

Natasha Kellem's Minoritarian Liberalism¹

ABSTRACT

Normative liberalism has promoted the freedom of privileged subjects, those entitled to rights – usually white, adult, heteronormative, and bourgeois – at the expense of marginalized groups, such as Black people, children, LGBTQ people, and slum dwellers. In this ethnographic analysis of Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I explore what happens when liberalism is challenged by people whose lives are impaired by normative understandings of liberty. I call such marginalized visions of freedom “minoritarian liberalism,” a concept that stands in for overlapping, alternative modes of freedom. In this piece, I introduce Natasha Kellem, a charismatic self-declared travesti (a term used in Latin America to indicate a specific form of female gender construction opposite to the sex assigned at birth). Through interconnected experiences, I offer ethnographic evidence of non-normative routes to freedom for those seeking liberties against the backdrop of capitalist exploitation, transphobia, racism, and other patterns of domination.

Keywords: liberalism, queer, favela, travesti, Brazil

A game of chess

I STILL KEEP a picture of Natasha taken in 2010. Seven people – four women and three men – pose in front of a black and white tiled wall, like pieces in a game of chess. We were at the Bar & Mar nightclub in the West Zone

of Rio de Janeiro, and no one knew exactly how the night would end. Who would fuck whom? Who would kiss whom? Who would pay whom? In her black, pointy high heels, Natasha is the tallest one in the photo. Her strapless, metallic dress is glued to her slender body, giving her a golden glow. She has no breasts, but she looks very feminine, with smooth hair and delicately applied makeup. Her black smoky eyes draw attention. In her right hand, she holds a glass of whiskey. Natasha didn't like to drink, but that night, she'd made an exception. She'd accepted an invitation to share a fancy bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label with the young, muscular man standing behind her in the photograph. He wears a tight white t-shirt and blue jeans with white shoes. His bulging biceps wrap around her waist, and his knee peeks out from in between her legs. Natasha wears a slight smile. She's enjoying the manly arms wrapped around her.

The Hillside and the Asphalt

I first moved to the Favela da Rocinha in early 2009, only carrying with me a Crumpler backpack and an egg-yolk colored suitcase. I lived there until mid-2010. When I concluded this initial period of fieldwork, I went back to Scotland to obtain my doctoral degree and, from there, to the United States. Not everyone had the opportunity to move out of the favela; the fact that I did was an obvious privilege. Freedom – including the freedom to move between different spaces – depends on power, which can be both productive and destructive.² To understand the politics of freedom in Rocinha, one must be aware of the specific forms of power that are operational both inside and outside of its borders. Within Rocinha, drug trafficking governmentality reigns. A distinct form from state governmentality, which operates in the “formal city” of Rio de Janeiro. They both act by establishing control over territories and populations, but they do so through different modes of oppression and by allowing different kinds of freedoms. Drug traffickers are not free in territories controlled by the state, and the state is not free in territories controlled by drug traffickers.

The freedom to move between territories was not just a matter of wealth, as might be expected; there were drug dealers in Rocinha with

money, but their power did not always extend beyond the borders of the favela. As my friend Clarice put it, “And what good is a wealthy trafficker? If they get out of the favela, they are going to be killed! Where’s their freedom?” Meanwhile, disloyal residents (a.k.a., X-9) were either killed or forced to leave the favela. A common form of betrayal was for an X-9 to receive money from the police, or a rival faction, to spy on drug dealing activities in the favela, providing “outsiders” with privileged information. I often worried if traffickers would consider my research as a form of espionage. After the fact, I assume they didn’t, considering that I could always leave the favela whenever I wanted, and I was never forced out either.³

During my time in Rocinha, I lived in the lowest part of the hill, known as Valão, or literally, the “Great Ditch,” named for the big open sewer that cut through the bottom of the slum and went all the way down to the upper-middle-class neighborhood of São Conrado, on the other side of the main road, Lagoa-Barra Highway. Sewage did not flow between the two territories under the same conditions as humans. A little over one kilometer away, all that dense sewage was discharged into the open green sea, without much purification. The wastewater treatment plant in São Conrado rarely operated. The municipality claimed there was a lack of resources. But the connections permitted between Rocinha and São Conrado were different on the surface of the city. There was always a pair of policemen, wearing gray uniforms and driving light blue, battered cars, who monitored the flow between *the Hillside* (Rocinha) and *the Asphalt* (the “formal” city of Rio de Janeiro). They surveilled the rivers of people entering and leaving the shantytown on a daily basis, patting down only those they knew they could bother, given the emasculated power they held at the borders of the favela territory.

These urban frontiers were not difficult to locate. Rio de Janeiro’s policemen knew precisely the territorial limits of their activities, and they helped to regulate the boundaries of the favela from the outside, just as traffickers did on the inside. In typical racist fashion, the policemen targeted black dwellers, or those that looked more “local” than I did.⁴

The police never stopped me for a pat-down. I'm more likely to be classified as a white middle class person in Brazil.⁵ Occasionally, they stopped people who looked more *gringo* – or foreigner – than I did, investigating backpacks, tote bags, packages, pockets, and wallets. In some cases, they even looked for drugs inside people's underwear. Except for these body searches, the policemen looked bored with their job – they could often be seen chatting and eating deep-fried Brazilian *coxinha* and *pastel* at the local market at the main pedestrian entry to Rocinha. The presence of the police at that spot was symbolic, a demonstration of state power required by São Conrado residents, who persistently complained about the *favelização* (favelization) of their neighborhood. In response, the police tried to prove that they had not given up on their duties to protect the elites.

(Post)colonialism

There are at least two genealogies that must be recounted regarding the effects of colonialism and liberalism as it comes to the emergence of favelas, particularly those located in Rio de Janeiro. The official abolition of slavery in Brazil only took place in 1888. Nevertheless, this historical event alone does not do justice to the complexities of the different processes of freedom and liberation taking place side by side with the horrors of slavery. Resistance and rebellions against colonial powers were frequent, as it was to be expected. In some cases, these movements led to the formation of successful *maroon* communities, made up of runaway subjects.⁶ In the last decades of slavery, “freedom” could also be obtained through manumission and, after 1871, through birth.⁷ In the last decades of the 19th century, housing for the free Black populations becomes an issue. If, previously, enslaved subjects were incorporated into farms and into the domestic sphere of white owners in urban centers, after freedom, more and more Black folks migrated to the cities and lacked adequate housing, given their economic deprivation, even after 1888.⁸ Historical data post-abolition suggests that Black folks in the city of Rio de Janeiro lived mostly in collective “substandard” housing called *cortiços*. When fears of “freed slave” rebellions started to grow, the

local government started to repress the insurgence of new *cortiços* and to demolish existing ones. Favelas became as alternative to the Black and oppressed population. Vallares shows that the Mayor of Rio in the early years of the 20th century, called Pereira Passos, demolished large *cortiços* in the central zone of Rio de Janeiro (1904–1910). Since then, the Black population of the city, along with other poor classes, were left with no choice other than to occupy the least desirable areas of the city, such as hillsides and the suburbs.⁹

The second genealogy refers to a rebellion. It took place in response to the newly created Brazilian Republic (1889) and continues to operate as some sort of “origin narrative” to Brazilian favelas. What became known as the Canudos War (Guerra de Canudos) created certain conditions of possibility for the “invention” of favelas both as a physical, as well as, an ideological construct.¹⁰ The short version of the events is that around the turn of the 20th century (1896–1897), a peasant group from the hinterlands of the Brazilian Northeast took over a very and impoverished area in the state of Bahia. The movement followed a charismatic and religious figure, known as Antônio Conselheiro. Under his leadership, the small town of Canudos rapidly grew, attracting more and more migrants. Large farm owners in the region, together with the Catholic church, tried their best to resist the movement. Tension rose to the point that the Brazilian army was required to intervene in the situation. What looked like an easy feat for the Republic, however, turned into a series of defeats. It took four different expeditions to vanquish the rebels, which meant a significant moral and material cost for the Brazilian state at that point.¹¹ The recruitment of soldiers to these battles drew heavily on recruits from Rio de Janeiro, which was the federal capital during those years. These men were promised a series of benefits upon their victorious return to Rio de Janeiro, including housing. Coming back from war however, hundreds of soldiers found out that the government promises were not going to be fulfilled. As a form of protest, in need of housing, they started to occupy a hill centrally located in Rio, which is nowadays known as Morro da Providência and, at the time, became known as “Favella Hill” [Morro da Favella].^{12,13} “Os Sertões” [the Hinterlands]

is one of the best-known literary descriptions of the Canudos War.¹⁴ According to the author, Euclides da Cunha, Canudos came to represent liberty vis-à-vis the Brazilian state, the possibility of the poor taking over rights over land, over their own labor, and to challenge compulsory federal tax payments. Canudos became a physical and discursive territory for freedom which was violently repressed by the state, but it left a deep heritage of possibilities and ideas that influenced the birth of favelas as spaces where the poor could not only carve a space to live, but also resist and claim a certain independence from the state.

A moist encounter

I first met Natasha during a tremendous heatwave. It was April 20, 2009. I was thirsty but wanted something more exciting than plain warm water, and I had no fridge at home. Luckily, Amélia, a very kind middle-aged migrant from Ceará state, who lived upstairs with Bezerra, the father of her two children, invited me to go for a walk. We left the building almost side by side, squeezing through the narrow front gate leading to the alleyway. Amélia's daughter, Maria Beatriz, liked to tease her mother for the generous size of her derriere. We passed by our neighbor Quino's house, but he was not there, sitting in his wheelchair like usual. We continued walking, passing by Dona Irani's sewing workshop, a small space packed with colorful fabric. I waved to her, but despite wearing her new glasses, she didn't see us. We turned right at the end of the alley, then passed by the house of Dona Magali – a short-haired woman who spent most of her days smoking at her front door. We made it to the corner fruit and vegetable store, whose entrance was on Rua do Valão, almost inside the open sewer. During rainy days, the wastewater flowed by a bit clearer. During hot days, like that day, it was slower and more concentrated. The smell of the street changed accordingly.

The store owner, Senhor Jair, stood to the right of the entrance. He was behind a battered counter that held an antique scale, a faulty calculator, a wooden drawer to keep change, and a notebook for writing down customer's debts. He wore a thick gold chain over his abundantly hairy chest and plastic sports sunglasses on top of his bald head. The corner

store was tiny – no more than 10 square meters. Against the bright green walls, there were boxes and boxes of fruits and vegetables. Some of them were pretty fresh, while others were already rotten and covered with flies. While Amélia admired the mangoes, I was drawn to the middle of the store, toward a small table full of watermelon slices of different sizes. “What is the sweetest slice of watermelon, please?” I asked Jair. He slowly came over and helped me choose one, as he had done many times before. He weighed the slice, including the rind, and told me the total: 2,50 Brazilian Reais, just over the equivalent of one US dollar.¹⁵ I declined the plastic bag he offered; I needed that slice of watermelon for immediate consumption.

Once I got a few steps past the motorcycle parked outside the fruit store, I stopped again. The more I sweat, the drier my mouth felt. I couldn’t wait anymore and decided to bite into the juicy watermelon right then and there. (Amélia and her luscious pink mangoes were more contained and waited until they got home.) A slow whisper approached my right ear from behind: “Delicious!” I turned around. The voice was coming from a mouth thickly covered in rouge lipstick. I noticed that she was looking at my lips, too, cool and moist from the fruit I was eating. I smiled at her, and she looked down, as if she wanted a bite of my watermelon. I noticed that she was very thin and quite tall. She was wearing a black tank top, revealing a sculpted abdomen, a pastel pink skirt showing smooth legs, and high heels, even during the daytime. She had a narrow face with an elongated chin, with pointy ears sticking out through shoulder-length hair. As I followed her enormous, dark eyes, she looked up again. Finally, she introduced herself as Natasha, with a mischievous smile. I could not resist and surrendered with a broader smile. I was mesmerized by the game. Her eyes flashed goodbye as I walked away with Amélia. I didn’t say much on the way home. Once we were back, sitting on the small couch in front of her television, Amélia decided to break the silence: “You are not to be afraid of Natasha! She is a good person!” my neighbor affirmed, in between bites of mango.

Minoritarian liberalism

As a travesti¹⁶ living in a favela in Rio de Janeiro, Natasha was excluded from normative liberalism through multiple mechanisms. Tropes of favelas as “urban jungles,” or territories defined by violence, were ubiquitous during my fieldwork and remain so.¹⁷ For the elites in Rio de Janeiro, favelas signal unruliness, predation, and lack of respect for private property rights and civility – in other words, the absence of law, a contemporary “state of nature.” Travestis, in particular, are considered to be among the most dangerous, unruly, and abject members of favela communities.¹⁸ The dangerous travesti living in a lawless land epitomizes the fears of normative liberals towards those unwilling to subject to majoritarian norms of gender, sexuality, and, I could add, capitalist projects of individualism and privatization.

I had initially expected to witness and register contemporary processes of “enslavement” using ethnographic methods. I assumed that the scarcity of freedom in the lives of the Brazilian urban poor, particularly queer ones, would be an important topic for in depth ethnographic research. I anticipated that favela residents were mostly, even if not all, living under conditions similar to those described in other studies of urban poverty in Latin America. Above all, I hoped that an *exposé* on the lack of freedom in Brazilian favelas could help to bring change to the unfortunate situation I imagined I would encounter.

After moving to Rocinha, however, it only took me a couple of weeks of fieldwork to start noticing that there was no scarcity of freedoms in the favela in an absolute sense. Instead, day after day, I began to notice different expressions and practices of freedom in the slum. The problem seemed to be that most of these favela freedoms were not the same freedoms that I already knew, and liberal supporters cherished. Some of these freedoms were very unfamiliar to me, and, probably, unfamiliar to others who had never set foot in a favela. The research process for this book allowed me to bear witness to several forms of freedom where I least expected them to exist and to understand their importance for those who live by them. In my wanderings with Natasha, I came across liberalisms that were not created for the elites to protect other elites.¹⁹

Favela residents have their own mode of liberal politics, in some favelas more than in others.²⁰

I argue that minorities are not excluded from the liberal project in an absolute sense. Not only liberalism presupposes the existence of the “unfree” but, importantly, subjects historically marginalized in normative liberalism often respond to their dislocated condition. One way they do so is through a process that queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz would call “disidentification,” creative strategies through which minoritarian populations engage with dominant forces to produce their own truths. What does happen is that some truths regarding liberalism tend to be rendered invisible when they do not conform to some basic (Eurocentric) liberal values. *Minoritarian liberalisms*²¹ are not necessarily individualistic and focused on private property, for example. Acts of “disidentification” offer the conditions of possibility for “a disempowered politics or positionality [of freedom, I would add] that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”²²

In my research, long-term fieldwork and ethnographic research methods have proven to be critical tools that allowed me not just to witness the existence of minoritarian modes of liberalism in the Brazilian favela but also to understand that these liberalisms operate according to their own (even if disempowered) theories. Rather than struggling to preserve (or even expand) Eurocentric meanings of liberalism so as to disqualify experiences of freedom in the life of minorities as something other than liberalism (as *libertinism*, for example), my (queer) proposal is that, in the company of Natasha Kellem and other queer friends from the favelas, the stability of normative liberalism should be put at risk.

A heterotopia of deviations

“I have a lot more freedom in the favela to be who I am!” Natasha stated after a party in the “formal city” of Rio de Janeiro. The territoriality of the favela affects different possibilities of existence. Before we went to the party, she seemed to be filled with doubt. “Was she free to be herself?” I wondered. At the same time, Natasha wasn’t looking for a single self with a fixed body. Flexible possibilities of being were more

important to her. Her body was malleable; it took many forms. Some days, her body was more feminine. On others, her body was more masculine.²³ It was for that reason that Natasha argued she didn't like hormones or plastic surgery. Over her years in Rocinha, the possibilities of being for Natasha, of being Natasha, had also changed. In many ways, this instability was reflected in the favela itself, which was a territory of accelerated changes – a different temporality compared to the Asphalt. People moved in and out every day. Natality and mortality rates were both high. New constructions were being built all the time. Despite the disastrous presence of the violent Brazilian state in favelas, despite the tyranny of drug lords, and despite the prejudice of the brothers with whom Natasha was obliged to live, the favela was not a limiting territory to her gender and sexual practices.

A gay friend, Auro, once articulated some of these principles of favela liberalism:

Well... whores live here, right? Dykes live here, right? Bandits live here too, don't they? There are faggots all around, right? There are thieves, drug addicts, workers... all living here. The favela has got everything! You have got it all, sweetheart! You have to learn to deal with these differences and live your life. To each their own!

Rocinha constituted a “heterotopia of deviation” of sorts.²⁴ There was a radical accommodation of difference in Rocinha governmentality.

Radical transitions

In Favela da Rocinha, minoritarian modes of liberalism exist in articulation with the power and governmentality of drug lords. These minoritarian experiences are constituted based on the “disidentification” of favela dwellers with the normative liberalism of the Brazilian elites. As Natasha herself acknowledged, she had more freedom to be herself in Rocinha than in the Asphalt. Partly, this was due to “the laws of the hill,” some of which were particularly tailored for the LGBTQ population in the favela. For Northeastern migrants, the

possibility of a different experience of freedom was a fundamental part of their desire to migrate from places like the interior of Ceará state to Rio de Janeiro.

Among the gay and lesbian bourgeoisie, queer liberalism has come to signify the *normalization* of queer life in Europe and the United States, and also in nations considered more peripheral, such as Brazil and Mexico. According to the sociologist Rafael de la Dehesa, queer liberation in Latin America started to acquire more momentum in the 1970s, as an item added to the political agenda against “illiberal” forms of government, such as the military dictatorship in Brazil and the “one party rule” of Mexican PRI. In both cases, the normative liberal queer movement benefitted from international liaisons with Europe and, most importantly, the USA. The international efforts to “democratize” Latin America opened up the region to other items in the international liberal agenda, such as the universalization of human rights claims, and the emphasis on notions of “modernity” derived from the Enlightenment. Along with these, there was also a push to expand civil rights to coopt subjects who had been marginalized due to their non-normative desires and sexual practices.²⁵ More recently, these achievements have reached the point that it has become “normal” for homosexual couples not just to marry, but also to reproduce, having children both through adoption and reproductive technologies.

For my queer friends in the favela, however, queer liberalism offered different possibilities. Favela dwellers challenged the liberal social contract in their unapologetic land occupations, and they presented an even bolder challenge when they refused to live life according to the expectations of reproductive futurism. The main concern for my queer friends from Rocinha was not necessarily related to a better future, getting legally married, living as long as possible, or saving resources for their offspring. Instead, they cared much more about living life to the fullest, enjoying sexual pleasures disconnected from concerns with biological reproduction and even one’s “health”. Instead of preserving their bodies for the future, they were more concerned with radical bodily transformations.

Toward a queer liberalism

Minoritarian liberation demands a detailed ethnographic engagement to understand “disidentification”: that is, how those outside the racial, sexual, and even adult mainstream negotiate with dominant powers not by aligning themselves with or against these exclusionary forces, but rather by transforming them for their own purposes.²⁶ An important contribution of queer slum dwellers’ political work has been the constant production of “lines of flight” in the face of intertwined forms of oppression. The concept of minoritarian liberalism is not meant to be simply a variation of liberalism within a pre-established framework of tolerance toward cultural “diversity.” Instead, the concept is derived from research “based on conscious political choices about standing on the side of struggle and transformation.”²⁷ In this case, rather than merely looking to expand a catalog of freedoms, as some sort of “butterfly collection” exercise, I have suggested that the main point of taking minoritarian liberties seriously is to further the struggle of favela dwellers against forms of domination that are not the most evident and, for that same reason, more effective. Notably, I am referring to the colonization of liberal possibilities by normative liberalism.

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NOTES

1. Excerpted from *Minoritarian Liberalism: A Travesti Life in a Brazilian Favela* (University of Chicago Press, 2022). All rights reserved.
2. On this topic, Michel Foucault states: “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power [only] in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991), 194.
3. The concepts of negative liberty (absence of constraints) and positive liberty (possibility of action) resonate here (see Berlin 1969). Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty, in *Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).
4. As scholars have often pointed out, racial categories are complex in Brazil. Affirmative action skeptics have historically asked: “Who is black in Brazil?” Black activists have consistently responded: “Ask a Brazilian policeman, he’ll know!” For further discussions on the complexity of racial issues in Brazil, see, for example: Antônio Guimarães, *Classes, Raças e Democracia* (Editora 34, 2009).
5. I did not experience the same racial classification in Brazil as in the United States, where I’m considered colored, or Latino.
6. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
7. See: Sidney Chalhoub, (2011). *Visões da liberdade: Uma história das últimas décadas da escravidão na Corte*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
8. The abolition of slavery in Brazil was not followed by any economic policies to assist these populations.
9. Lícia Valladares, *A Invenção da Favela – do Mito de Origem a Favela.com* (Editora FGV, 2015). Valladares also states that both in the Census of 1948 and 1950, Blacks and *Mestizos* were by far the most dominant ethnic groups living in favelas.
10. An argument made by Valladares, *A Invenção da Favela*.
11. Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões* 1 ed (Rio de Janeiro: Laemmert, 1902).
12. Valladares, *A Invenção da Favela*, 35. Valladares also states that both in the Census of 1948 and 1950.
13. *Favella* (*Cnidocolus quercifolius*) is also the name of a plant that grew over the hills in Canudos (Bahia).
14. Cunha, *Os Sertões*.
15. At the time, one US dollar was the equivalent of 2,23 Brazilian Reais.
16. According to the definitions provided by ANTRA (the Brazilian National Association of Travestis and Transsexuals) travestis can be defined as “people who live a female gender construction, opposite to the sex designation attributed at birth, followed by a physical construction, of a more permanent character, which is

- identified in social, family, cultural and interpersonal life, through this identity.” Whereas, transsexuals could be defined as “people who have a different Gender Identity than the one designated at birth.” Free translation. Source: <https://antra-brasil.org/sobre/>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.
17. The Brazilian metropolis, especially São Paulo, is known as the “urban jungle (*selva de pedra*).”
 18. Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
 19. A notable example of this form of liberalism would be the type of Black freedom conceptualized as “marronage.” See Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*.
 20. There is great diversity to what is collectively known as favelas. These are not only differences in physical form, but also in mechanisms of power and control. To that extent, my findings in Rocinha are not automatically translatable to the realities of all Brazilian favelas.
 21. “Minoritarian” here is derived from Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
 22. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
 23. For a more in-depth analysis of masculinity as a consideration in the life of Brazilian travestis and their lovers, see Larissa Pelúcio, *Abjeção e Desejo: uma Etnografia Travesti sobre o Modelo Preventivo de Aids* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2009).
 24. Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias, translated from *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46–49.
 25. For a more detailed account of LGBTQ rights struggle in Latin America, see Rafael De La Dehesa, *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). For the Brazilian historical context in particular, see James Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Print location: Chicago University Press, 2000).
 26. Muñoz, *Disidentification*, 31.
 27. Faye Harrison, *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association: 1997), 88.