7 “Don’t mess with my fags!” – said the drug lord

Queer liberation in a Brazilian favela

Moises Lino e Silva

"Liberada": Queer freedoms and liberties

The liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual subjects (referred from now on as queer or LGBTQ subjects) from oppression, violence and discrimination has been a fundamental item in the agenda of queer politics since at least the 1960s (D’Emilio 1998). As such, queer liberation entangles ideologies of freedom and liberalism (a set of different positions against limitations on freedom) as they reflect the daily life experiences of queer subjects in their encounters and struggles with a variety of forms of power, authority and domination.

Anthropologists, such as James Laidlaw (2014), argue that “there is no single definition of liberal freedom.” At the same time, authors such as Foucault (1990) and Butler (1990) remark on the fact that neither is there a single stable queer identity. One could add to this complicated puzzle the fact that different territorialities are also an important factor in discussions of queer freedom, and these are not stable either. In his work on queer liberation in South Africa, Donald Donham (1998: 17) recognizes the challenge posed by the (often neglected) territorial question:

Foucault did not problematize the role of cultural exchange across space, of transnational connections that bring, at ever quickening speeds, “unspeakable” stories of subjectivity into relationship with narratives of history. Ethnography is required to meet this goal, an ethnography that traces the global in the local, that analyzes the interplay between globally circulating narratives that persuasively cast past sufferings and offer future liberations, on the one hand, and the local technologies of communication that help conjure up the imagined communities that will enact those liberations, on the other.

Based on several years of ethnographic research, this chapter opens up a discussion regarding the multiplicity of assemblages figuring experiences of freedom in the lives of queer persons in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The chapter presents an alternative account to the historically established sense of gay liberation based upon the experiences of queer subjects in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States of America (often in reference to the Stonewall riots and other events that followed them). My objective is to provide a more complex understanding regarding the contemporary operations of freedom (and liberalism) in the lives of queer subjects living in political territories that are not assumed to be the homeland of liberal values, such as the South African townships and the Brazilian slums (also known as favelas). The relevance of examining the operations of liberalism in Brazilian favelas emerges from the particular positionality that these urban territories occupy vis-à-vis the national Brazilian state (Doherty and Lino e Silva 2013). It has been observed that favelas exist both as territories at the margins of the state and at the centre of its operations. Pandolfi and Grynspan (2003: 22, my own translation), for example, defend the former position:

If on the one hand violence is perceived as a defining element of favelas, on the other hand, this violence is not attributed only to poverty, but also to the absence of the state. It is necessary to highlight, however, that this absence is not only noticed in the incapacity of guaranteeing the rule of law [in favelas] through the state’s imposition of its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, but also noticed in the almost absent investments in infrastructure, sewage, health, education and public transport.

Therefore, favelas are at the margin of what would constitute the minimum rights of a citizen, favelas could be said to be also defined by their social exclusion.

Meanwhile, Wacquant (2008: 71) presents a strong claim to the effect that favelas are actually central to the operations of the (neo)liberal Brazilian state:

(...) neighborhoods of urban relegation – the decaying favela in Brazil, the imploding hyperghetto in the United States, the declining banlieue in France, and the desolate inner city in Scotland or Holland – turn out to be the prime physical and social space within which the neoliberal penal state is concretely being assembled, tried, and tested.

This apparent disjunction in the understanding of the role of the state in Brazilian favelas could be partly attributed to different understandings of (neo)liberalism and the multiple roles that the national state is expected to play in different liberal theories and in the actual daily lives of different populations. If the state is understood as the guarantor of civil rights and the legitimate holder of the monopoly over violence, the picture one obtains regarding its operations in favelas is very different from the one in which the state is understood as intentionally withdrawing from the provision of equality and universal rights while increasingly building on its role as a penal state. In daily favela life, different expectations regarding the role of
the state in “urban territories of relegation” are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, they often overlap in very interesting ways, which makes the discussion regarding particular operations of liberalism in favelas all the more important.

Indeed, understandings of the authority of the state in relation to the population it governs can be as varied as there are multiple strands of liberalism. To briefly highlight some of these variants, it could be said, for example, that even the classic type of liberalism proposed by Hobbes (1651/2010), Locke (1689) and Ferguson (1782) present a range of distinct possibilities regarding the exact origins and necessity of the state as the guarantor of what Brazilians call “liberdade” (freedom and/or liberty). If Hobbes (1651/2010) believed that people submit to a strong monarch for protection from chaos, for Locke (1689), civil society is mainly formed for the protection of property. Whereas, for Ferguson (1782), liberty was not just important as a moral element in society, but it was also argued to be the very organizing principle for any society to obtain progress.

Other liberals, such as Smith (1776), chose to focus their arguments much more in defense of free commerce and exchange among nations. This is not to mention that modern liberals, such as Hayek (1944), added their own particular concerns to the debate on the meaning and proper role of liberalism in our lives (for example, as an argument against socialism). More recent works, such as Brown’s (2005), continue to identify and confer different powers to liberalism. In the case of Hayek (1944) and Brown (2005), “neoliberalism” has become the more commonly used term. Brown (2005) would argue that as opposed to the classic liberalism of Hobbes (1651/2010), for example, neoliberalism is more concerned with the economic variant, but there is always a particular political rationality to it: disseminating market values to all institutions and different forms of social action.

For the purposes of this chapter, instead of entertaining a work of purification in search of which particular variant of liberalism could be said to be more relevant to the case of Brazilian favelas, I will adopt a different strategy. My aim is to highlight how the existence of different configurations of “liberdades” (freedoms and/or liberties), marked by relations of exteriority (i.e., assemblages), mobilizes a diversity of identities, territories and histories at once. These assemblages could be understood as the outcome of wider processes of territorialization and deterritorialization of different strands of liberalism. As Wacquant (2012: 70) himself argues: “There is not one big N’Neoliberalism, but an indefinite number of small-n neoliberalisms born of the ongoing hybridization of neoliberal practices and ideas with local conditions and forms.” Here I am concerned with the multiple forms that freedom and liberty assume in Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro. In particular, this chapter is dedicated to understanding the operations of liberalism (in the sense of words such as “liberdade”) as part of a wider apparatus of queer liberation in the favela (beyond a simplistic “coming out” issue) and its connections to other significantly related histories and territories.

Ceará, “the hillside” and “the asphalt”

In a small living room, three old twin mattresses shared space with a small red couch, a shelf full of small plastic ornaments, a powerful stereo system and a large television. Next to the window, Priscilla struggled to finish her makeup, using a small mirror enclosed in a bright orange plastic frame. Meanwhile, in the next room, Priscilla’s brother had just finished cooking a north-eastern Brazilian dish made with rice and red beans called “baía de dois”. He invited me to eat with him. Priscilla said that we did not have time for it. Her brother looked at her face, her makeup, and coldly stated that Priscilla looked horrible. She did not seem to care much and pulled up the black Lyca dress a little bit more to better show her ass. Priscilla’s brother laughed and told her to be ashamed of herself and to become a real man. He remarked, “Funny that in Ceará you were not like that! In Ceará you dressed like a man! Then you arrived here and lost your shame!” Priscilla replied by saying that even if she used to wear men’s clothes back then, she was already a faggot. She added, “The difference was that I was a faggot in the closet! In the favela, I am a liberated faggot! Totalmente liberada, meu amor! [Fully liberated, my love]!” As she responded to the insults coming from her brother, Priscilla laughed out loud and slapped her hands several times in a row. After a while, her brother ended up laughing too. Priscilla grabbed her glittery purse from the shelf, opened the door and pulled me out of the house by the hand. Soon we were walking hand in hand through crowds in one of the busiest streets of Rocinha, called Valão Street. Our destination was a nightclub in another favela in the west zone of the city called Rio das Pedras. As we paraded down Valão Street, people stared at us. Some laughed at us, others waved, but no one used physical violence to stop us. We walked, the two of us, with a certain confidence that in the favela we were protected: a travesti could walk hand in hand with a “bicha boy” like me (meaning, a gay man who dressed like a man), and we would almost certainly not suffer physical violence. “In Ceará, people are much more ignorant than here!” Priscilla used to say.

It is possible to comprehend contemporary dynamics of territorialization and deterritorialization of liberalism — and thus better understand the daily operations of liberty and freedom — through the life experiences of my queer friends in the favela, such as Priscilla. The articulation among experiences of freedom, sexuality and identity are necessarily enmeshed in wider assemblages that are not only intersectional in terms of race, gender and class but also inflect according to different histories and territorial arenas. Although Priscilla’s statements could be argued to carry reminiscences of a “coming out” narrative, she also points towards wider dimensions than the category
of queer “coming out” – given its genealogy – can be reasonably expected to accommodate (see Manalansan 2003).

As a political cause, queer liberation is not the same in the United States, South Africa or Brazil. Within these national territories themselves, there are still further multiplicity of distinct territories that are more or less bounded according to different lived experiences. One of the differences that mark the lives of queer residents of slums seems to be the separation between territories that are under “the rule of law” versus those territories operating at the margins of state power or simply subjected to the state’s most violent face (often in the name of “the rule of law”). Therefore, non-normative gender and sexual practices become revealing of urban processes of territorialization and deterrioralization of contemporary “liberdades” in daily life.

The concepts of territorialization and deterrioralization, as understood here, originally emerged in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1977). Since then, they have been adopted, expanded and explained by other authors, such as DeLanda (2006: 13). The latter commented on the two concepts as follows:

In the first place, processes of territorialization are processes that define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories. Territorialization, on the other hand, also refers to non-spatial processes which increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage, such as the sorting processes which exclude a certain category of people from membership of an organization, or the segregation processes which increase the ethnic or racial homogeneity of a neighbourhood. Any process which either destabilizes spatial boundaries or increases internal heterogeneity is considered deterrioralizing.

(DeLanda 2006: 13)

Following the conceptualization made by Priscilla, some territorial arrangements catch our attention due to the sharpness of their edges (as experienced by those I lived with during my research). These are territories of more marked homogeneity in Priscilla’s experience, for instance. In this case, Ceará figures as the background of immigration, as the territory (a Brazilian north-eastern state) from where a large part of Rocinha dwellers had left in order to live in the favela. Priscilla’s family members and many of her friends customarily made references to Ceará as a territory that exposes the distinctive gaps between rural Brazil (Priscilla came from a very small rural village in Ceará) and the urban side of the country (the city of Rio de Janeiro), Ceará was often used by Priscilla to refer to a site of oppression, machismo and anti-modernity, particularly regarding issues of sexual freedom.

The favela also figured in Priscilla’s conceptualization as a well-defined territory, regardless of the porosity of its physical borders and despite its heterogeneity on many levels. At least at the level of sexual freedom, Priscilla referred to the slum as a homogeneous bounded entity: “In the favela, I am a liberated faggot! Fully liberated, my love!” As we shall see, there are several characteristics that could be used to territorially mark what constitutes the slum as opposed to other parts of the city. For now, it is worth pointing out that the distinction between the favela and Ceará was well marked in the way that many people in Rocinha lived their lives. Among the queer population that I knew in the favela, there was even a common gay slang term used to refer in particular to migrants from Ceará (and other places in the Brazilian north-east). They were referred to, offensively, as maricas – i.e., those from the mato, the bushes, as my friend Auro once explained to me.

A third very prominent and significant territory that emerged in arguments surrounding queer liberation was the so-called asphalt. We have already noticed that Priscilla experienced sexual freedom in a very different way in the slum as opposed to Ceará. Residents of Rocinha often made some distinction between the “formal city” (aka the “asphalt”) and the favela (aka the “hillside”). The latter territory was understood to have its own particular rules of acceptable behavior and sociality. To refer to these rules as a regulatory corpus, people often called them “the laws of the hill.” The rules of the “asphalt” were more often equated with the rules of the official state, the Brazilian state. In that sense, two forms of macro-political authority marked these different territories in such fashion that freedom, and liberalism, operated in a multiplicity of different ways, depending on whether one was based in “the asphalt” or in “the favela.” The question became how different forms of “liberdade” moved across these three different territories just mentioned. What assemblages do they authorize or negate in their daily operations? In particular, what happened to the struggle for queer liberation in the life of my friends living in one of the largest slum territories in Brazil?

Wearing trousers in “the asphalt”

Ryle was a short light-haired Australian guy that used to teach English in Rocinha as a volunteer. We even taught some classes together. He was very shy, but it seemed to me that he enjoyed the liveliness of life in the favela. Just before he returned to Australia, he organized a big party at the hostel where he used to live in Flamengo, a neighborhood near the center of Rio de Janeiro. He had told me that he wanted a lot of people at his party and that I should invite anyone I liked to come along with me. Most people involved in teaching and administration at his non-profit school in Rocinha ended up attending the party. Many of my students from the Basic English class attended too. Although Priscilla was not involved in the activities of the school, I invited her to come along with us. She was extremely hesitant about accepting the invitation though. She asked me, “Would I not be out of place there?”

To which I promptly replied, “No! We will have fun!” But she really seemed doubtful and worried.
On October 20, 2009, at the exact time that we had arranged to meet in front of the language school, Priscilla did not show up. I waited a bit longer and started to fear she had given up on us. So I decided to run up to her house and see what was going on. I had to get one of Priscilla's neighbors to open the downstairs gate for me because it was locked, and she was not answering my calls. "Is she not at home?" I thought out loud. As I went upstairs and knocked on Priscilla's door, her brother answered. I was increasingly convinced that Priscilla was not at home; otherwise, she would have come to greet me herself. He asked me to come in and said that Priscilla had been in the bedroom for hours trying to decide what to wear. I was happy to hear she was at home but had never seen her so concerned about her appearance. She confessed that she was about to give up on going out. As soon as she saw me, the first thing that she said was, "Better to wear trousers, right? No dress tonight, right? More adequate for the event, right?" It was clear to me that going out of Rocinha to "the asphalt" required a lot more effort from Priscilla than going out inside Rocinha, or to other favelas. She was worried and afraid that people would not approve of her looks. I told her, "We are laaate, Priscilla!" And she laughed while putting on a pair of very tight jeans. As if to compensate for the more "masculine" trousers, Priscilla poured thick makeup on her face, including some golden glitter on her eyelids. Her mouth was once again dripping with lipstick, and she chose one of her highest high-heeled shoes to wear. Her brother made a couple of his usual machist remarks: "Remember that you would steal my football socks to wear and everything! Look at your shoes... don't you have something more masculine to put on?" To which Priscilla replied, "Now that my mother has gone back to Ceará, the last thing I need is for you to be annoying me in her place!" Priscilla blew him a wet kiss in the air and we left. We had to walk fast, but that was just impossible. Priscilla was trying to walk elegantly in her high heels but she had to hold on to all the walls she found on the way downhill to "the asphalt". It was nearly impossible to walk in her heels descending this very irregular slope. In any case, we made it to the party and she looked beautiful—even if not as feminine as Priscilla would normally want to be. Later Priscilla remarked that Ryle's event had been okay, but parties in the favela were a lot more fun: "Tenho mais liberdade para ser eu mesma!" (I have more freedom to be myself!)

In this episode, it becomes evident that the type of liberalism related to the guarantee of civil rights and the enforcement of the "rule of law" expected to operate in "the asphalt" (where Ryle's party took place) did not necessarily make Priscilla experience a personal sense of freedom. For the type of queer liberation that Priscilla was more concerned with, which was not just about a "coming out" type of issue, the favela still had considerable advantages. It is to the particular type of liberalism operating in the favela that we will now turn.

BTV and "the queer law of the hillside"

For my queer friends, there were significant limits to the slum in relation to other territories in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and further afar, which were based on the very limits of queer freedom. These were not given borders, but borders formed and transformed through particular political processes with important historical dimensions. Assemblages fostered by queer liberation in Rio de Janeiro were deeply connected to the history of the formation and division between "the hillside" with its "rule of law" (or the "law of the asphalt") versus the favela, with it is own "law of the hillside". As it concerns sexual rights, the authority of a "parallel" ruling power, not democratically elected, highlighted the particularities of the slum in relation to other parts of Rio de Janeiro: the drug traffickers. These traffickers possessed de facto power over the favela territory, obtained through symbolic and physical violence. The so-called *domo do morro* (or "owner of the hill") was regarded as the highest political authority in the slum. His position combined the economic power that resulted from drug dealing with the political power of being the chief of the territory. His role also extended to what could be called "legislative and judicial functions", considering that he often legislated on particular issues, establishing rules for the community; the drug lord also frequently served as the maximum authority in the assessment and judgment of internal cases of conflict and misconduct. As such, the "owner of the hill" used to have considerable influence over the population in Rocinha.

The authority of drug lords was not based on any form of democratic agreement though. As such, most currents of liberalism would hold their authority over the favela population as a violation of freedom and liberty. Nevertheless, drug lords strived to obtain legitimacy through other means, including the adoption of "assistaentialist policies", such as the distribution of gifts to the population during specials dates and the provision of money for medical emergencies. During the years I lived in the favela on a daily basis (2009–2010), the owner of the hill was a man called Ney. My impression was that people did not usually dislike him. Although they were aware of his violence, many times I heard people in Rocinha say that he was a fair chief. He was certainly very popular among my queer friends and part of the reason was that Ney had kept in practice a benevolent "law" regarding the treatment of the queer population in the favela. Ney did create the law though: "He inherited it from a previous drug lord, called BTV, and really kept it in place," said my gay friend Auro. This provision of "liberdade" from the part of the drug lord had a profound impact on the legitimacy of his authority in the eyes of the queer population in the favela.

In the favela, Valão Street (aka the "Big Sewer Street") was my daily path home, connecting the very small one-bedroom house I rented to the rest of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Besides being known as a battleground between
the police and drug dealers, Valão had also in the past been one of the main stages where the famous drug lord BTV, “owner of the hill” between 2004 and 2005, used to throw huge parties to the sound of what is known in Brazil as “funk music”. A native of the Brazilian northeast, BTV was described as a particularly good-looking young man and was known to always carry a shiny golden pistol around with him. As the leading commander of drug trafficking in Rocinha, he was often treated like a celebrity, and he liked to hang out with other celebrities from the city of Rio de Janeiro. His nickname derived from that of a beautiful yellowish bird: the kiskadee. BTV liked to show off, and he loved extravagant parties. “He really knew how to throw amazing parties!” my neighbor Amelia told me one as we walked past the very spot where BTV had been shot in the head by a police sniper.

“Do you know what his secret formula was for his amazing parties?” Auro asked me on a different occasion. After some silence, he replied, “Heavily armed private security provided by his traffickers, conspicuous machine guns and performances of power; the presence of celebrities, football players, whiskey, lots of coke, the strong beat of funk music and gays! Lots of gays, travestis, prostitutes!” He added, “BTV really valued sexual freedom! He knew that without us, gays, there could not be all the fun and these amazing parties in the favela!” At some other opportunity, Auro remarked that BTV used to make a lot of money from the big parties in the favela too; it was not just that he seemed to enjoy them as a way of life – living life intensely because a trafficker could never know if he would be alive or free (not in jail) from one day to the other – the drug lord also made huge profits from drug sales during these events. A particular articulation of the defense of sexual freedom backed up by a logic of capital and profit making constituted an interesting dimension to the way that queer freedom had been established (territorialized) and deeply impacted on the daily life of my friends in Rocinha.

I myself felt the concrete effects of the “queer law of the hill” one day going to the supermarket with Auro. On our way down to the “asphalt,” we passed by a group of guys in a dark Rocinha alleyway. They began to mock us, laughing out loud, pointing fingers and aggressively shouting, “Look at the little faggots!” Auro immediately became upset and walked down to have a word with them. I anticipated a physical fight and maybe worse. Auro shouted back at them, swinging his finger and telling them to have more respect. To my surprise, they shut up immediately and just kept quiet. On our way back from the supermarket, though, Auro wanted to confront them again. I felt we had been lucky we got out of the situation without much trouble the first time, and it seemed like a really bad idea to go back and argue with them a second time. Auro insisted, however. He was a big guy and approached them without any fear. Auro shouted at them in anger, “As far as I am aware, the law of the hillside is not to tease fags, huh! Be careful!” Sometime later, when we had already safely walked away from the group, Auro asked me, “Did you see the fear that the guys expressed cutting through their faces?” My friend was proud of himself, and I was somehow proud of us too. It felt like a moment of queer empowerment to me. He added, “Since BTV, it has been forbidden to bully fags in Rocinha. BTV gave freedom to the fags in the favela!” After a pause, he added, “Nowadays, it is Ney who guarantees our freedom!” I had been deeply touched by the episode. Auro simply kept talking with pride: “BTV used to say, ‘Are you going to make fun of my fags? No, you are not! Don’t mess with my fags!’” Auro, clearly excited by his deed, concluded, “BTV liked us! He used to claim that fags were necessary to liven up the big parties that he loved to host in Rocinha!” My brave friend looked happy. I was still a bit shaken, deeply touched and very impressed to hear more about the two drug lords considered great allies to the queer population and protectors of LGBTQ freedom in the favela.

As seen in Rocinha’s recent political history, the articulation between capital, drugs, particular territories and liberal queer policies have had major practical consequences for the everyday life of certain groups. Next, I propose a brief comparison with other assemblages of queer liberation in the USA and South Africa. These foreign territories were not present in the daily discourses and practices of my friends in Rocinha. However, they are important cases for the understanding of wider connections in the context of the global queer liberation movements. First, I will discuss the queer liberation movement in the USA. Following this, I will go through some of the impacts that the end of apartheid in South Africa brought to queer populations in townships. These two cases provide a better appreciation of concepts that have been territorialized and deterritorialized with regard to the particular case of “liberdade” queer in Rocinha, Brazil.

Stonewall riots and the “jail mentality”

The historical making of the queer community as a political force in the United States was deeply marked by protests that followed a police operation in a New York City bar named Stonewall. However, previous events were fundamental in the establishment of the conditions of possibility that led to the Stonewall riots. D’Emilio (1998: 10) describes a very intimate scene that would come to contribute to the widespread “liberation” of thousands of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and other queer groups (LGBTQ) living under the sovereignty of the United States and arguably in foreign territories:

On a Saturday afternoon in November 1950, five men convened at the home of Harry Hay in the Silverlake district of Los Angeles. They gathered to discuss a proposal written by Hay that had as its purpose “the heroic objective of liberating one of our largest minorities from (. . .) social persecution.”
What came to be called the Mattachine Society was a special configuration of people, ideas and material resources that diverged immensely from other coeval arrangements. Whereas “homosexuality” was starting to be understood and discussed by the Harry Hay group as a social movement, from the point of view of the most popular religious group, the scientific community and legislative powers in the USA, “(...) homosexuality appeared not as a mark of minority group status but as an individual problem, as evidence of moral weakness, criminality, or pathology.” (D’Emilio 1998: 10)

However, this change in identity, social constitution and political power that became more noticeable and pronounced for LGBTQ groups in the second half of the twentieth century was based on several other factors. These include, for example, the relationship between a queer identity and processes of urbanization and the modernization of capitalism, consideration of the separation of production from the domestic sphere, the change in the nature of families and a wider process of labor migration in different industrializing countries. D’Emilio (1998: 11) observes,

The interlocking process of urbanization and industrialization created a social context in which an autonomous personal life could develop. Affection, intimate relationships, and sexuality moved increasingly into the sphere of individual choice, seemingly disconnected from how one organized the production of goods necessary for survival. In this setting, men and women who felt a strong erotic attraction to their own sex could begin to fashion from their feeling a personal identity and a way of life.

This new concept of “the homosexual person” as a more stable identity acquired by some in a repressive and heteronormative society went well beyond any sort of judgment or condemnation of “homosexual practices” alone. Repressed persons came to occupy the central stage in the discussions around homophobia. As such, the LGBTQ cause was able not just to bring these repressed people together, but it also became more evident that there were clear resonances between the queer cause and the cause of other oppressed groups in the USA, such as racially oppressed minorities. When the civil liberties movements began peak up in the USA in the 1960s, queer liberation movements followed suit and took advantage of a wider context of struggle against the oppression of minority groups in the country.

Mass migration from Ceará to Rio de Janeiro in the last decades of the twentieth century had a profound impact on my friends (such as Priscilla) in terms of their lifestyle, income and types of relationships they passed to develop to their, now often distant, families. As such, these wider processes likely contributed to queer liberation in the favela. Having said that, the value of individual freedom in Rocinha also has its own genealogy.

One day, I left Rocinha to visit another favela in Rio de Janeiro, called Pavão-Pavãozinho-Cantagalo (PPG). There, I met Rose, a woman in her 40s who had grown up in PPG. She told me something I had not really considered in depth up to that point, highlighting an important aspect in the understanding of the operations of freedom and liberty in Brazilian favelas and particularly those favelas located in Rio de Janeiro. Rose told me that life in PPG was strongly influenced by life in jail. Traffickers would go to jail and return years later to their favelas, bringing with them what she called a "jail mentality". They would then run the favelas in a similar way to how they had dealt with others in jail and would abide to similar values. Rose argued that it was not by chance that the motto for the main trafficking faclons of Rio de Janeiro refer to freedom and that traffickers have a strong concern with the guarantee of freedom in their communities. She said "What is A.D.A's? ("Friends of Friends") motto? It is Viver e deixar viver (To live and let live). And C.V.'s ("Red Command's")? It is Paz, Justiça e Liberdade (Peace, Justice and Freedom). It could be argued that it was not just for the sake of drug sales, good parties or a personal attraction for the queer community that BTV used to protect individual freedoms in Favela da Rocinha. Considering that BTV had become a very important figure within the A.D.A. trafficking faction, Rose's point was that it was to be expected that he would share some values with his organization that were deeply rooted in jail life. Those values included extreme violence directed towards members of rival factions, as well as loyalty towards one's own group, but, above all, for those who had experienced life in prison, freedom acquired a very special importance.

In comparison to Ceará, Priscilla and other friends often assumed Rio de Janeiro to be more modern and more liberal. In this sense, it could also be argued that urban centers in Brazil were more attuned and aligned with the model of the “queer subject” with individual rights that one sees in the USA, for example (Green 1999). The difference, however, is that queer people in the favela had to deal with both the fact that Rio de Janeiro as a city seemed to want to be recognized as a global queer capital (for the sake of profit making from queer tourism, for example) and the particular condition that in Rocinha the “rule of law” affected the population in very asymmetric ways: the state didn’t guarantee freedom in favelas; instead, it often operated in the reverse manner in that its presence was felt, if at all, as an institution that punished favela dwellers, taking their freedom away by killing or incarcerating them. There was a sense that, in comparison with Ceará, the existence of “LGBTQ subjects” with individual rights was more widely accepted in Rio de Janeiro. However, some liberal guarantees that were used by Americans to obtain queer liberation could not be mobilized in the favela territory. In the favela, it was the “law of the hill” that needed to be primarily mobilized for the liberation of queer subjects, and this law was partly formed exactly through the privation of freedom established by the Brazilian state upon some favela dwellers and the privation of some freedoms established by the drug lords upon the population in favelas.
Soweto and “gay pride”

In “Freeing South Africa”, Donham (1998) is concerned with the particular configuration of queer freedom that emerged in South Africa with the end of apartheid. The author refers to similar elements already discussed earlier: national territories, ghettos, liberalism, queer identity and sexuality. Nevertheless, the combination of these elements happens in a very different form in Donham’s findings. One could argue that the assemblage he discusses is a very different one, although with elements that have been deterritorialized from other times and places and reterritorialized in South Africa.

In the same fashion that the travesti Priscilla has a central role in this chapter, for Donham it is Linda who takes the leading role in his analysis. The events in South Africa revolve around the funeral of Linda in Soweto (which many people in Brazil would consider to be the South African equivalent of a favela). In that particular assemblage in Soweto, the end of apartheid and the emergence of a queer identity in Linda’s home territory are related. Donham (1998: 8) argues,

For black men in townships around Johannesburg, identifying as gay was both recent and tied up, in unexpectedly complex ways, with a much larger historical transformation: the end of apartheid and the creation of a modern nation; in a phrase, the “freeing” of South Africa.

This new possibility of queer identity, created by liberalism in the struggle against apartheid, is in clear opposition to the repertoire available in the ’60s and ’70s: “If an urban black South African boy during the 1960s and 1970s showed signs of effeminacy, then there was only one possibility: she was “really” a woman, or at least some mixed form of woman” (Donham 1998: 6). Already in the 1990s, the situation had changed dramatically in South Africa and in Soweto. Donham (1998: 11) describes how the life of queer populations in townships had been transformed by then:

Nelson Mandela had been released from prison. It was clear to everyone in South Africa that a new society was in process of being born. (...) As a result, the cultural definitions and social institutions that supported the sex/gender system in which Linda had been raised had been shaken to its roots. (...) I will make explicit what Linda suggested: with the birth of a “free” South Africa, the notion of sexuality was created for some black men, or more precisely, an identity based on sexuality was created. The classificatory grid in the making was different from the old one. Now, both partners in a same-sex relationship were potentially classified as the same (male) gender – and as “gay.”

Donham (1998: 12) argues that public events of “gay pride” in South Africa have been very important political arenas for the LGBTQ liberation cause and the formation of new connections to the global queer scene:

A third event that heralded change was the first gay pride march in Johannesburg in 1990, modeled on those held in places like New York and San Francisco that celebrated the Stonewall riots of 1969. Linda and her friends participated, along with approximately one thousand others. This annual ritual began to do much, through a set of such internationally recognized gay symbols as rainbow flags and pink triangles, to create a sense of transnational connections for gay South Africans.

It has also been argued that Brazil keeps competing systems of sex/gender: one more global, based on the modern and medicalized categories of heterosexual/homosexual, and another one, derived from the colonial heritage, based on the sexual roles of penetrator/penetrated (“ativo/passivo”) (see Fry 1982; Kulick 1997). I encountered resonances of this distinction during a conversation I entertained in the middle of the very famous “Gay Pride Parade” in Copacabana Beach, Rio de Janeiro. The event took place on the first of November 2009. During the parade, I first met one of my students from Rocinha, Andrei, on the queer scene. I must admit that I was very surprised to see him there. I had never really considered that he might be gay or even gay friendly. He asked me if he could hang out with my group of friends during the gay pride event, and I readily agreed. My straight neighbor from Rocinha, Amelia, had come to the parade with me, and I was expecting to meet many other friends there, including Mazinho, Priscilla and other queer folks from Rocinha.

As we walked down the road listening to loud electronic music, watching colorful flags and half naked bodies all over, my student Andrei started to tell me all about his family and how his mother was an evangelical Christian who had migrated from Ceara to Rio. He said she used to attend services at a church called the Universal Church for the Kingdom of God. I asked him more about his life and he told me, “When I arrived in Rocinha, there were only women and men and some travestis. There was no such thing as gay people. Do you understand? For that reason I had many girlfriends, and I even had a son. But now I am less confused and have decided that I am gay. I am gay, do you understand?” I surely did. Then I asked him about when he had lived in Ceara. He replied, “In Ceara, there is a lot of prejudice still today! But my family in Rio accept me better. Even my mother, who belongs to an evangelical church, accepts me!”

“And does she not want to convert you? To liberate you from the evil spirits that make you gay?” I asked him, based on my previous experiences at the Universal Church in Rocinha.
He replied, “She tried; she really tried, but she could not do it! Now she has even stopped trying to take evil spirits out of other people... First she would have had to be able to solve my case, right? So, it is better for her to leave us alone!” He laughed out loud.

From my experience at the gay pride parade in Rio de Janeiro, it became clearer how many different forms of liberalism became territorialized within an event meant to be more of a global type of queer liberation assemblage. First, the international influence of a particular sense of queerness and freedom was very much present at the event. On the many sound trucks passing by us from time to time at the parade, there were several LGBTQ liberation messages being displayed to the public. One of them read: *É direito nosso amor e viver livremente* (“It is our right to love and live freely”). Another truck carried a banner that read: *Devemos lutar pela vida, amor e liberdade* (“We should fight for life, love and freedom!”) Yet another truck carried the following message: *Duque de Caxias deve respeitar a liberdade de expressão* (“Duque de Caxias [a suburban area in Rio de Janeiro] must respect freedom of expression!”). The language of rights and the importance of the “rule of law” (very much in an “asphalt” fashion) permeated a large part of the event. At the same time, a significant part of people attending the gay parade in “the asphalt” lived in favelas and other territories where “civil rights” were secondary to “the law of the hill.”

The encounter of different queer identities was also noticeable during the event, both in terms of actual different LGBTQ communities attending the event and in terms of the life narratives of different people, such as my student Andrei. One of the most thorough studies of Brazilian queer history is found in *Beyond Carnival*, by James Green (1999). In it, the author argues, “In spite of government censorship during the 1970’s, bits and pieces of information about the rise and growth of the international gay and lesbian movement found their way into the Brazilian press” (Green 1999: 262). Based in Rio de Janeiro, there was a weekly publication called *Já*, which ran a column entitled “Gay Power” ( . . . ). A clenched fist clutching a bouquet of wild flowers served as the columns logo, as if to suggest both political militancy and countercultural values. ( . . . ) The last column before the journal closed down carried a two-page banner headline in English entitled “Gay Liberation Front,” reflecting the influence of the international movement.

(Green 1999: 263)

As such, gay pride could be seen as a consequence of the international queer movement, as was the case in South Africa.

Nevertheless, as it has been remarked, in Brazil, this influence did not happen homogeneously in the “asphalt” and the “hillside.” It would only be on November 5, 2010, that the population of Rocinha first organized its own gay pride event in “the hillside.” Equally, in terms of sexual identity, the *active/passivo* model is said to still have more purchase power in the north and northeastern parts of Brazil (including Ceará) and in favelas, as opposed to the “asphalt” of big urban centers such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Kulick 1997). This fact carries particular implications regarding concepts of sexuality, power and freedom in the favela: the legitimacy of the “active”, dominant, yet abusive, role of the drug lord in Rocinha could be better understood in relation to the “passive” queer population who receives protection from the big chief. This sort of analytical speculation would find resonance in wider arrangements of sex/gender in Brazil.

The articulation between queer liberation and religious freedom was also remarkable in the parade. There was a big truck in the gay pride I attended in Copacabana, which was dedicated to *liberdade religiosa* (“religious freedom”) and was carrying representatives of different religions, some even wearing ritual clothing. The last car of the parade was called *Carro da tolerância religiosa: Brasil é país laico* (“The truck of religious tolerance: Brazil is a laic country”). Again, the language of rights and the “rule of law” are present here. Significantly, though, the connections between queer freedom and religious freedom also emerged in Andrei’s life history. According to many evangelicals in Rocinha, a female demonic spirit is to be blamed for non-heteronormative gender and/or sexuality. The solution proposed by many churches is to liberate the person from such an entity. By doing so, they argued, they could bring LGBTQ subjects back into “normality.” This particular type of liberation does not connect very well with other forms of freedom and liberty based on the assumption of existence of a modern subject with a queer identity and political queer rights recognized as a particular social group. In fact, the way the church approached the question seemed to be reminiscent of the time before the constitution of queerness as a political identity. The church was concerned with correcting individual deviations, undoing connections between people and evil spirits.19

To conclude this section, I would like to make an issue more explicit: for most of my friends from Rocinha who attended the gay pride in Copacabana, the queer liberation political agenda seemed to be only secondary to their concerns. In a way, they recognized that some of the pride flags being raised were foreign to their daily life context and their daily struggles for freedom. The “laws of the hill” were different from those in Copacabana and the impact one could achieve in Rocinha through the “global” queer rights rhetoric was somewhat limited. Having said that, my queer friends still seemed to enjoy the event a lot. The celebrations went on until very late at night, and most of them stayed until the very end. The following day, I heard that many people, both from “the hillside” and “the asphalt”, ended up meeting at the beach, where actual sex (not rhetoric) took priority in their encounters.
television? He said that it was something very serious. I asked him if he could hear fireworks. He said, “No!” Traffickers commonly used fireworks to signal trouble in the favela. “What was happening?” My friend was finding it hard to say anything. I asked him again. He said that he could not really believe TV Globo. I asked him again, “What is going on?” He replied after some silence. “TV Globo said that Ney was caught by the police!” It was my turn to go silent; I did not know what to say. Almost immediately messages started to pop up over the Internet about the possibility that Ney had been caught. My friends from Rocinha started to post frantically on Facebook. Was it true that Ney had been caught? The friend with whom I was chatting asked me to stay online and that he would try to keep me informed about everything. He was still a bit doubtful himself. Minutes later, my friends on Facebook started to post links to other online media that brought more news about Ney being captured by the police while trying to flee Rocinha inside the boot of a diplomatic car. My friend on the online chat and I had both started believing the news.

The reaction from the part of my queer friends in the favela to these events was extremely negative. One of them kept publishing her views online. At one point she stated: *Liberdade Pro Ney da Rocinha :) * vai toma no cu (UPP) / (“Freedom for Ney of Rocinha :) * go fuck yourself (UPP).” Overall, the mood was miserable and dominated by uncertainty about the future of the favela and the continuation of the “laws of the hillside” that had been in operation. In many of my frequent subsequent visits, I kept hearing from my queer friends in Rocinha that the situation was terrible. They missed all the fun parties; they missed the attention they used to receive from the traffickers and, above all, they mentioned many instances in which queer freedom had been compromised and homophobia was increasing in the alleyways of Rocinha. “Who can we turn to now? To the homophobic police officers?” asked one of my *travesti* friends. It turned out that even the Gay Pride Parade that had started in Rocinha in 2010 was under threat then because it depended on the formal authorization of the police and, even worse, without the support of traffickers, there would not be enough money to finance the event. The first years of the UPP operation in Rocinha will remain as a bad memory for most of my LGBTQI friends.

Since 2013, however, the UPP project has been slowly falling apart in Rio. Without the required financial resources, the technical capacity or the political will on the part of corrupt policemen and politicians to control and put an end to very profitable “illegal” activities, a dual and unstable system of power has become more apparent in favelas. New traffickers had been increasing their power upon the favela territory, and there was some expectation that “the good old days” of queer liberation under BTV and Ney could return some day.

As we await new developments, it is worth noting how flows of different types of “liberdade” and even contradictory elements of liberalism were mobilized in very particular ways to bring a unique type of queer liberation...
to the LGBTQ residents of Rocinha. From a violent drug lord who loved parties, fags and free drug trade, to the failure of the Brazilian state to provide more than its armed hand to the assistance of the favela population, at least between 2004 and 2011, one could clearly delineate an assemblage of queer liberation territorialized in Rocinha. This assemblage thrived based on the deterritorialization of many concepts, identities, powers, ideologies and rhetorics from other territories that also struggled to either prevent or obtain queer liberation in other times and spaces (such as small villages in Ceará, a metropolis in the United States and the towns in South Africa). These disparate elements were unevenly and uniquely reterritorialized in Rocinha in a very immanent and ethnographically observable manner. Nevertheless, such an assemblage has been deeply upset since the police “pacification” of favelas. Ney was jailed and remains in jail as I write. The Brazilian state has not managed to become the new provider of “liberdade” to my friends in Rocinha (despite its rhetoric to the contrary); most of these friends remain hopeful that a drug lord will emerge in the favela, or come out of jail, and actively fight once again not just for his own freedom, but also for the collective freedom of “his fags”.

Notes

1 Much of the work on urban marginalization has focused on neoliberalism and how neoliberal economic reforms have affected the role of the state and urban issues. My treatment of (neoliberalism) highlights it as one more variant among a multiplicity of liberal positions. As such, I am equally concerned with more classical articulations of liberalism, which preceded the co-option of the term by economic rationalities.

2 For an expanded discussion on “urban territories of relegation”, see Wacquant (2008).

3 In the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1972).

4 For an extended discussion on Brazilian travestis, see Kulick (1998).

5 I refer to the USA here because it is considered the cradle of queer liberation. South Africa is also regarded as a liberal state in terms of sexuality (most of all compared to other African countries); however, its importance to my argument relates more to the unequal distribution of liberty and freedom across a very segregated urban fabric in South African cities, which offers interesting comparative possibilities to the Brazilian case.

6 See, also, Doherty and Lino e Silva (2011).

7 See Penglase (2009) for further discussions on “the law of the hillside” in a different favela context.

8 From the Portuguese “políticas assistencialistas”. Also known as “populist” or “patronizing” policies.

9 Whereas the first gay pride event in the world took place in 1970 in New York City (USA) and the first Brazilian gay pride took place in 1995 in Rio de Janeiro.

10 The importance of the connection between sexuality, Afro-Brazilian religions and Pentecostalism has been noted and discussed by anthropologists such as Fry (1992). Therefore, I will refrain from expanding on the topic here; however, this is a complex formation of liberalism that I hope to discuss in future work.

Bibliography


