Virtually Virgins

Sexual Strategies and Cervical Cancer in Recife, Brazil

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Culture, Gender, and Ethnography

WHENEVER Djandira got caught up in the details of some interesting story or some gossip she was hearing, she would lean forward intently and click her dentures in and out of her mouth with her tongue, so interested that she seemed to forget her usual keen desire to appear well-groomed, or at the very least dentulous, in public. When she spoke, she was just as intense. She would fix me with her very large sad eyes and ask me every few seconds if I understood, "*entendeu*?"

Did I understand, for instance, why she needed to leave her husband? Or did I simply think she was shameless, and no longer worthy of my respect? I always assured her that I did not question her morals or her respectability. But I thought I understood her concern. In the limited time that I had spent in her community, a favela, or shantytown, in Brazil, I had been told repeatedly that a woman's greatest asset was her respectability, and that a woman without a husband was not respectable. A good woman, I was also told, should remain home with her children, should not venture out into the city streets alone, and should never have more than one sexual partner. Djandira was about to do just about everything that a good woman should not.

She had just decided to leave George, her "husband" of six months. George was a thin, quiet man, whom everyone referred to as "Ja Morreu"—Already Died. His nickname reflected that he'd been sickly since childhood and, in fact, had often been so near death that no one had believed recovery possible. With each acute illness, family and friends had accepted as inevitable his demise. That he had now survived to adulthood did not negate, in the minds of those who knew him, that he had already died several times over.

Although generally healthy, Djandira herself was not particularly vibrant. In fact, when George moved in with Djandira, my friend Fatima began referring to the listless couple as "Ja Morreu and Dona Morta"—Already Died

and Lady Death. Listening to her teasing, Djandira would smile slightly at the joke and drink her beer. She never seemed to have the energy to respond.

Only twenty-nine years old, Djandira worked cleaning houses six days a week, and her skinny body was curved into a permanent tired slouch. Since losing her virginity at twelve (and being subsequently kicked out of her natal home by her stepfather), she had been engaged in a long line of semi-permanent monogamous relationships. Without a home of her own, Djandira depended on her "husbands," and sometimes on charitable friends, to provide her and her family with a place to live. Her dream was to own her own home, but the minimal wages she made cleaning houses, coupled with the rampant Brazilian inflation, made saving for that dream next to impossible. If she had her own home, she reasoned, she would depend less on the charity, or the sexual interest, of others for her survival.

Djandira did not make it a secret that she did not particularly like George. She complained that he tried to control her life too much. "He is so jealous. I can't leave the house without him asking where I'm going, what I'm doing, what we said, for how long. It's too much." But he bought food for the household and sometimes gave her money. And he never hit her. Still, Djandira did not expect their relationship to last forever. Something would come up, George would start to beat her, or he would spend money on other women, or they would fight too much, and the relationship would end. She would then have to find another "husband" and another place to live.

She was not worried that ending their relationship would sully her reputation. She had left men, and had been left by them, before and she had always found new partners. No one thought any less of her for having had several "husbands" so long as she was faithful while she was with them. But this time was different. Another man, married, and more than thirty years her senior, had made Djandira a proposition. He wanted her to leave George and to promise to be available for sex and companionship whenever he came by. In exchange, he demanded no other commitment from Djandira and promised to help her buy the materials she would need to build her own house.

Djandira and I discussed her dilemma nightly. That this other man did not want Djandira to live with him, or even to be faithful to him when he was not present, was both appealing and frightening. On the one hand, the freedom he offered was enticing, and her relationship with George rather tenuous. On the other hand, such behavior would certainly damage her reputation and mark her as both a woman without a man and as a woman "in the street." It was not clear what she should do. Djandira finally made her decision the week that she caught George twice with other women, spending his paycheck in the bar and leaving little for her and her sons at home. She left him.

One year later, Djandira's house was almost completed. She was still seeing the older man and was also seeing two other men in their sixties, each of whom was helping to fund the construction and furnishing of her home. She told me that she now understood that the best thing in the world was to be without a commitment to a man. "I don't have anyone yelling at me to give them their coffee or to do anything. It is much better alone. I don't even like to have a man sleep all night with me any more. I like my bed to myself."

When she left George and began accepting the visits of the older man, Djandira's reputation did in fact change. People talked about how she now would sleep with any man with money, and men in the community made advances and sexual comments that they had previously withheld. But that was about it. There was no Hester Prynne-like scandal, no shunning, no loss of friends or severing of family ties. Life just went on.

I learned that some variant of Djandira's situation, and her actions with regard to it, were much more commonplace than I had been led to believe. Djandira's dilemma was familiar to many of the women in the community. In fact, during the eighteen months I spent living in the favela, I was struck by the extent to which sex, sexual relationships, and their social and economic implications were both central and remarkably ambiguous issues in the lives of most of the women in the community. Women knew the "rules" of correct behavior and knew how "good" Brazilian women should behave sexually, but they also knew that those rules were often simply untenable in the context of their lives. In the context of poverty, frustration, and extremely strained gender relations, respectability, shame, honor, marriage, and even virginity all became relative terms.

This book examines the conflict between cultural ideals of Brazilian women's sexuality and the lived reality of sex for impoverished Brasileiras in the Brazilian Northeast. It then examines the interplay between sexual expectations, sexual reality, and disease in that same context.

These examinations matter. As an object of study, Brazilian sexuality has been deemed a defining quality of the Brazilian people, and women in particular have featured prominently as the cynosures of the Brazilian sexual universe (Parker 1991; Guillermoprieto 1990). Despite that, one has little sense of women's sexuality in Brazil *as it is experienced by women*. This remains true even in more recent scholarly portrayals of Brazilian sexual culture. Discussion of women's subjective experience of sexuality continues to remain notably absent (cf. Parker 1991, 1999; Paiva 1995).[1]

This is not just academic nit-picking. Not only does this dearth of attention to women's sexuality guarantee a lopsided perspective of Brazilian culture, but it also has important practical implications. How a woman thinks about and uses her body sexually has a tremendous impact on the health or disease of that body. This is especially significant in northeastern Brazil, where

the proportion of women suffering from AIDS continues to rise (Aruda 1995), where Recife, the largest city in that region, was once known as "Resyphilis," and where documented incidence of cervical cancer, a disease related to sexual activity, is the highest in the world (Registro Nacional de Patologia Tumoral 1991). The neglect of women's sexual experience in Brazil, then, not only silences women but also may have significant consequences for women's health.

This book attends to that neglect. Focusing on women's understandings and uses of their own sexuality, it argues that impoverished Brasileiras are constrained by larger cultural expectations of female sexuality and manipulate those expectations to meet their own needs. It also shows how dominant cultural constructions of female sexuality affect discourse surrounding the prevention and understanding of cervical cancer. And again it demonstrates the ways in which impoverished women alter those dominant biomedical constructions to fit their more local interests. Finally, it shows how, while that ability to manipulate the dominant cultural constructions to their own ends demonstrates a remarkable resourcefulness and sense of agency among women in the study, it also had significant, deleterious, ramifications for women's health.

Theoretical Underpinnings

THE QUESTION OF CULTURE

One of the central assertions of this work is that the women in my community were constrained by, but also altered, culturally dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. This assertion, however, contains two large assumptions. First, it assumes that "culturally dominant constructions" exist. Second, it assumes that those constructions can be used to describe individuals, like *faveladas* (women who live in favelas), who live at the margins of culture. Both assumptions are problematic. Before going on, then, let me explain why those assumptions are difficult, and why, despite those difficulties, I still contend that generalized cultural norms of gender and sexuality shaped women's sense of themselves and of their behavior.

First, the assumption that dominant cultural constructions exist is problematic because the entire concept of culture has become something of a problem. In 1871, British anthropologist Edward Tylor described culture as "a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1958). Although now considered a classic definition, Tylor's depiction of culture as a discrete, fixed, knowable entity has become difficult to defend. In a time in which cultures are increasingly technologically connected, and people and ideas travel quickly between different areas of the

world, it is hard to imagine discrete, stable, cultural "wholes." Rather, multiplicities of thought and opinion seem to push at national boundaries, while the world itself seems to be shrinking (Knauft 1996). As a result, an idea of culture, when considered as a neatly packaged whole, may be becoming obsolete. Particularly in a complex and immense country like Brazil, one has to wonder if the notion of a Brazilian culture provides more of a simplistic gloss over differences than a useful tool for analysis. To ask this another way, does the concept of culture assume, absurdly, that the diverse populations of Brazil—the poor, the rich, the southerners, northerners, mulatos, whites, and natives—are all basically more or less the same?

That is one difficulty inherent in the culture concept. A second difficulty arises when we ask who ultimately defines culture, and how do they define it? That is, how much of what is deemed culture is just the product of what those who observe culture wish or believe it to be? As anthropologists Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney argue, culture may ultimately simply be a reflection of "the representational politics of those who employ the term" (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). It may, in fact, exist only in the eye of the beholder, and the beholder is, more often than not, an anthropologist. And the culture that anthropologists describe may serve more to satisfy an academic idea of the way that the world "should be" than to clarify a lived reality.[2] Finally, culture is not just a matter of perspective, it is also a matter of power. What an ethnographer identifies as culture is generally what he or she can most readily observe. Unfortunately, those on the margins of society, those without political power or voice, are less readily perceived. They are, as Ardener (1975) puts it, "muted." Muted groups can, of course, speak, and their speech may even be closely attended to, but they nonetheless remain muted because their view of the world can only be expressed using the language of those in power.[3]

To put this another way, using concepts suggested by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, individuals are "muted" not because they are actively silenced but because they and others consider their own silence to be natural or inevitable. That inevitability, Bourdieu explains, is the result of "habitus," "the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms" (Bourdieu 1990: 54). Habitus (which, as anthropologist Sherry Ortner [1984] points out "behaves" like culture but with an added emphasis on the importance of structural inequalities), is composed of the informal rules one learns—even rules about one's own marginality—that are so embedded in the psyche that one is unaware of them. Following from that, Bourdieu suggests that the term "doxa" denotes the commonsense assumptions about the world through which an individual interprets all other

events. While habitus is the daily, lived reproduction of structured inequality, doxa are the assumptions about the naturalness of that inequality. Doxa both arise from and reinforce habitus, providing a "sense that the limits of one's subjective desires are more or less isomorphic with the limits of objective possibility" (Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994: 13).

Thus groups silenced by structural inequalities are then further muted by the assumption that what is, must necessarily be. Further, Bourdieu also suggests that those with greater power in a culture may also have greater access to the rules of status acquisition and therefore are more able to perpetuate their own unequal status (Bourdieu 1977). Culture becomes in some sense like a "serious game" (Geertz 1980; Ortner 1996), in which those with power have disproportionate access to the rules and therefore greater access to effective strategies for increasing their dominance in the game. Thus, as dominant actors exert disproportionate control over cultural discourse and over the symbolic and material resources that structure culture, inequalities are perpetuated.

So where do these critiques leave the present work?

First of all, I acknowledge the difficulties inherent in positing a culture that affects every member of a complex society. I argue, nonetheless, that in Brazil deeply rooted cultural ideals of sexuality and gender exist and affect the everyday lives of contemporary Brazilians. I do not argue that there is one fully integrated Brazilian Culture, or even that ideas about sexuality and gender do not vary with an individual's position in culture (in fact I hope to show that they do vary). I also do not suggest that an individual is ever a member of just one culture, or that the cultures that structure an individual's life are coherent or join together seamlessly. For example, an impoverished Brazilian woman with cancer may belong, simultaneously, to subcultures unique to Brazil, to her region of Brazil, to shantytowns, to women, and to the ill. These subcultures may hold mutually contradictory, or mutually reinforcing, values that the individual somehow must negotiate.

But I do suggest that culture, even in its fragmented, often contradictory forms, still matters deeply. It organizes human experience and gives meaning to it. It affects how we dress, who we marry, what we eat. In the specific case of Brazil and this work, I suggest that there is an overarching, even dominant, cultural ideology of gender and sexuality that the majority of Brazilians use as a template in terms of which, or in defiance of which, they construct their own experiences. Women, men, the poor, and the rich may use that template in different ways, creating their own unique sexual subcultures, but each is ultimately impacted by that larger cultural norm.

Ironically, it is because culture matters, and because those outside a particular culture appear fundamentally different from those within, the postmodern dismissals of anthropological accounts of culture as academic constructs or "fictions" rings true. In other words, the postmodernists are correct; an-

thropologists do, in fact, construct stories when we attempt to describe other cultures. But we do so, not because culture does not exist, but because it does, and because our *own* culture colors all of our perceptions, making our observations mere interpretations. So, every attempt we make to explain a foreign culture is made via assumptions grounded in our own cultural realities (Hahn 1973), and every attempt made to describe another culture must inevitably be distorted. However, this does not render the study of culture useless. A culture may be quite imperfectly understood by an outsider, but it can be described and approached. As Knauft has argued, "While ultimate knowledge of others' experience or actions (or even their existence) is impossible, greater or lesser approximations of this otherness are possible; indeed, they provide the basis of all social living. Absolute impossibilities should not blind us to pragmatic possibilities for comprehension, translation, and representation across the intersubjective divide" (Knauft 1996: 46–47).

In the present work, I very much acknowledge my own perspective, which is that of a middle-class white woman, steeped in biomedicine and sympathetic to the plight of the women I met during the course of my fieldwork. I admit my subjectivity and my unique point of view and still stand behind the observations I make from that perspective. I also acknowledge the shaping presence of habitus and suggest that an androcentric understanding of gender and sexuality formed a key part of the habitus and doxa of the women in my community. I further argue, however, that those same women managed to maneuver within and even in opposition to that habitus. That is, while it may not have been possible for the women I knew (or for anyone) to escape the shaping power of culture, it *was* possible for them to recognize that power and their place with regard to it. That recognition then enabled conscious action.

The *faveladas* thus simultaneously acted and were acted on, and they had the ability to shape or change their culture even as they were shaped themselves. Shaped, and in some senses silenced, by cultural expectations, they were still able to act by and for themselves, as agents of change.

CULTURE AND GENDER

Given that I foreground gender as one of the elements of culture that shaped and was shaped by women in this study, I should clarify here what I mean when I use that term. Until relatively recently, most scholars would have agreed with anthropologist Peggy Sanday that gender is "the way members of the two sexes are perceived, evaluated, and expected to behave" (Sanday 1990: 5). According to this definition, gender is simply the cultural construction of manhood and womanhood as determined by physical differences, by anatomical sex. However, in the last decade or so, scholars have made the case for "third" or alternate genders that do not simply reflect the

binary distinction between male and female (Butler 1990; Roscoe 1996; Nanda 1996).

For instance, anthropologist Will Roscoe has persuasively argued that, historically, Native American "berdaches" occupied unique third gender positions. Anatomically male or female (though most commonly male), berdaches did not "cross" or exchange genders (that is, men acting as women or vice versa). Instead, these individuals were often distinguished by unique symbolic dress and rituals and were accounted for as a separate gender in myths of creation. They were a third gender.

Similarly, Nanda (1996) argues that in India multiple genders and sexes are acknowledged. She gives the specific example of the Indian Hijras. Hijras, who are usually born male, often dress as women and assume many of the same attitudes and roles associated with women in Indian culture, but they are a separate gender. They live in their own communities, form their own religious cult, engage in ritual castration, and stress that they are both "like women" and "not women." Again, they are a third gender.

Significantly, many scholars argue that just as gender is constructed, so too is sex, with sex meaning different things in different cultures. As Martin and Voorhies first noted in 1975, "physical sex differences need not necessarily be perceived as bipolar. It seems possible that human reproductive bisexuality established a minimal number of socially recognized physical sexes, but these need not be limited to two" (cited in Roscoe 1996). Similarly, Diemberger points out that in Nepal, where what is female is considered flesh and what is male is considered bone, all individuals necessarily contain both sexes (Diemberger 1993). Thomas Laquer has convincingly made the case that the Western assumption of the natural existence of two sexes is actually a relatively recent one (Laquer 1990). Up until the eighteenth century, he notes, there was one sex—the male sex—and women's bodies were simply considered an incomplete version of the male body (Laquer 1990).

While these arguments are often compelling, I agree with anthropologist John Wood, who writes that "the problem with the wholesale rejection of sexed bodies and binary logics is that the people who are the subjects of ethnographic study use them to think about gender, though not in any simple or reductive way" (Wood 1999: 202). That is, most peoples, across cultures, continue to divide the world into male and female as determined by sexual anatomy. However, as both anthropologists John Wood (1999) and Don Kulick (1998) point out, binary gender categories are not necessarily static, but may contain ambiguity and contradictions within their borders. Wood, for example, describes the *D'abella*, the "male women" he encountered among the Gabra of East Africa. Neither fully man nor completely woman, they are simultaneously both and neither. But, he stresses, they are never something else entirely, never a third gender or sex. Among the Gabra,

gender is at least partially independent of sex and is tied to notions of space. What is inside is female, what is outside is male. Thus anatomical males who, through age and ritual, move "inside," become "male women" (Wood 1999). Gender and sex remain binary, but may be combined in multiple, shifting ways.

Similarly, Kulick argues that while transvestites in Bahia, Brazil, do not reject dualistic gender categories, they do reject a firm linkage between gender and anatomical sex. Instead of linking gender to anatomical sex, the transvestites link gender to sexuality. That is, "the possession of genitals appears to be fundamentally conflated with what they can be used for" (Kulick 1998: 227). Individuals who are sexually penetrated—such as women and transvestites—share the same gendered category. Individuals who penetrate are men. The gender system thus remains binary, but the categories are reconfigured.

In the present work, women rarely, if ever, altered or reconfigured gender categories. For the *faveladas*, anatomical males were expected to act "like men" and anatomical females were to act "like women," and the stigma attached to acting otherwise was significant. So, who "naturally" belonged to each gender category seemed clear-cut and relatively rigidly defined.

Superficially, definitions of gender-appropriate behaviors were also relatively clear-cut and narrowly defined. But on closer look, it became clear that the women I knew creatively and consistently manipulated gendered expectations to fit their needs. That women were able to alter, even minimally, gendered expectations, is significant. This is because gender does not simply reflect cultural norms of masculinity and femininity; it also reflects the value accorded to things considered male and things considered female. That is, gender is also an element of social differentiation. Indeed, Scott, a historian, has argued that gender tells us as much, or more, about inequalities of power as it does about sexual difference (Scott 1988; see also Ortner 1996). And, as "an axis of major social inequality along with race and class" (Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994: 33), gender becomes one of the elements that shapes culture (Ortner 1984; Knauft 1996).

As such, gendered categories cannot simply be considered essentially male or female and then set aside. Rather, those categories direct and constrain individual behaviors. For instance, among the Gabra, women are associated with the left side. They will tie their garments on the left and claim the left side of a tent as theirs (Wood 1999). Associated with interiors, females in northern Sudan (and in many other Muslim cultures) tend to remain inside, apart from more public affairs (Boddy 1989). This is not to suggest that women and men among the Gabra believe that women can only and ever stay on the left side of a tent, nor does it suggest that northern Sudanese women never leave their homes and never engage in public affairs. Rather, it suggests that in each of these cultures—in all cultures—gendered categories

create constraining tendencies that exist not only as cultural ideals but also as lived realities. Thus, as Moore points out for Marakwet of Kenya, among whom women are associated with children and with a junior status, the reality that "many men can count strong and influential women among the people known to them" (Moore 1988: 37) does not change the power of that gendered association. Rather, "such statements [referring to women as children] not only provide a strategic reason why women should be excluded from certain activities, but also ensure that women will be excluded in many cases" (Moore 1988: 38). Cultural inequalities, by their very dominance, are thus reproduced and perpetuated.

At the same time even as gender constrains, it can be played with, altered, or even resisted. And indeed, ethnographies of cultures as diverse as those of Egyptian Bedouins (Abu-Lughod 1986), San Franciscan gays and lesbians (Weston 1991), and rural Indonesians (Tsing 1993) demonstrate the creative ways that those on the margins of cultural power reimagine dominant cultural values and attempt to resist, or at least expand, dominant structures of inequality. Similarly, in the present work, I demonstrate the ways in which gendered notions of sexual activity, living spaces, and public roles continue to shape the behaviors of contemporary women in a favela in northeastern Brazil. I also show how women in that community played with ideas of honor, shame, sex and virginity, and altered them to provide themselves with increased behavioral breathing room.

CULTURE AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER

Given that I have foregrounded power and inequality in this work, I should make clear my own position in the power grid. Ethnographers have become increasingly aware of the need to contend with their own roles in presenting and living through cultures. Anthropologists cannot escape their own positionality (Abu-Lughod 1993). At the same time, however, the goal is ethnography, not autobiography, and excessive self-reflection is not the point and is not helpful. As Knauft quite sensibly explains, "It now seems crucial if not axiomatic that ethnography must be critically aware of its own relationship to power and representation. If reflexive concerns take over the entire project, however, we are left spinning our wheels; we shed the light of analysis almost exclusively on texts and on ourselves rather than on the people we study with" (Knauft 1996: 46).

In terms of the present work, and my own authorial position, I need to not only account for my position as a middle-class American in a Brazilian shantytown, but also my positions as (at the time) a student of biomedicine and a woman in a monogamous relationship. All of these positions certainly altered the ways in which I was perceived and the information to which I was privy. But, given the controversy in medical anthropology over the "medicalization"

of medical anthropology, I should elaborate specifically on my location with regard to biomedicine.

I was, and am, steeped, in the biomedical subculture, one that tends to privilege cure over prevention or the alleviation of suffering (Farmer and Kleinman 1998). Although I certainly tried to keep my biomedical background somehow bracketed while exploring the experience of cervical cancer in Recife (and while I did not ever present myself as a physician-to-be), I was certainly always aware of it, and was at times forced to choose between my own cultural biases and a more relativistic stance. For instance, some of the women with cancer whom I followed asked me at various times in their radiation treatments whether I thought that they should continue the treatments. They did not ask me as a physician, as I had made clear that I was not a doctor and not part of the oncology service. But they probably did ask me as someone whom they believed had access into what was happening to them. Each time I was asked, I had to weigh my role as an anthropologist trained to respect cultural difference against my role as someone who believed in the efficacy of the biomedical therapy. Sometimes I said I did not know what they should do, but sometimes I said that it seemed to me that they should continue with the radiation. I consciously used my influence in an unequal relationship and explicitly denied cultural relativism, to suggest that biomedicine provided them their best chance for cure. Other women, after being told by families and physicians that they did not have cancer, asked me if that was indeed the case. The women turned to me to affirm, or to perhaps deny again, their suspicions of malignancy. Again, I was not able to theorize the question away. I did not theorize that as a cultural construction, perhaps cancer in Brazilian culture was not really the same thing as cancer in my worldview. I did not posit that it would thus be impossible for me to answer the question. A strong argument can be made that, given that others in the woman's cultural world had determined that she would not be told that she had cancer, it was wrong for me, especially given my unique status and my biomedical bias, to say anything. But when I was pressed, I would always answer that yes, she did have cancer. Again, I balanced what, from a culturally relativist stance would have been the right thing to do (profess neutrality) against what from my own cultural viewpoint I felt was the right thing to do (disclose). Forced to clarify my position, I did not always choose the most anthropologically "pure" stance.

Outline of the Book

This book is ultimately the product of my positioned observations. On the basis of those observations I argue that the women with whom I worked, the *faveladas*, both reproduced dominant cultural ideals of Brazilian female

sexuality and created their own, separate construction of female sexuality. I also argue that the cultural disconnect between these two often conflicting understandings of female sexuality has had deleterious ramifications for the health of impoverished women in Recife.

To make these arguments, I first describe the ethnographic setting. In Chapter 3 I then elaborate on the historically dominant construction of female sexuality, and how that construction affects women today. I also suggest that the historically dominant construction of female sexuality reflects a male ideal of Brazilian female sexuality as simultaneously hypersensual and controlled by men.

Although I argue that this construction of female sexuality was primarily a reflection of male experience, I also suggest that because it was part of the dominant (male) discourse, Brazilian women reproduced and perpetuated it. Thus women in this research held traditional—and contradictory—notions of female sexuality. On the one hand, they valorized traditional notions of controlled sexuality—respectability, virginity, and fidelity. On the other hand, these women made it very clear that they considered themselves, as Brasileiras, to be uniquely *quente*, sexually "hot." Rather than contradicting each other, however, these ideas of Brazilian womanhood worked together to validate male control of female sexuality. If virginity and fidelity are important, and if women are innately sexual, then male control of female sexuality was essential.

Chapter 4 is an examination of how the discourse concerning cervical cancer in Brazil strengthened the notion that female sexuality must be controlled. By comparing two cervical cancer screening programs in Recife, I argue that—through an equation of women's sexuality with "risk"—biomedical discourse held women largely responsible for the deleterious consequences of sexual activity, thereby reinforcing the perspective that female sexuality must be controlled.

In Chapter 5, I suggest that, despite having internalized the dominant cultural discourse surrounding sex, women in my community also owned their own construction of sexuality. This chapter presents the argument that women in the favela constructed their own view of sexuality as an economic resource. Understanding that their sexuality was linked to their survival, women developed one of two sexual tactics, which I label "security" and "*liberdade*" (liberty). Briefly, security was the use of sex to find and keep a man as a buffer against the harsh realities of the favela. By contrast, *liberdade* was the use of sex for short-term gain while abandoning the notion of man as protector. These constructions mirrored dominant androcentric constructions. A woman engaged in *liberdade* used the sexually uncontrollable *mulata* as a model, while a woman engaged in a tactic of security modeled herself

on the traditional honor-bound wife. Thus security and liberty reinterpreted dominant cultural models without actually challenging them.

In particular, as argued in Chapter 6, women who chose a tactic of security were invested in maintaining a vision of themselves as respectable wives. At the same time, however, they cleverly negotiated terms associated with honor and respectability to widen the array of behaviors available to them. Chapter 7 then shows how, just as women in the favela reinterpreted dominant male constructions of their sexuality, so too did they reinterpret biomedical models. Interpreting cervical cancer screening as a tool for general gynecological health, they interpreted a lack of screening as their primary risk, and sexuality as a given, not as a risk for which anyone could actually assume responsibility. Interestingly, women who adopted a tactic of *liberdade* had remarkably different views of the Pap smear than did those engaged in a tactic of security.

Chapter 8 suggests that women who engaged in *liberdade* sometimes did more than reinterpret traditional models. Sometimes they openly defied them. In Chapter 9, I argue that in the face of a crisis as threatening as cervical cancer, women abandoned impulses to reinterpret or challenge dominant sexual constructions. Instead, in the search to find meaning in suffering, they fell back on strict interpretations of traditional sexual ideology, stigmatizing cervical cancer as a disease associated with uncontrolled female sexuality. I conclude, in Chapter 10, with a discussion of coping, examining how women learned to live with the disease and with its treatments.

Overall, I attempt to reflect the strength and creativity of the women I met as they struggled to survive the multiple obstacles placed in their way as poor, female, and, in some cases, very sick, Brasileiras. I try to show that women in this study survived both by accepting hardship as a given and by refusing to let that hardship defeat them.