
Book Review**Book review: *Minoritarian Liberalism: A Travesti Life in a Brazilian Favela*, by Moisés Lino e Silva**Meg Weeks^{1,*}¹ Assistant Professor, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA* Correspondence: weeksm@ufl.edu

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Book review: *Minoritarian Liberalism: A Travesti Life in a Brazilian Favela*, by Moisés Lino e Silva

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What does it mean to be free? The nature and origin of freedom are at the heart of most modern political projects, and they are the subject of an excellent new book by anthropologist Moisés Lino e Silva. In the normative liberal tradition, individual liberties are innate, yet the state intervenes through a social contract to guarantee that subjects freely enjoy them. In 'minoritarian liberalism', Lino e Silva contends, subaltern subjects devise their own notions of freedom that diverge, sometimes shockingly, from the political cultures originating in the Western Enlightenment. *Minoritarian Liberalism: A Travesti Life in a Brazilian Favela* presents a rich ethnographic study of queer residents of Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro's largest slum, deftly crafting a tale of migration, survival and complex social relations against a backdrop of violence and poverty. While its author confesses that before moving to Rocinha to begin his research, he expected to encounter a place of curtailed freedoms, he instead portrays a community in which residents negotiate social marginalisation, homophobia and racism, while also experiencing joy, pleasure and, yes, freedom – often capaciously so. The book is more than just a rehashing of the well-worn structure-versus-agency debate, however; instead, Lino e Silva offers radical readings of bodily, sexual, social and religious practices as means to liberation outside the familiar technologies of the liberal state.

Rather than reject the concept of liberalism as bourgeois and atomised, as many scholars and practitioners of radical politics have done, Lino e Silva attempts to rehabilitate it: in a sophisticated introduction, he justifies his attachment to the term while identifying its minoritarian iterations as distinct from the Eurocentric, individualised rights to own private property, freely express oneself and act in the political arena. In 'decolonizing' and 'deterritorializing' liberalism, he groups the terms together with its etymological cousins, words such as *liberada* (liberated), *libertina* (libertine or deviant) and *libertação* (liberation) (xii, 13). Mining the liberal framework for other, more radical, and often collective gestures towards freedom, he is able to think expansively about liberty beyond the strictures of more orthodox political traditions on the Left. Moreover, by arguing for a specific variant of liberalism located in the favela, a space largely free from the laws of the formal city, Lino e Silva distinguishes the emancipatory practices of queer favela-dwelling youths from the homonormative liberalism of the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement.

Lino e Silva's main character is Natasha Kellem Bündchen, a *travesti* (a Brazilian term for a person assigned male at birth who lives as a woman but does not necessarily undergo sex reassignment) and migrant from the impoverished north-eastern state of Ceará. The favela's tolerance and even protection of queer residents allowed Natasha to live openly as a *travesti* upon arriving in Rio, an identity she was forced to conceal when living with her conservative Catholic family in Ceará. Despite frequent shootouts and extrajudicial killings, the author depicts the urban slum as a space of enhanced freedom in a certain sense, where children roam about unimpeded by bourgeois notions of proper behaviour, vices are indulged and residents are free to, in the terminology of queer theorist José Muñoz, 'disidentify' with normative modes of moral and civic conduct (101). 'The normative liberal narrative of a rational city with clean streets and straight lines was not the only possibility for liberty. Dirty, shady, and bent alleyways could also foster a different mode of liberalism', especially for non-normative subjects like Natasha (98).

This book is most compelling when it tackles subjects that evade neat theorisations, such as a particularly fascinating chapter on popular religiosity. While scholars tend to portray Brazil's rapidly proliferating evangelical churches and Afro-Brazilian religious practices as 'closed systems', Lino e Silva reveals them to be intimately enmeshed (126). He shows that while the largely homophobic evangelical denominations inadvertently legitimise Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous spiritual practices by treating them as devil worship, spirit possessions in both traditions challenge the 'ontologically sealed' and rational body imagined by normative liberalism (135). In the subsequent chapter on *travesti* sex workers in Europe, he argues for sex work to be imagined outside the liberal feminist assessment that it is a profession like any other, as more than just a survival strategy or a means to earn money for desired body modifications. Perhaps, he suggests, it is best understood in the context of 'the adventures [it] afford[s], the attention that travestis receive in the streets, the unknown possibilities of pleasure, [and] the capacity to heal broken kinship relations' (171). My only objection to the book is that Lino e Silva does not adequately address the intellectual legacies of the Brazilian prostitutes' movement, whose leaders, Gabriela Leite and Lourdes Barreto, have put forth their own radical sexual ethics and visions of minoritarian liberalism. Engaging with this literature would have yielded rich reflections, as well as likely eliminating a significant error, which misdates the founding of the country's most important sex-worker non-profit by 20 years.

As a Brazilian trained in the Anglophone academy, Lino e Silva is especially attentive to questions of language. For example, *liberdade* in Portuguese denotes both 'liberty' and 'freedom', a thorny yet fruitful ambiguity. He inserts copious quotations into the text, including longer passages that often include key terms and phrases in the original Portuguese. He also probes the layered meanings of both favela and queer linguistic codes, providing a particularly fascinating account of *Pajubá*, a queer dialect with roots in Yoruba. While at times his ethnographic detail verges on extraneous, his colourful prose and extensive personal anecdotes are well crafted and almost always deployed at the service of illustrating his theoretical arguments. Equally artful is Lino e Silva's consideration of his own positionality: while his queerness secured him crucial access to social worlds that would have been otherwise inaccessible, his status as an adult, middle-class, White researcher from a European university marked him as an outsider and mediated his understanding of phenomena unique to youths in a Rio slum. He is remarkably thoughtful when parsing these entanglements, as is he in discussing the deep friendships he developed over the course of his research. While his friend Natasha passed away in 2012, he dedicates the book to her, and through it, her radical pursuit of freedom lives on.