are the social structures of inequality perpetuated by Brazilian society that force certain populations to live in territories where the presence of the Brazilian state is in many ways absent and in other ways extremely heavy handed. Moments such as police invasions should remind favela dwellers that the state is not only present in Rocinha when it provides electricity to favela dwellers, it is also present when they shoot favela dwellers from above, using state owned black helicopters.

However, to what extent would such a political and historical structural analysis make sense to the people with whom I endured the police ‘invasion’? I would risk saying that the very concept of the ‘state’ as employed above is foreign to people like Amélia. Also, their historical knowledge is very different from that obtained through formal schooling, which is the one that tends to be used by academics. One could certainly argue that the very fact that some of my neighbours in Rocinha do not have access to adequate education is a symptom of their very structural oppression. Nevertheless, to affirm the existence of a type of violence that people themselves do not judge to exist in their daily lives does not help much to understand the nuances of the ethnographic episode that I experienced. To force all the many forms and meanings of violence that could be derived from that situation above into a pre-determined structure seems to be an act of violence in itself, most of all considering that this would certainly generate a ‘differend’ between the analyst and people in Rocinha.

Instead, I would propose that a more desirable study of violence in this urban setting should give priority to the experiences of people argued to be the victims of violence themselves. Why is it that my neighbours treat the presence the police as an invasion? When do they feel violated? If we were to think about the particular type violence identified with specific subjects, who would...
with ‘structural violence’ approaches to the understanding of life in *favelas* is that usually the structure given is too rigid to account for these radically varied and nuanced understandings of violence. At the same time as it misses many complexities, it insists on including in the structural picture many elements that are foreign to the way that my neighbours seem to understand the world. I want to be in touch with the language spoken by my friends in the field, I want to be by their side in the same way that in many circumstances they stood by my side in Rocinha. To subject my friends to a grand narrative of violence would certainly hurt most of them and I would see this as an act of violence from my part. I understand that the risk of not taking a structural approach to violence is that I naively ignore the ‘the invisible social machinery of inequality’ that operates in Rocinha. However, considering that this machinery of inequality is invisible, I would rather start by tackling the one inequality that both I and my friends would be able to see. Namely, the inequality between a privileged knowledge position meant to be occupied by academics versus the underprivileged position of ‘false consciousness’ in which some people living in the slums of the world are meant to occupy. For me, this is not just a case of catching up, but a case getting away with the binary altogether. I am deeply committed to the breaking down of this structure of violence.

**Postscript**

The way that *favelas* are represented in the media and in academic works may have very concrete consequences for the life of *favela* dwellers. In November 2010, the government of Rio de Janeiro decided to occupy a complex of *favelas* called the German Complex (Complexo do Alemão). This occupation was different from a simple invasion, and was part of a more permanent ‘solution’ that aimed at fighting drug trafficking and at bringing order to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro as Brazil
prepared itself to receive both the 2014 Football World Cup and the Olympic Games in 2016. As the occupation by the police was strongly resisted in the German Complex, the Brazilian government decided to bring in the army to fight some favela dwellers. Many people died and scenes of blood and terror were aired live throughout Brazil. In the media coverage of the event, however, the biggest legitimating narrative used by the army to explain their brutal display of force against those resisting the occupation was to argue that such a war was necessary in order to bring ‘freedom’ to the area. I hope this article will give us an opportunity to re-think our ethical commitment towards the lives of favela dwellers.

NOTE
1. A term coined by Galtung (1969) and appropriated by anthropologist Paul Farmer (2004) and others.

REFERENCES