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# Out of Bounds: Negotiating Researcher Positionality in Brazil

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The transnational dialogues between black researchers from the United States and Brazil have been documented by a number of scholars (Hellwig 1992; Yelvington 2006). While the historical import of these dialogues have been discussed at length, only rarely does the analysis of these dialogues focus on dilemmas in the field that are related to how researchers practice activism and research (see Twine & Warren 2000 for an exception). This is, indeed, unfortunate as black scholars find themselves in a truly unique position to provide insight into these negotiations. Their positionality allows them to, at times, slip seamlessly through social spaces and, in other moments, stumble awkwardly through an unpredictable “web of interlocking social categories,” on “multiple levels,” and simultaneously (Caldwell 2007, xv). Gilliam writes of her experience in Brazil: “We were white to the degree that we spoke English and refused to speak Portuguese properly, since it reinforced our status as foreigners. We were black to the degree that we seemed Brazilian. This bifurcation of the subject position was to become more complex in Bahia” (Gilliam & Gilliam 1999, 72). While this statement is persuasive, I argue that positionality is characterized by multilevel fragmentation rather than a dual or bifurcated negotiation. Along these same lines, black researchers in Brazil are perhaps best framed as being positioned “out of bounds.” Rather than moving in and out of boundaries strategically, or unpredictably, they are never completely in or out. They hover in the uncertainty of constantly shifting positions, but they also exert agency in guiding these transitions. Researchers benefit greatly from a more candid discussion of these shifts because they have significant implications for how researchers can maximize their contribution to the very communities that they hope to empower.

This chapter provides concrete examples of how I navigated fundamental dilemmas when conducting research in Brazil. My research approach was one that was deliberately both feminist and activist, which I found to be more flexible and dynamic. Instead of distantly observing, this approach anticipates empathy and action with research participants. I draw heavily on black feminist theory to argue that it is beneficial and necessary for scholar-activists to reject the false dichotomy of insider/outsider status, in exchange for discussing complex negotiations of identity, power, and

positionality. I refer to myself as an “outsider-within,” both because of my resistance to normative approaches to qualitative research and my ambiguous position within the Afro-Brazilian community (Collins 1991).<sup>1</sup> Though I instinctively aligned myself with a black feminist orientation, I argue it was not always clear what this orientation meant in complicated situations in the field. Below, I will focus on several thematic areas through which I illustrate how I managed my subjectivity and the demands of research, and struggled to dismantle interactional styles that reinforced privilege and unequal power dynamics, while also promoting the goals of scholar-activism.

### Reconciling the Researcher Gaze and Activist Deeds

While the bulk of my research is based on my time in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, my first visit to Brazil was when I spent six weeks in a language program in Rio de Janeiro. It was here that I had first-hand exposure to race relations in Brazil. As a black, female PhD student in sociology, I had diligently read seminal works on Brazil by both U.S. and Brazilian scholars, and trained with interdisciplinary mentors in history and anthropology. I benefited from the works of a growing cadre of black female scholars from the United States (among whom I perhaps presumptively situated myself) who had written about race, gender, and subjectivity in the field. I stood on the shoulders of giants and had planned to use their works to develop my intellectual trajectory and navigate my positionality in Brazil. On the van ride from Rio’s airport to my apartment, I took notes furiously, noting how the dilapidated favelas were juxtaposed against both the beauty of Rio’s beaches and the upscale community in which I would reside. These observations were consistent with how researchers have discussed the spatial topography of racial inequality in Brazil and other countries (McCallum 2005). On a narrow street in Copacabana, the airport van came to a halt, and directly outside of the van window I noticed a very dark-skinned woman unambiguously identifiable as black (*preta*) sitting on the edge of a sidewalk. Near the corner, she sat on a dusty, dull blue blanket with sundry knickknacks including dishes, plastic bottles, newspapers, and a tattered pillow. Next to her sat a young girl who could not have been over four years old. The tiny brown-skinned girl wore her hair parted down the middle in two matted puffs with stray afro-textured hair peeking out across her hairline. In the girl’s hand was a worn baby doll with dirt spots on her face and patches that hinted at the doll’s original blond hair.

This image of an apparently homeless black mother and daughter living on a blanket on a sidewalk was provocative and deeply disturbing. It represented Brazil’s stark social inequality, and the face of racial inequality and poverty in Brazil. As I fumbled through my bag to find my camera, I did not take my eyes off of the young girl, hoping to beat the change of the traffic light. As I brought the camera up to my face, suddenly and unexpectedly, the little girl pulled the tattered blanket over her head to cover her face. I was paralyzed, or rather, mortified. Frozen with embarrassment, I lowered the camera, feeling as though I had betrayed her . . . with my imposing gaze. I would later describe this encounter to interested colleagues—explaining that the young girl and I were locked in a gaze. But, after reviewing my field notes later on, I realized that though my eyes were fixed on her, her eyes darted around uncomfortably, only coming back to meet mine to see if I was still looking. This fleeting moment in Rio left an indelible impression on me and raised questions about my privilege, my positionality, and the tension between being a researcher and an activist.

In this first encounter in Rio, I was using what has been referred to as the “white ethnographic gaze”—observing, inspecting, evaluating, and making conclusions without even consulting these two Afro-Brazilians (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008, 180). I had naively presumed that privilege and exploitation were mainly issues for white researchers to work out, and had not anticipated the degree to which I would also feel ambivalent about the researcher gaze and the activist posture. As a black North American, I felt solidarity with Afro-Brazilians, but as Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) suggest, “Sharing certain identities is not enough to presume an insider status. Idiosyncrasies are embedded in our identities that inevitably create moments of intimacy and distance between the informant and researcher” (207). My sincere investment in documenting racial disparity by taking a photo did not inevitably translate to activism, and at worst could even be considered exploitative and dehumanizing. Few et al. (2003) note: “Good qualitative feminist research must not only be able to assist the researcher in gathering accurate and useful data, but, more importantly, the researcher must ensure that the informant is central in the research process” (207). Despite the fact that a significant portion of my own academic experience had been spent embracing the importance of “decolonizing methodologies,” de-normalizing epistemological approaches, and resisting expectations to produce a particular narrative of race and inequality, I still found myself in a position where, in practice, I was poised to do quite the opposite (Smith 1999, 3).

In retrospect, my propensity to so easily slip into the more problematic researcher gaze reflected my inculcation in the norms of sociology and a particular social-science tradition that includes the casual dismissal and manipulation of marginalized communities (Ladner 1973, Smith 1999 Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008). This made me potentially complicit in reproducing inequality; as researchers have argued, “White rule, or the theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and practice domination of Whites . . . can happen without Whites at the helm” (Hordge-Freeman, Mayorga & Bonilla-Silva 2011, 96). Not only had this moment uncomfortably revealed my privilege, but it clarified the extent to which I would need to closely monitor my gaze and more consciously reevaluate how my socialization in the academy influenced how I interacted with marginalized communities (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008; Collins 1991). When the van drove away to deliver me to my nice apartment in Copacabana, I was left feeling ambivalent: what I knew about who I was, my research, and what I was doing in Brazil were now fragmented ideas that needed to be reconfigured and reassessed.

### **When U.S. Researchers Come Knocking**

One of the first examples of how I navigated my status as “out of bounds” is reflected in my interactions with established faculty in Brazil. Social-science researchers, intentionally or not, often neglect to describe the complications of gaining entrée into the communities that they research, particularly in international contexts. From my experience, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) offers significant latitude in terms of dealing with international populations, which puts the researcher at an unfair advantage. But, if one were to assess how qualitative researchers discuss how they identify and enter into their community of study, this process is written about as though it occurs spontaneously and with little fanfare. This was certainly not my experience in Bahia, Brazil. I arrived in Bahia wanting to develop relationships with race scholars and become incorporated into important academic circles. My efforts to develop relationships with renowned scholars depended on my access and mobilization

of various forms of capital, including my identification as a U.S. researcher and institutional affiliation. Some of these initial contacts were exceedingly helpful, particularly those with Dr. Antonio Alberto and Gildete Lopes, who are both researchers at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and are also close friends of Dr. Sherman James, who served on my dissertation committee. But outside of them, I often felt that female faculty interacted with me tentatively, while some male Brazilians were uncomfortably eager to help me find my way. I anticipated that my nationality and gender would provide advantages, and while they often did, there were moments when they did quite the opposite.

Researchers at prominent universities who had initially agreed to assist me in my research were unresponsive, dismissive, or simply too busy to meet. I struggled during my first weeks to make inroads and often felt frustrated by the lack of support that I was offered. But my disappointment was rooted in my expectation that when I knocked, other researchers would answer. But, why should they? As my Brazilian colleagues and friends would soon reveal, it was likely that some of these scholars felt that assisting me would be undermining their own efforts to develop a name for themselves in their respective fields. In some ways, they were correct that the work of U.S. researchers (produced in English) often received more visibility and was viewed as more legitimate than theirs. It was obvious that I had much to gain from associations with them, but it was less clear that an affiliation with me was a worthwhile investment. Researchers idealistically speak about intellectual exchanges, but some Brazilian researchers, familiar with the unidirectional way that these interactions can and often do unfold, were perhaps rightfully resistant. And so, the privilege that nationality offered me, which compelled people on the streets to rush to my aid the moment they heard English, had much less currency among well-known faculty. In fact, academic and intellectual events occurred all over Salvador, but my attendance did not necessarily translate into developing meaningful relationships with the faculty at the helm of power. In contrast, at conferences around Brazil, Brazilian graduate and undergraduate students *were* eager to engage me in conversations about racism and social movements in the United States. Idealizing the civil rights movement in the United States, they were unduly attentive to my responses to questions and, at times, interacted with me in a way that reinforced the very “power asymmetry” that I had hoped to diffuse (Alcalde 2007, 143).

My difficulties in developing relationships with faculty is one issue, but the very fact that I so highly prioritized developing ties with university faculty represented my internalization of a hierarchy of legitimate knowledge that undervalues the importance of community groups with alternative knowledges (Smith 1999). More interestingly, these institutions, though they had international reputations, had a different local reputation. Most of the brief meetings that I managed to organize with major scholars ended in disappointment. On one occasion one of the more renowned scholars of race asked me, “Why study race, when class is so much more important?” The paradox that a race researcher in Bahia did not want to critically discuss race was disconcerting. After months of being in Salvador, I began to expand my network of potential allies and collaborators, and only when I did so was I able to develop relationships that would form the basis of my research.

My relationship with activist-scholars whose knowledge was based on their close interaction with Afro-Brazilian communities was pivotal to helping me frame my project in ways that would resonate with the community. The ultimate selection of my research site evolved from a relationship that developed organically with an Afro-Brazilian woman in my apartment building in Salvador. My

informal relationships and not the more formal institutional connections were the ones that were fundamental to my research trajectory. But, after only a few weeks in the field, I realized that my formal doctoral training had not prepared me to reconcile the multilayered positionalities that I occupied. How do I conduct research and negotiate friendships? Where does the research end and the friendships begin? Can a researcher be an activist, and what does that even mean? Recognizing that I was in a privileged position vis-à-vis my informants, how do I negotiate the unequal power relations that are inescapable? Social scientists provide some suggestions about this process, but what did their suggestions mean in Brazil, particularly for me?

Almost universally, I was read as black, as one respondent affirmed directly by brushing her finger over her forearm and stating, “*você é como a gente*” (you are like us). Another respondent would later question my blackness, stating directly, “You are not black, I am black,” but the latter was exceptional. Certainly, being mistaken as Afro-Brazilian had its moments of convenience, yet at other times it was devastating. I enjoyed the conveniences of standing at a bus stop and being ignored by peddlers targeting gullible tourists. At the same time, my ability to blend in with other Afro-Brazilians meant that I would be ignored while standing in lines, and I had to avoid police batons that targeted black crowds during Carnival. But, for all the ways in which I appeared to be an insider, I was simultaneously an outsider, and vice versa. There was an assumption that as a black female researcher from the United States, my blackness and sense of shared experience would open most doors and make me feel at home. This grossly underestimated the extent to which my subjectivity was negotiated in complex and contradictory ways.

Among Afro-Brazilians, I was often embraced and given “partial insider status.” Paradoxically, white Brazilians who positioned me on their level and “superior” to Brazilian blacks embraced me. A white Brazilian associate refused to group my husband and me with Afro-Brazilians, stating, “You all are not like our blacks.” I was privy to a number of similar comments and other “intimate secrets of white society” in Brazil (Collins 1991, 35). Exposure to anti-black sentiments and racism angered me, but I learned to “suppress a sense of outrage while in the field . . . and take advantage of [my] rage” in order to make key inferences about racial discourse and white habitus in Brazil (Erikson 1984, 61).

### **Flipping the Script, Redefining Roles, and Promoting Liberation**

Beyond the difficulties of developing ties with faculty and negotiating my multiple positionalities in Brazil, there are important ways that the researcher’s gaze and activism collided during the data-collection process. I arrived in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, to research the complicated ways in which Afro-Brazilian families negotiate racial hierarchies. One of the major challenges was making decisions about when I would remain in my researcher role and when I would take on a more activist approach. While I had the expressed goal of engaging in feminist and activist research, putting this approach into practice was considerably more difficult than I had anticipated.

The tension between the researcher and activist role became salient as I spent time in my research site located in the Lower City of Salvador and listened to family members, neighbors, and children mercilessly tease a young Afro-Brazilian girl to the point of tears because of her “*cabelo duro*” (hard hair). Though I have written about interactions like these previously, I have seldom discussed how I responded to the mistreatment of children (Hordge-Freeman 2013). Refusing to simply document

instances of her humiliation by family and friends, but cognizant of my role as researcher, I adopted the role of hair braider in the community. I offered to braid or twist the hair of young Afro-Brazilian girls who wanted a new hairstyle. In this role, I provided a service to the community that was desired, and created a place for young girls to be exposed to counter-discourses about blackness and beauty. At one point, as I styled a young black girl's hair, I complimented her on how healthy and thick her hair was, and she turned and looked up at me quizzically, reminding me that people in the neighborhood said that she had "hard hair." These moments of affirmation would certainly not erase the constant messages that reproduce racial hierarchies, but they did expose her and other young girls to alternative readings of her racialized and gendered body. As hair braider I created a safe space for young girls, and simultaneously created an opportunity to engage in sustained conversations about race, gender, and beauty. The women and girls who I interviewed were not merely internalizing and reproducing prepackaged aesthetic norms, but rather the conversations illustrated how they "weave 'between and among' oppositional ideologies of femininity and anti-racism to find self valorization and liberation from hegemonic power structures" (Sandoval 1991, 270-271).

Subjectivity is defined as "the quality of an investigator that affects the results of observational investigation, which have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project" (Peshkin 1988). Rather than perceiving an obstacle to be avoided at all costs, Peshkin recognizes that "subjectivity can be seen as virtuous for it is the basis of researchers' making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (14). I relied on this interpretation of subjectivity to guide my interviews, interactions, and presentation of self in Brazil. While there were elements of my subjectivity that I "tamed," throughout my time in Brazil, I embraced and manipulated my subjectivity in ways that led to theoretical insights. The extent of my subjectivity expanded beyond my role as hair braider, as there were intentional ways that I manipulated my own personal appearance both as a form of research and activism. Realizing how much racialization processes and notions of beauty are framed in terms of hair, I begin to manipulate my own hair in response to racialized comments about "cabelo bom" and "cabelo ruim" (good and bad hair). Every several days, I changed my natural afro-textured hair using hair styles ranging from intricate braid and twist patterns to a natural afro style. Both young girls and women became curious about my hair designs and started to request them for themselves or ask to learn how to do them. Contrary to the argument that social scientists are not "necessarily conscious of [subjectivity]," I was manipulating my subjectivity and destabilizing the status quo in ways that had implications for both my research and activism (Peshkin 1988, 17).

In other situations, my negotiation of research and activism was much more complicated, with far more consequential results. Though I was studying biological Afro-Brazilian families, on several occasions, I met women who had been informally adopted into families as children. Luana, like so many of these informally adopted women, had remained bound to her adoptive families, even continuing to live with them past the age of forty years old. After knowing Luana for several weeks, she eventually confided that she had been horribly abused in her family. Her revelations alarmed me, as did her tearfully emotional narratives. As I asked her more questions about her life, she confessed that she had never discussed her abuse with anyone and welcomed our conversation as a space to further describe her mistreatment. After our discussion, she resolutely stated that she was going to

leave the house and find a home for herself because she was tired of being “explorada como se fosse escrava” (exploited as though I were a slave).

I felt deeply conflicted and anxious about what seemed to be an important and life-altering decision. Horrified by her life history, yet concerned about whether or not she would be able to support herself outside of her adoptive family, I was uncertain about how to respond. What role had our conversation played in her decision to leave her home? I had been intentionally cautious about not making any suggestions one way or the other, but obviously our conversation was a turning point. Were my questions part of the reason why she had decided to leave? What responsibility did I bear for her well-being? I wanted to support her decision to leave because it was an assertion of her independence, but I also knew this decision would profoundly change the dynamics of the only family that she had known. This significant life decision needed to be made by Luana. Eventually, I would be returning to the United States, whereas she would have to live with the consequences of this transformative decision. Instead of responding with emphatic enthusiasm, I responded that I understood why she would want to move, but I also asked her practical questions about how she planned to support herself. Did she know how much it would take to live on her own? Would she be able to find a job that could sustain her? She answered each question slowly yet deliberately, and within one month of our conversation she had moved out into her own house. I was frightened for Luana, uncertain about whether she would be able to find a home, concerned about how her adoptive family would respond, and nervous about the long-term impact of this decision. Liberation is a goal of feminist and activist research, but this was a gray area.

### **The Dilemmas of Intimacy and Researcher Responsibility**

Over the course of several months, Luana and I had developed a very close relationship. But, our growing relationship posed what researchers refer to as “dilemmas of intimacy” (Taylor 2011). After her move, Luana struggled to pay her bills in the home. At times, she asked to borrow money, and our relationship started to become more complicated. I did not want to reproduce the patronage relationship that she enjoyed with middle-class white Brazilians on whom she depended. At the same time, my refusal to allow her to borrow money was like a violation of a practice that occurs throughout Brazil among status unequals. In her job as a cook, Luana sold meals to men who were working at a local factory. To distance myself from the patronage role but also help Luana, I purchased and overpaid for meals from her that she used to support herself.

While this was a short-term solution, a larger issue was that Luana enjoyed reinforcing the “power asymmetry” that was part of our relationship. She relished in introducing me as her American friend and considered our friendship the basis of her bragging rights. While she often framed me as an “outsider” or foreigner, she simultaneously cultivated the idea that I was an “insider.” She often referred to me as her “filhota” (diminutive form of daughter), introduced me to others as her *filhota*, and took pride in caring for me as though she was my mother. This was not the type of relationship that I had envisioned we would have. Luana was accustomed to interacting with others as a mother, but I wanted to be her friend because it seemed right. But, this was not a comfortable role for her. On Mother’s Day, I was busy writing up my field notes in my apartment and did not plan to spend time in the community. When I stopped by the next day, Luana would not even look at me. She was



furious that I had failed to call her on Mother's Day, that I did not spend Mother's Day with her at home, and that I had not given her a gift on the special day. I was stunned by her anger and sadness. Similar to how Beoku-Betts (1994) describes her experiences, "my negotiated status as insider implied a kin-like expectation . . . and conformity with expected behavior and traditions in the communities I studied"; my relationship with Luana was based on me being simultaneously a foreigner and a family member, which meant that I was held to standards that I had to learn and negotiate (418).

Initially, I felt Luana's insistence on treating me as if I were her daughter was problematic. What I did not realize was that though we had different visions about our relationship, we were both interested in maximizing our relationship and minimizing "power asymmetry." Luana was accustomed to functioning in the capacity of mother and caregiver in her adoptive family and took pride in being able to do it well. When I would ask that she not cook, she refused and explained that she enjoyed cooking for me because I appreciated it. I accepted her explanation, but did not feel comfortable with the arrangement. As a black, female North American, I was welcomed into her life, but in return she capitalized on the status that our friendship offered and used our relationship to perform a type of motherhood that she could not fully express in her adopted family. Navigating the boundaries of our relationship, which fell somewhere between friendship and family, was an ongoing process that involved me negotiating what I felt comfortable with as a researcher, and being open to allowing Luana to set the terms of our relationship. What I did not expect is that the interactional style that made Luana feel empowered would make me feel uncomfortable.

Apart from the intimacy that I developed with my formal respondents, after spending over a year in Brazil, the friendships that I created outside my research became much stronger. I soon learned that friendships were also laden with expectations for assistance and support. This was the case with Matheus, who as an ally and friend served as a sounding board to help me understand some of the more complicated cultural and racial dynamics in Salvador, Bahia. When I received a phone call from his business partner and wife in the middle of the night, I knew that something had gone terribly wrong and that they would be asking for some type of assistance. They were calling because Matheus, who is Afro-Brazilian, had been beaten, arrested, and thrown in jail, as a result of racial profiling and police brutality.

As he explained, during a visit to Itaparica Beach with his brothers and cousins, they were accosted by police officers who claimed that the group fit the description of several men who had robbed and assaulted a couple on the island earlier that day. According to Matheus, he explained to the officers that they had just recently arrived at the island and there was no way that they were involved with the robbery or assault. The police continued to harass the group of young men, and Matheus stated that he was a student studying law and from what he understood, the police had no just cause to accuse them. Matheus's "arrogance" angered police officers, who not only brutally beat him and his friends, but also forced them into the police vehicle, accusing them of assault, and later planted drugs on them once they arrived at the police station.

It was that same evening that I received a phone call from Matheus's wife begging that I help her explain the situation to Matheus's American business partner, who she hoped could help him get out of jail. Through numerous Skype conference calls, with me translating back and forth between the two, I helped them find a lawyer who could plead Matheus's case and arrange bail. The process extended over three weeks, during which Matheus's wife and I met with representatives from the

Public Ministries to file a report against the police officers who attacked her husband. The situation took several months to resolve, and in the process I spoke with two administrators at the jail, two lawyers, and a civil rights group in Salvador, and was asked to write a letter of support for Matheus. Part of the reason why I was central to this process is because of the assumption about how my Americanness would potentially help his situation. By illustrating that Matheus was well-connected with two Americans in Salvador, he and his wife hoped that my phone call might compel officers to refrain from beating him and ultimately release him. On the other hand, the phone call could also lead to the officers requesting a bribe in exchange for Matheus's release. In the end, both of these occurred. They stopped beating Matheus, but coerced a confession and requested a hefty bribe for his release and expungement of his record. Matheus and his wife's initial phone call to me reflected the expectation that our friendship meant that he could rely on me to use my privilege to help in this vulnerable situation. Researchers can benefit from their positionality in the field, and instead of ignoring this reality, there are ways that this needs to be problematized and, in some cases, mobilized.

### **Conclusion—Rewriting the Rules**

In conclusion, as a black, female U.S. researcher in Brazil, my experiences provide important insights about how race, gender, nationality, status, and “gradations of endogeny” are negotiated in the field (Nelson 1996). The struggles that I faced from the inception of my project to the very end revolved around me being an “outsider-within,” both in terms of my position within the field of sociology and my ambiguous role in the Brazilian context. My experiences illustrate that I did not have everything worked out before arriving in Brazil. In fact, I struggled to implement a feminist and activist research approach while avoiding the methodological and epistemological traps of mainstream sociology. This was further complicated by the difficulty of managing my multiple positionalities and obligations, which were both complex and contradictory. My engagement in efforts to embrace rather than tame my subjectivity, in addition to the ways I handled dilemmas of intimacy, power asymmetries, and my privileged position illustrate the extent to which being an outsider-within is negotiated. This chapter is entitled “Out of Bounds,” which in sports refers to being outside the playing boundaries of the field. Game play can be chaotic, and going out of bounds can happen often—and sometimes players go “out of bounds” intentionally if it can be an advantage. This aptly describes the position that I found myself in while I was in Brazil, and it is consistent with how other African descendants have analyzed their positionality. Taming subjectivity may be promoted in mainstream sociology as a way to achieve (the illusion) of objectivity, but there are ways in which developing and manipulating this subjectivity can provide tremendous insight into the very phenomenon that we study.

During my time in Salvador, I became involved as a research collaborator in a unique interdisciplinary project on Violence in Feira de Santana. One of the first of its kind, this group was organized by Dr. Edna Araújo at the State University of Feira de Santana (UEFS) and composed of scholars who worked in middle schools to empower young people to address violence in schools through technology. Having the opportunity to work in a research group like this one helped to root me in a research community that was grounded in community organizing, and encouraged me to also seek ways to ensure that my research and presence had a positive impact on the community that I studied. After several months of research, the principal of the school was pleased to report that levels of violence

in the schools had decreased. I also spent time teaching English for free at a community center, as a way to give back to the community that had invested their time and shown me their hospitality.

Activist or emancipatory scholarship should at its core intentionally foster relationships with non-mainstream institutions in order to create a space of alternative knowledges to be heard and represented in research (Smith 2003). Fortunately, though admittedly through circumstances beyond my control, I became much more integrated into Afro-Brazilian communities by redefining my notions of who was an expert on race, and seeking out individuals and groups outside the realm of the conventional power structure. Activism and research do not always involve elaborately planned protests and institutional transformation. To the contrary, researchers should reframe what activism means for them and work to foster ruptures in the status quo, consciousness-raising, and empowerment that reflect their own capabilities. Fieldwork is necessarily messy and rife with contradiction. The only element that we can control is our commitment to the communities that we research, and our willingness to put their humanity and well-being before all else.

#### NOTES

1. Throughout the text, "black" and "Afro-Brazilian" are used as racial terms. When referencing Brazilians of African descent, I use the term Afro-Brazilians in order to be consistent with how activists in Brazil have defined themselves. When referring to researchers of African descent from the United States, I use the racial term "black," which is more commonly used than "Afro-descendant."

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