Masking Urban Marginality

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*Rio is a city of* fantasia *[costumes], she tells me. Everyone wears a disguise,* uma máscara *[a mask]; you can't trust anyone. You must be on your feet at all times, one foot forward, the other behind* [ficar com um pé na frente e o outro atrás]*, ready to make a counter move.*

Conversation with Dona A in Chapéu Mangueira, RJ

Fieldnotes, July 8, 2013

This summer, during preliminary field research in Rio de Janeiro, I witnessed the re-creation of public space as over a million urban citizens took to the streets to demand their rights to the city. Protesters were armed with paper signs — bold, hand-written messages expressing their rebuke of choice (transportation, corruption, healthcare, education, police violence, etc.) — as well as catchy chants and mobile network technologies to document these events in real time. They had concurrently created a spectacle on the urban streets and in the digital streams of social media. This spectacle was about personal narratives, both visual and verbal, that evinced what the mainstream media and political leaders had failed to reveal: the extent of discontent and mistrust that the urban public has in the country’s structures of power and governance.

These narratives were aestheticized in their tone and structure of articulation as well as in their visual ensemble revealed online through photographic and filmic images. Particularly during the demonstrations of June 20, the atmosphere on the streets shifted rapidly between a euphoric carnivalesque masquerade and a frantic, violent warzone as battalions of military police shot gas bombs and rubber bullets into peaceful crowds, instigating waves of fleeing protestors. As activists and residents from marginalized squatter communities stressed in meetings and social media and on protest posters, this militarized violence against civilians was not new to Rio de Janeiro, it had just never been directed at the middle classes. The protest was an artful performance of urban citizenship that used public space to contest and reconfigure the public both on and offline.

While these popular protests began as a response to the hikes in public transportation fares, reactions to police violence and censure in the media and political discourse widened support for the cause across the nation. International development organizations such as the United Nations have lauded Brazil for, “achieving economic growth, with social justice and fairness,” and managing “to reduce inequalities without reducing economic growth rates.”[[1]](#footnote-1) However, everyday conversation among Rio residents [Cariocas] before the protests revealed widespread discontent with the quality of public services, corruption, urban governance, mega-events developments, and police violence. Once ignited, these diverse concerns were channeled into a collective fight for the “right to the city” [*dereito á cidade*]. However, where is the new line drawn between the visible and the invisible in representation of public protest, and what is it masking in terms of access, security, and citizenship?

Masks and transparency were central themes that aimed to expose marginality across social and economic classes. These popular protests, *manifestações*, were an attempt to remove the mask of equitable economic growth by rendering deep structural inequality manifest in the public spaces of Brazilian cities. Playing with the theme of deception and disguise, protestors appropriated the Guy Fawkes mask that the “hacktivist” collective Anonymous has used as a symbol of their political movement. In the streets and online, urban citizens addressed diverse issues of marginality from *favela* squatter settlement evictions to homophobia. The breadth and depth of their cause was well expressed in the popular protest slogan: “Pardon the mess. We are changing the country” [*desculpa o transtorno, estamos mudando o país*].

These masks that disguise urban marginality take on many forms throughout the city. My initial aim this summer was to observe, participate in, and investigate local everyday practices in the squatter settlements of Rio de Janeiro in which residents expose structural and symbolic inequality by creating, producing, and (re)negotiating urban space and cultural identity. I spent two months living, observing, and participating in everyday life in Chapéu Mangueira, a small squatter community located on a hill above the wealthy Southern Zone [Zona Sul] of the city. The community has been occupied by the new state-run military police, the Pacifying Police Units [UPP, Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora], since 2009.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the wake of “pacification,” local researchers have begun to refer to the community of Chapéu Mangueira and its western neighbor Babilônia as “boutique favelas.” They are communities that have gained much visibility due to their small size,[[3]](#footnote-3) privileged location and views of the city, and recent attention from outsiders: tourists, researchers, and publicly and privately funded philanthropy and development projects who have all added to the stark rise in property values[[4]](#footnote-4) and cost of living. These trends ignite fears of gentrification among local leaders and academics who often refer to this developmental process as *remoção branca* [white removal], community displacement enacted through market forces rather than forced removal. Unlike many squatter communities that suffer from invisibility in the periphery, the cultural identity of these particular favela residents and their community spaces have become hyper visible in the media, academia, and publicly and privately funded programs for infrastructural upgrading and physical and social services. My research question soon shifted to investigate whether the perceived security that “pacification” has brought to these communities has produced a new avenue that masks urban marginality. Has public recognition and focus in the marginalization of these particular urban citizens and investment in their physical and social services turned everyday life in these communities into a “projectification” of the social?

The protest atmosphere that enveloped the city worked its way into my lens of analysis. I began to focus on local manifestations of the political and the ways in which those messages work their way into daily discourse and organized action. This has been exemplified on a metropolitan scale with the recent linguistic tactic by residents that has shifted the local term used to refer to the city’s squatter settlements from favela to *comunidade* [community]. On a more localized scale, I observed community reactions to the various project and program proposals that entered the community on a daily basis; they consisted of four main types (1) government-funded and often privately managed; (2) privately funded and privately managed; (3) non-governmental and non-profit; and (4) associated with academic institutions. Most were top-down and prefabricated in design, despite their claims of participatory methods and empowering local leadership. Additionally, I observed critical reactions to the educational and empowerment projects that aimed to “teach” residents their rights. I participated in resident association meetings that organized collective responses to distrustful projects, and I actively accompanied a locally founded activist group, Favela Não Se Cala [Favela Won’t Shut Up], that mobilized a grassroots network of favela residents and interested participants from across the city to expose the dangers of what they call the privatization of the favela.

Ultimately, my field research revealed that the manifestation of inequality — whether during popular protests in central city streets or interventions in the daily life of “pacified” *comunidade* residents — does not negate the presence, persistence, or exacerbation and reproduction of sociocultural marginality. It does, however, create new forms of urban citizenship that contest these *fantasias* [costumes or fantasies] of development with both visible and invisible demands for their right to the city.

1. United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] (June 5-6, 2011), *International Forum Pathways to Democratic Transitions: Summary Report on Country Experiences, Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead*, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States: Cairo, pp. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Battalions first enter the *favelas* to expel drug traffickers, and subsequently, different officers are placed in the community to reduce crime and violence in the longer-term by remaining onsite. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While the exact population is unknown, the 2010 IBGE Demographic Census estimates that both communities combined number 3,740 residents in 1,194 households, and the Chapéu Manguiera residents association places that estimate at approximately 5,000 residents. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some cases cited by the local residents association reveal up to a one-hundredfold increase in property values. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)