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CLAG / Clarissa Kimber Master's Award Report
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Transgender Space in Urban São Paulo, Brazil

I put the funds from the Clarissa Kimber Master's Award to good use this summer. With the money I received, I bought a plane ticket to São Paulo, Brazil, where I spent five weeks carrying out the fieldwork for my Master's thesis. Over the course of those five weeks, I met Brazilian scholars working on trans topics and conducted sixteen interviews with transgendered Brazilians. I also had the (unexpected) opportunity to engage in participant observation with a few of my interviewees, an experience that allowed me to see and hear things I never expected. When the five weeks were up, I returned to Lexington with a better understanding how bodies, space, and gender transform and inscribe themselves on each other.

My process of data collection was full of surprises. I knew my time in Brazil would be short; five weeks is not much time to do fieldwork. With a sense of urgency well established, I set up several interviews before I left. As a result, I conducted three interviews during my first five days in São Paulo, all with university students. As I reviewed my notes from the interviews, however, I realized I had run up against my first problem; the interviews were not yielding enough useful data. I couldn't rely on snowballing for all of my recruitment if I wanted to interview people from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds and life experiences. With this in mind, I started going to the places where transgendered people (or those who might know transgendered people) tend to hang out: bars, clubs, events.

I'm glad I did. I ended up interviewing a much more diverse population than I had anticipated before arrival. Some of my interviewees were older, in their 40s and 50s. Some were students, some were prostitutes, some were employees of the state. And I not only interviewed the participants, but I conducted participant observation with some as well. Through participant observation, I was able to see firsthand how some transgendered Brazilians alter their bodies. I saw one of my participants get industrial silicone injected in her hips. I saw the scars on older *travestis*' arms, relics of a time when transgendered sex workers regularly cut their arms to ward off hostile police with their blood. I witnessed several of my participants experience street harassment, and even caught one such moment in a photograph.

Walking the streets of São Paulo turned up other rich sources of data. While walking through the Praça Roosevelt (a large plaza in the center of São Paulo), I encountered an open-air presentation titled "Gentrificação e transfobia" (Gentrification is Transphobia) by a group called the Arrua Coletivo. This presentation was my introduction to a street in São Paulo called Rua Rêgo Freitas. In particular, one four block stretch of Rua Rêgo Freitas is home to a dense population of transgendered folk, and a popular work spot for trans sex workers. As it happens, the street is also rapidly gentrifying (in fact, the word gentrification has been imported from English into popular usage in Brazilian Portuguese recently, as *gentrificação*). I was able to

directly observe how the changing space of the street was changing bodies, and how those bodies were working to change the street.

For example, the past few years have seen several new high rise apartment buildings built on this stretch of Rua Rêgo Freitas. The location is, after all, valuable real estate, practically in the heart of downtown São Paulo. The pricier buildings, along with the wealthier renters they attract, are not welcoming to the transgendered people working in their shadows. One memorable night, one of the participants I was observing complained about the growing difficulty of attracting clients with the new buildings going up. In response to the difficulties presented by gentrification, some of the sex workers were changing where they stood, their location in the city, how they advertised themselves (through speech or dress). Some, however, tried to change the space of the street. As she was complaining about the buildings, the participant mentioned earlier took a box of baking soda and drew a penis on the road in the middle of the intersection between Rua Rêgo Freitas and Rua Santa Isabel. She blocked traffic, pointing at the penis and yelling at the cars honking at her: “This is me. Can you see me now?” Ultimately, participant observation was an effective way to see gender, bodies, and space tangle together in real time.

I also met several scholars working on trans topics, and many scholars in my field (geography) more broadly. I took a day trip to the Universidade Federal de São Carlos, a university about three hours northwest of São Paulo. The Sociology department there is well known for its collective work on issues of gender and sexuality. While visiting, I met and received work from several scholars who have been important to my research: Jorge Leite Jr., Maria Inês Rauter Mancuso, and Richard Miskolci. In terms of geography, I spent a large amount of time with the Geography department at the Universidade de São Paulo. Though the department is not known for gender and sexuality studies, I did have discussions with faculty there about becoming a visiting scholar during my PhD. Through the connections I made during this trip, the Universidade de São Paulo could become a home base for research in the future.

At this point, I have transcripts of nearly all the interviews I conducted. I am in the process of sorting through the data, and making connections between the data and larger points of scholarship and theory. What I have offered here are a few preliminary findings only; the rest of my arguments will come as I write my Master’s thesis over the next eight months. Of course, none of my fieldwork would have been possible without the support of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers and the Clarissa Kimber Master’s Award. Brazil is an expensive country. Traveling to and from Brazil, with all the associated costs, can be an insurmountable barrier for a Master’s student. This research grant got my foot in (and out) of the door, and my work and future career as a scholar are better for it.

Photo Appendix



Figure 1: A freshly painted mural as seen from the Minhocão. The Minhocão is an elevated highway that closes to car traffic on Sundays. The road runs parallel to Rua Rêgo Freitas and empties near Praça Roosevelt.