

Introduction

Hard Laughter

The secret source of Humor is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.

Mark Twain, “Pudd’nhead Wilson’s New Calendar”

When I began the research that resulted in this book, I had no idea that I would use humor as one of the consolidating themes of an ethnography seeking to chart the complex intersections among the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality at work within poverty-stricken communities in Rio de Janeiro. I expected to write about the state and transnational processes shouldering their way into the lives of the urban poor—an insistent phenomenon increasingly insinuating itself into other local contexts, both urban and rural, in Brazil and all over the globe. But rather than locating my research in one of the institutions through which these forces are channeled, mediated, or even challenged (a site of inquiry that would have given me more direct access to these processes), I found myself instead embroiled in the local life of Rio’s *favelas*, or shantytowns, performing a rather old-fashioned role as participant-observer. Here, despite their heavy and direct impact, these state and global processes often seem detached and oddly indirect; they appear most of the time as vague, burdensome shadows, becoming solid and “real” only through the routine and visceral engagements with the embodied effects of power: humiliating encounters with police, standing in line at the emergency room with a deathly sick child, visiting a friend’s relative in prison.

In the shantytowns, one gets the almost overwhelming sense that it is not one’s place to participate in these processes or engage in dialogue with them. Residents feel largely divorced from these “outside” forces, except as a generalized target of them. These forces originate elsewhere,

journey far above and beyond ordinary people, are controlled by and offer opportunity to others, only then finding their end point, their appointed destination, in the lives of the poor through the contemptuous gaze of a police officer or the dismissive gesture of a well-meaning but overworked doctor. It is hard, even for the researcher, not to feel trapped within this particular reality—an existence blinded to the larger workings of these processes that, despite their undeniable daily impact, are strangely diffuse and seemingly well beyond local influence. Indeed, it is almost impossible to escape the naturalized notion that these forces, and the power they bring to bear, simply do not belong to the poor. And on many days, throughout the course of my fieldwork, I felt the same way—that these processes did not belong to me either, even as objects of inquiry. I saw the effects of power everywhere. Its fallout was all around me. Yet I sometimes felt I had come to study the forest, only to get lost in the trees.

Because the residents of these impoverished communities are indeed embedded in structures of power that are often unpredictable and beyond their immediate control, I have been careful to conceal their collective identity through the fictional renaming of their community and by intentionally imprecise reference to the location of the community both on the provided maps and in the text. Additionally, I have masked all individual identities through the use of pseudonyms and the digital alteration of all identifiable faces appearing in the photographs. While all of the people I came to know were enthusiastic about the prospect of having their photographs appear in a published book, I have chosen to fog their expressive and aesthetically pleasing faces to ensure their personal security.

Despite the fact that I was caught up in a community where life was all too clearly hard, everywhere I turned I seemed to hear laughter. I gradually came to realize, first in my gut, later in my head, that there was much more behind the humor than I first realized. This humor was a kind of running commentary about the political and economic structures that made up the context within which the people of Rio's shantytowns made their lives—an indirect dialogue, sometimes critical, often ambivalent, always (at least partially) hidden, about the contradictions of poverty in the midst of late capitalism. It offered an intriguingly subtle window onto the forces that I many times feared I had lost sight of.

The shape of this humor, its resonance, felt oddly familiar to me. It was similar—although not identical—to an aesthetic I had experienced before, an echo from long ago. My parents, second-generation immi-

grants from Russia, began their married lives together in a run-down public housing project in Brooklyn, New York. Many of my childhood recollections include our immediate neighbors and friends who were also Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, some of whom had survived the horrors of the Holocaust. I know that many of them were tough-skinned, touched as they were so indelibly by the direct hand of evil. Yet I remember their dinner parties as particularly loud and boisterous affairs, unabashedly celebratory, their insistent laughter always overpowering those cramped little rooms and seeping under doorways into the dim halls or flowing from the high windows out over the noisy, bustling street. I also had the benefit of having both a father and a grandfather who saw themselves as the inheritors of a great comic tradition. Both were insatiable collectors of humorous stories and jokes, not all of which were considered to be “in good taste.” Thus, my childhood was immersed in laughter. This humor, rendered darkly through the glass of their collective experience, masked a certain loss of innocence—and I took their messages about the world, however disguised, as a profound form of truth.¹

Even now, as I finish writing this book, which I admit has taken far too long, my father cannot resist teasing me with the assertion that he is staying alive just to see the day it is published.

WORDS FLY AWAY

When you realize that you are not getting something—a joke, a proverb, a ceremony—that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it.

Robert Darnton, “Workers Revolt: The Great Cat
Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin”

The meanings embedded in humor are often elusive, hard to grasp, fugitive. Yet humor and laughter, even when they admittedly baffled me, always incited me to delve deeper.² Such laughter became a challenge, an interpretive method for beginning to unravel the complex ways in which people comprehend their own lives and circumstances. Perhaps at times only partially or imperfectly, I found that humor, despite its grinning, Cheshire cat-like nature, nevertheless opened up a window onto the complicated consciousness of lives that were burdened by their place

within the racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies that inform their social world. Despite the rigidity of these hierarchies and tightly woven webs of power, they were not strong enough to contain this laughter, nor the meanings disguised within it, as it spilled over into my work.

The impoverished women in whose lives I became enmeshed—a largely nonliterate, urban, historically oppressed population—represented examples of contemporary women’s popular culture, one that has few direct opportunities for self-expression. Humor provided one of the few vehicles for giving voice to this group of women who have very little access to the public sphere so exalted in theoretical writings about democratic governance.³ And yet their culture remains elusive, much like—and for many of the same reasons as—historian Peter Burke’s (1978) popular culture of early modern Europe: “Popular culture eludes the historian because he is a literate, self-conscious modern man who may find it difficult to comprehend people unlike himself, and also because the evidence for their attitudes and values, hopes and fears is so fragmentary. Much of the popular culture of this period was oral culture, and ‘words fly away’” (65).

Women’s popular culture in Rio is not only largely oral but also predominantly inaccessible in an obviously public form. We know very little about women’s particularized perspective on the world.⁴ Burke’s assertion that “words fly away” suggests why detailed ethnographic studies may still provide important insights, despite the contention by some that this style of fieldwork-based ethnographic writing has been one of the great conceits of the discipline of anthropology.⁵ Even though close to one million out of the ten million residents of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro still live in favelas,⁶ there have been very few ethnographic attempts to capture the tenor and context of daily life in these communities or the particular struggle of the women who form their backbone.

Yet, despite the rarity of cultural productions authored by women from the popular classes, Carolina Maria de Jesus, a poor black woman living in a Brazilian favela, was able, in 1960, to publish her personal diary that documented everyday life and her struggle to survive and care for her children within the context of extreme poverty. Throughout two decades, the book, *Quarto de Despejo*, served to bring the perspective of Brazil’s urban poor to the outside world.⁷ It became a key text in the fields linking Brazilian studies, studies of human suffering in impoverished communities, and studies based on autobiographical recording and witnessing. But while de Jesus’s book has enjoyed an enduring popular-

ity in the international arena, it held a relatively short-lived fame in Brazil itself.⁸

As a North American anthropologist and as a woman, however, I have had the opportunity to share in this perspective through the bawdy laughter of contemporary women with a rich oral tradition, one that remains relatively ignored by the elite classes. Through my experience in Brazil, I became a member, albeit temporarily, of a chorus of “laughing people” (Bakhtin 1984[1965]:474)⁹—in this case, a chorus of women and children sharing stories and making each other laugh—a privileged position that provided me an opening into understanding their particular lives, lives informed and constrained by the hierarchies in which they find themselves embedded.

This book, then, at its core, is about power relations and how they are experienced by the poor. Humor emerged as one of the organizing themes—but not the central focus—of this study because it is where a particular kind of communication and meaning-making takes place. Humor is a vehicle for expressing sentiments that are difficult to communicate publicly or that point to areas of discontent in social life. The meanings behind laughter reveal both the cracks in the system and the masked or more subtle ways that power is challenged. Humor is one of the fugitive forms of insubordination. Although I could not often see the discontent of these women directly, I found that I could hear it expressed, often meekly, sometimes boldly, through their laughter.

BITTER TRUTHS, HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS

Rabelais, one of the wisest and most learned, as well as the wittiest of men, put on the robe of the all-licensed fool, that he might, like the court-jester, convey bitter truths under the semblance of simple buffoonery.

Thomas Love Peacock, “French Comic Romances,” in *Memoirs of Shelley, and Other Essays and Reviews*

Having been raised within a family of homegrown comedians and their fellow New York accomplices, I found it no surprise, when I finally turned formally to the subject of humor, that the literature is filled with references to the place of humor within the Jewish tradition.¹⁰ Freud’s classic *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1963[1905])

claimed that self-critical jokes characterize Jewish popular life, and later theorists, taking this seminal work as a starting point, claimed that humor was often a survivalist response to the vicissitudes of life (Oring 1984; Koller 1988), a perspective referred to as the “Jewish” view of humor (Davis 1995).¹¹ While it may seem that the popular humor of the characters presented throughout this book displays a similarly survivalist perspective—after all, their humor is inspired within cruel and unusual political and economic circumstances that nevertheless allow them to make fun of the absurdity of their situation—it is also much more than that. It forms part of a shared oppositional aesthetic forged within a class-polarized context.

Countless philosophers, scholars, speculators, theorists, and their various fellow travelers—from Plato to Hegel, Baudelaire to Bergson—have contributed to the map that attempts to chart the multifold roles and difficult landscape of humor. Historian Peter Gay (1993) has pointed out that “the varieties of laughter cover so vast and varied a terrain that they all but frustrate mapping,” and that “wit, humor, the comic . . . are exceedingly ambiguous in their intentions and their effects, prudent and daring, conformist and rebellious in turn” (369, 373). Yet, despite its paradoxical character, since the turn of the twentieth century (due in large part to the influence of Freud), the idea that behind the subtle and various guises of humor lies an essential aggressiveness has become commonplace.¹²

In the social science literature, this tension between the exercise and control of aggression has taken form as a debate that characterizes humor as either a conservative or a radical social force. One group of scholars describes humor as a kind of homeostatic mechanism that allows for social strains and tensions to be expressed within a group, thus leading to a kind of “escape-valve” analysis.¹³ In many of these analyses, humor is perceived ultimately to reinforce the status quo. Indeed, Michael Mulkay (1988) argues that humor is basically impotent in affecting change in the real world, but its analysis is important because it reveals ambiguity, contradiction, paradox, and inconsistency while encouraging multiple interpretations of the world. For Mulkay, the humorous mode is “consistently inconsistent or inconsistently consistent” (219), thereby revealing the multiple realities of the social world more accurately than the serious mode. Mulkay is arguing, ironically, with a classic anthropological perspective set forth by British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), who wrote about humor as an anti-rite, seeing in it a potentially disorganizing and revolutionary force.¹⁴

This once-raging debate has taken a related but more subtle (although no less thorny) shape around questions of resistance within the contemporary discourse. Echoing Douglas's assertion of humor as anti-rite, James Scott (1985), for example, has suggested that humor might be one of the "weapons of the weak." Building on the ideas of E. P. Thompson and Pierre Bourdieu, Scott argued that elites perform various acts of public domination and that these displays of public power contrast with the disguised forms of protest and insubordination—folktales, millennial visions, gossip, rumors, grumbling, or humor—carried out by subordinate groups. These offstage protests are the "hidden transcripts" of resistance, those that can easily be missed or dismissed because they are not public. These acts are in opposition to the dominating rituals of the ruling classes—a "counter-theatre," to use Thompson's term¹⁵—through which those classes exhibit their authority and exact deference from the poor. The upper classes, by virtue of their position, can deploy their weapons directly (in the form of economic and political control, for example). The poor, by contrast, are forced to express their resistance behind the backs of power.

Both Thompson and Scott have been interested in how public rituals are used in displays of domination and how the dominated classes, meekly or boldly, meet those displays through their own ritual forces. Their analyses suggest that laughter may be a powerful, though fugitive, act of insubordination, "a sly assertion of dignity" (Gay 1993:370). Indeed, humor can be a productive site from which to read less public forms of cultural production, to explore "the relation between aesthetic forms, material conditions, and ideological conceptions" (Williams 1987:93).

This leads us beyond the arguments over whether humor functions essentially as a conservative or a disorganizing force to reveal the idea that humor, through its aggressive impulse, is a form of power: "Using the materials of its culture, humor offers splendid openings for the exercise—and the control—of aggression" (Gay 1993:368). Scott suggests that whereas the power of the ruling classes allows them to publicly deploy their rituals and theater, the hidden transcripts of the powerless are disguised forms of resistance that "insinuate" a critique of power (1990:xiii). Humor can indeed, as Scott and Thompson argue, function as a weapon of the weak. But it is important to remember that laughter also falls within the arsenal of the powerful. In other words, humor, as an expression and deployment of (class) power, is potentially both conservative and liberatory.

Certainly not all forms of protest are revolutionary; but neither are

they all flaccid or irrelevant. Everyday forms of “resistance” are admittedly largely fleeting, but, I believe, they are important nonetheless. As expressions of power, such dissent reveals the fault lines within society. As a deployment of power, however weak or limited, dissent challenges the status quo. If laughter often does not live up to its radical potential, it nonetheless echoes Rabelais and speaks bitter “truths to power.”¹⁶ Perhaps this is laughter’s most fundamental and revolutionary role. As Gay reminds us, at its most basic, “humor is a very human way of putting such [hidden] truths on record” (1993:373).

RESISTING RESISTANCE: SAHLINS (STILL) WAITING FOR FOUCAULT

The binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one. The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual, autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and inflect the visible facts of overall domination, and whose purposes and calculations, desires and choices resist any simple division into the political and apolitical. . . . There are no good subjects of resistance.

Colin Gordon writing on the work of Michel
Foucault, “Afterword,” in *Power/Knowledge:
Selected Interviews and Other Writings*,
1972–1977

Being called upon to provide after-dinner entertainment to the Fourth Decennial Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth, held in Oxford on July 29, 1993, North American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1999[1993]) took the podium and proceeded to render into dry satire the latest “postmodern” trends in the field for his esteemed, and doubtlessly delighted, colleagues:

Power, power everywhere,
And how the signs do shrink.
Power, power everywhere,
And nothing else to think. (23)

These few evocative words provide an introduction of sorts to Sahlins’s tongue-in-cheek commentary that evening.¹⁷ I was not lucky enough to have been present, but I can imagine the scene. Sahlins is perhaps the perfect trickster among what I imagine to be our discipline’s more staid and

proper British academic counterparts. It was a brief, humorous, but telling moment in the history of anthropology. On the one hand, his commentaries were a facetious and whimsical bit of entertainment. On the other hand, the “hidden transcript” of his often clever and biting wit reveals a stern and rather serious critique of the state of theory in the social sciences regarding hegemony and the (according to Sahlins, perhaps overemphasized) influence of Foucauldian constructions of power. “Quite wondrous, then, is the variety of things anthropologists can now explain by power and resistance, hegemony and counter-hegemony. I say ‘explain’ because the argument consists entirely of categorizing the cultural form at issue in terms of domination, as if that accounts for it” (Sahlins 1999[1993]:23). The droll lesson of the evening seemed to be Sahlins’s version of Freud’s proclamation that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”¹⁸ Cloaked in humor, his is a stern admonition to be wary of the trivialities overinvested with meaning by many of today’s researchers who have, according to Sahlins, become swept up in foolish faddishness.

So, while we might be tempted to dismiss Sahlins’s barely buried critique because it is embedded in humor, this would be a mistake. Sahlins certainly is just “joking” about the excesses in the discipline, but the old master Freud would be the first to point out that there is seldom such a thing as “just” joking. For Freud, jokes are as powerful a window into the trials and tribulations of the psyche as dreams. (Freud was talking about the individual psyche, but we could extend this to the social psyche as well.)

In a more earnest venue, Sahlins (1999) has indeed more seriously questioned the tendency in recent ethnographic writings to claim that “all culture is power,” or that everything is explicable in terms of domination and resistance. We are warned that we should not be tempted into spinning certain trivialities into material that is political, a point that I want to heed to some extent. I have taken some of Sahlins’s commentary seriously and subsequently have tried to resist as much as is possible the seductiveness of seeing resistance everywhere I turn. While it is true that an act cannot be termed resistance merely because it took place in the context of domination, it is important to recognize that every act is mitigated through class position and is implicitly a class act, ultimately political in the sense that every act, as well as the analytical practices we employ to understand these practices, reflects, reinforces, and enacts class relations. It is important to remember that hegemony (Gramsci 1971)—that predominance of ruling-class interests and of the acceptance of those interests as commonsense by those subordinated to those interests—is, quite literally, “habit forming” (Lock 1993:384).¹⁹

Just as I do not want to fall victim to a too-easy functionalism, neither do I want to back away from an ethnography that examines the complex and ambiguous discourses, emotions, and sentiments of real people. Rather, I hope to occasionally sort the “winks from twitches” (Geertz 1973:16). “Good-enough” ethnography, to use Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s (1992:28) term, champions the imperfect work of unraveling and representing how domination works, a task strengthened by including as subjects and agents those who are dominated.

BLACK HUMOR, CLASS, AND CARNIVALESQUE LAUGHTER

Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things, and they call it being merry. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal and so ill-bred as audible laughter.

Lord Chesterfield, *Letters*, March 9, 1748,
quoted in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*

While the humor of the poor may not necessarily lead directly to rebellions and political revolutions, it does open up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced. Further, because humor is connected to the sensibilities of a particular group, it is intimately connected to one’s position within the class structure. As Gay notes, “Humor is Janus-faced; in marshaling a momentary community of laughers, it ingratiates the teller with a chosen audience, but at the same time and by the same means stigmatizes others as outsiders to be disliked or despised” (1993:370). The humor of particular classes plays an important role in boundary formation and the reinforcement of class positions, hierarchies, and structures. Through laughter—one’s own as well as that of others—one’s naturalized and proper “place” within the social structure is outlined and reinforced, as well as contested. In humor, “characteristic expressions of individual minds, class habits, and cultural styles” (369) are embedded.

As Henri Bergson put it, “Laughter is always the laughter of a group” (1956[1911]:64). That said, it can also be used to upset those same group boundaries.²⁰ The black humor I came to know in the Brazilian shantytowns was a discourse created by the poor and used against the wealthier classes.²¹ Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Da Matta (1994),

writing on the characteristics of popular culture in Brazil, relates popular culture to that which is not official culture, to what is often referred to in Brazil as *o povo*, a word that can invoke everything from the folk or the people to the majority or masses of the population belonging to the subordinated classes. While it was once common to think that elite culture always moved downward toward the masses and that the masses merely mimicked the elite, there is now greater interest in tracing the effects of elite and popular culture on one another.²² Bakhtin (1984[1965]) employs this notion of circularity, an idea that refers to the interactions between popular and elite cultures, and perhaps more accurately describes the processes involved. His work on the popular culture of the Middle Ages offers a vision of this culture as one with a focus on bodily orifices and bodily functions—a kind of “grotesque realism”—that has been difficult for social historians to capture: “We cannot understand cultural and literary life and the struggle of mankind’s historic past if we ignore that peculiar folk humor that always existed and was never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes. While analyzing past ages we are too often obliged to “take each epoch at its word,” that is, to believe its official ideologists. We do not hear the voice of the people and cannot find and decipher its pure unmixed expression” (Bakhtin 1984:474). From the point of view of the official culture, these popular aesthetic forms—including those of *o povo* in the Brazilian context—represent a form of “bad taste” and, because of this distinction, are more difficult to read as part of official history. Bakhtin pointed to the ways in which the folk would play with the body in its “low” form—fart, defecate, and pick their noses—in a manner that reinscribed the body as a source of comedy. Similarly, David B. Morris (1991), in his fascinating study of the history and culture of pain, positions the body as a fundamental source and object of human laughter: “Comedy needs the body in the same way the sonnet needs fourteen lines and unrequited love. The life of the body—which most philosophers can afford to ignore or dismiss as trivial—is almost a formal requirement of comic practice” (82). Within a Bakhtinian world, a world that celebrates the rituals of the folk such as Carnival, it must be noted that bad taste is embraced. Carnival is a time when popular culture is permitted to broadcast its commentary, mustering all its power through lowness or bad taste.

Film critic and Brazilianist Robert Stam (1989) applies Bakhtinian categories to his analysis of a number of productions—twentieth-century music, theater, dance, and film—and finds that the carnivalesque aesthetic permeates Brazil. It is not merely cornered within the popular

classes; rather, it provides convincing evidence of Bakhtin's notion of circularity, of the interactions and exchanges between popular and elite cultural aesthetics.

Forms of humor can be conceptualized within this framework. For example, black humor, as it appears throughout this book, is comprehensible across a broad range of classes. I would argue, however, that it is borne within the material and ideological circumstances of the people whose lives I portray here. Accordingly, I must warn the reader of his or her own possible reactions to this particular aesthetic. Whereas an artistic production can elevate what is officially considered bad taste to the realm of art, the day-to-day carnivalesque aesthetics of the popular classes are often viewed by middle-class and elite culture, both in Brazil and elsewhere, as inappropriate or out of place. In fact, the themes, language, and general storytelling of the women in the pages that follow reflect a culture and a sense of humor that are, in many respects, distinct from the official culture of the dominant classes. The humor of these classes is at least partially traceable to the suffering they experience in everyday life. Nevertheless, Brazil produces its own form of black comedy, but this body of work is partially a product of a "trickling up" of a popular aesthetic form. One might be incited to ask, then, how are the forms of elite humor in Brazil different from the humor of the popular classes? The difference is a subtle, although palpable, one. The elite classes exhibit a similar sense of black humor, and their stories reflect a knowledge of misery in their midst, but it is usually a distanced misery. It is not that their commentary is in any way inauthentic or invalid. Rather, their suffering has different roots and different consequences. It is within the context of everyday lives and interactions that the stories presented here gain distinction. These protagonists live in the same communities where stray bullets from police and gangs are flying and where gangs and churches jointly vie for their allegiance. There is a direct relationship between the materiality of the misery and the aesthetic form, whereas among the middle and elite classes who dominate through their position in the social structure, it is a second-order aesthetic. Here, one can ground Bakhtin. Here, the lives that produce black humor are lives that are themselves plagued by particular kinds of tragedy and suffering, caused in large part by their material conditions. These are not the same problems lived by the middle and upper classes.

And so it is in these ways that laughter and humor play a significant role in power relations. The black-humored commentaries of the subordinated classes are windows into the sense of injustice oppressed peoples

feel about their conditions. While those with power act out a theater of majesty, wealth, and domination, those with less power act out a “counter-theatre” of objection, defiance, and absurdity.

This body of humor, taken together, makes me believe that its practitioners understand the futility of certain forms of protest (the ones we expect to see and thus tend to look for) but nevertheless are acutely conscious of the situation they face. For those of us who are on the sidelines attempting to analyze these situations, we are troubled by the implications of what our underestimation or overestimation of the effects of their protest will mean. Rather than too easy and quiet, I have come to see their laughter as hard and loud, in a way different from the more expected forms of protest, which only rarely find expression in their lives and thus in these pages. Their laughter contains a sense of the absurdity of the world they inhabit. This connection—between absurdity and laughter—is one that the people portrayed on these pages may not articulate spontaneously, but they would doubtless recognize it. Others, too, will understand this connection, much like the architect John Donald Tuttle,²³ who playfully inscribed a quotation from Rafael Sabatini²⁴ above a doorway in the Hall of Graduate Studies at Yale University: “Born with the gift of laughter and the sense that the world was mad.”²⁵

WHISTLING PAST THE GRAVEYARD OF THE COLD WAR OF CLASS

I believe that the notion of a hidden transcript helps us understand those rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power.

James C. Scott,
Domination and the Arts of Resistance

Brazilians have always prided themselves as a nation in being (relatively) bloodless during major moments of historical upheaval. This self-image is of course partially a revision, history tidied up to make these actors more appealing to themselves and to the world at large. But while Brazil did, for example, move from colony to kingdom, kingdom to empire, and empire to republic without extensive bloodshed, as well as abolish slavery without a civil war, there was indeed violence. The Paraguayan War (1865–70), the decimation of Canudos (1890s), and the military

dictatorship's successful suppression of political dissent (1964–85) provide historical counterexamples. Moreover, one could name Brazil as that place where the extremities of radical inequality seem to effortlessly remain in place, exhibiting almost none of the strain often seen blatantly cracking the surface of other places where similar inequality is evidenced. Given the flagrant nature of Brazilian inequality, one would most likely have never predicted that Brazil would have been able to avoid the appearance of a large-scale, class-based revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, despite its sometimes misleadingly celebrated harmony, I attempt to attend ethnographically to the distinct forms of class hegemony and the muted forms of resistance against it, searching both within and beyond the distinct communicative forms people use to express dissatisfaction.

It is worth pointing out that the resistance of the population in Brazil has taken place within a number of relatively pacific and democratically oriented social movements, especially during the last twenty years. Both a strong Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores [PT]) and an increasingly successful grassroots movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra [MST]) made up of rural, landless workers fighting for land reform and for access to agricultural lands have enjoyed a certain measure of success. Likewise, several new social movements have emerged.²⁶ I tend to be slightly less optimistic—but still supportive—about these movements because, in many cases, they tend to be thick with committed and well-intentioned middle- and upper-class activists but sometimes thin on representatives of the populations they hope to represent. However, it must be recognized that they have been successful, both in professionalizing their movements in the context of nongovernmental organization formation and in making real political gains through both local and global protest networks. The women's movement, the black consciousness movement, and even the relatively newer AIDS social movement provide examples of such groups; each can point to important gains made over time, and their efforts are to be lauded. But it is important to note that the women I worked with and whose lives I speak about here are emphatically not members of these groups, nor do they have much information about such organizations. I mention this to point out that part of the problem these women face is that they do not even have access to these collective political organizations. Their only weapons of resistance are their fierce wits and sharp tongues.

The protagonists in this ethnography find themselves at the bottom of

a number of complex and interacting hierarchies, a situation that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to find their way out from under these oppressive structures in any straightforward manner. They experience simultaneous and multiple forms of domination, including criminalization by the police forces and the society at large; intimidation by the local gangs whose web of activities seduce their youth and entangle many who want to remain neutral; the narrowing of public space, in terms of being made to feel ill at ease, illustrated in such examples as strict policing during periods of international attention;²⁷ a sense of ambiguity regarding their own evaluations of the color of their skin, hair type, and facial features; and frustration in their relationships with men who can transgress sexual boundaries as part of an acceptable cultural script. These women are, throughout their everyday lives, almost wholly devoted to surviving. They have not had the privilege of becoming a well-organized or a highly politicized social movement. At least, not yet.

The women introduced here are so far removed from the economic transformations taking place in Brazil that their particular favela has not yet even been visited by global corporations attempting to harness cheap home labor in the production of toys or sweaters or electronic goods, as has been found by some of my colleagues in other similarly impoverished communities just beyond the center of Rio de Janeiro.²⁸ The vast majority of the women studied here belong to a lineage of domestic workers whose daughters now are attempting to break from this tradition and are experiencing limited success in locating satisfactory alternative forms of employment. Yet these women communicate in an oppositional aesthetic style—a constant flow of spontaneous black humor—that seems to belie their everyday struggles. This black humor, one of the many offshoots described by Freud as intimately related to the human aggressive impulse and defined by Breton as the ability to find laughter in human tragedy, is significant because it is perhaps one of the few ways of escaping pain and human suffering. As Morris writes: “We tend to emphasize Freud’s well-known theory that laughter expresses sublimated aggression, where the relation between comedy and pain is quite explicit. It is useful to recall, however, that Freud also sees a much more subtle and disguised relation linking comedy and pain. In a late essay, for example, he describes humor as a crucial means for *evading* the compulsion to suffer that he elsewhere finds endemic to human mental life” (1991:89). This more subtle link between pain and humor has long been known: “Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful” (Prov. 14:13),²⁹ or, as the comedian Jerry Lewis once remarked, “Funny had better be sad somewhere.”³⁰ The women described

on these pages seem to be laughing in spite of their suffering. Or because of it. Or, perhaps more accurately, it is a combination of both. Humor is one way of bearing witness to the tragic realities of life and an expression of discontent—the oppositional act, to turn Scott’s phrase, of laughing directly into the teeth of suffering.

Is this laughter of resistance an example of what Scott (1985) has termed the “small arms fire in the class war” (1)? The ambivalence and ambiguity of fugitive forms of resistance elude interpretation. Perhaps it is the verbal equivalent of throwing stones. Revolutions have been started with less, and often it is hard for us to know when those moments are upon us. I happened to be in Rio de Janeiro during the *arrastões* (beach sweeps) of 1992, when gang youths from poor neighborhoods swept across the beaches populated by middle- and upper-class bathers.³¹ I wondered whether such actions signaled the possibility of the cold war over class beginning to heat up. But waiting or hoping for the revolution is tricky business, as Scott himself points out: “For all their importance when they do occur, peasant rebellions—let alone revolutions—are few and far between. The vast majority are crushed unceremoniously. When, more rarely, they do succeed, it is a melancholy fact that the consequences are seldom what the peasantry had in mind” (xv–xvi). It is to court a hard bargain to wish for such a revolutionary moment, because we all too often know beforehand who will suffer the greatest losses.

In my own experiences in Brazil, laughter seems to fall short of a direct weapon of rebellion; humor is a much more discursive form of resistance. Humorous stories about class circulate freely and frequently on both sides of the class divide. I have heard many stories, for example, from middle- and upper-class friends who are perplexed by the laughter of a domestic worker. They have watched the same evening soap opera, but rather than being moved to tears like her employer, the domestic worker is inspired to laughter. Because of such “laughter out of place,” these workers and their popular culture may be seen as a kind of “alien within” by these more powerful classes.

Thus, a Brazilian reader from any class would need much less explanation of the humor spelled out here than would the North American reader, who needs more of a guide to the context, the daily struggles, and the inequalities and hierarchies within which the humor of this unfamiliar culture takes place. Brazilians of all classes, however, will recognize this humor as part of their own because they know their own context and by now accept the circularity of this popular form. Despite this, there

are moments of misrecognition wherein even elite Brazilian readers may experience a newfound identification through a close reading of this text.

Regardless of the audience, and despite my own rather ambivalent feelings regarding the radical potential of humor, I nevertheless humbly join Walter Benjamin (1978a) here in suggesting, “There is no better start for thinking than laughter” (235).