Hungarian University of Fine Arts Doctoral School

The Other in Me
'Othering' and the Brazilian White Middle Class

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Abstract

Living in Hungary gave me the distance to reflect on my reality in Brazil—a reality infused with the fear of urban violence, the fear of the other whom I had othered. I approached this phenomenon through autoethnography, theory, and artistic practice, using them as tools to expose how social narratives construct my identity and to challenge the dynamics of othering, both in everyday life and in cinema.

To ground this reflection, I described my Brazil not through the stereotypes of jungle or violence often exported abroad, but through João Pessoa, my coastal hometown in the northeast. Growing up by the beach, I witnessed how urban planning displaced poor families inland, turning the shoreline into a symbol of privilege. Early on, I learned to guard myself against those excluded from that privilege, as peripheral youth were cast as threats in media and social narratives.

From there, I located myself more directly. As a white, middle-class, northeastern Brazilian woman, I recognized that my social position shaped how I saw and represented others. In my early filmmaking, I had directed my gaze toward marginalized groups without questioning my right to do so. Only after moving to Europe—where I experienced being othered—that I realized the power I thought I had. This led me to feel the need to turn the camera back on myself and my own class. Following Simone de Beauvoir's insight that how we see the Other also constructs our own identity, I came to understand that my gaze was never neutral and that rethinking it was both an aesthetic and ethical necessity.

This led me to examine how my identity had granted me the "right to look," while at times making me the one looked at. Growing up, I had been excluded for my northeastern accent while still benefiting from whiteness in a racist society. These contradictions showed how the gaze both objectifies others and constructs the self, producing superiority and insecurity at once. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, I recognized that my gaze was shaped by power and, in turn, shaped who I was.

I then turned to the gaze as a political force. Building on bell hooks, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Fanon, I showed how looking had long functioned as a tool of control and objectification. In Brazil, the white middle-class gaze often reduced Black existence to suffering, as Djamila Ribeiro argued in her critique of the fetishization of poverty. I recognized how my own gaze had been trained by such narratives, seeing archetypes instead of individuals. This realization pushed me to the central question of my dissertation and artistic work: what happens when the white middle class itself becomes the object of the gaze?

The question of standpoint gave me another entry point. I traced how the concept of *lugar de fala* had entered Brazilian debates, often misinterpreted as a "permit to speak" rather than a perspective shaped by position. At first, I too misunderstood it, imagining silence was my only option as a white person in the debate of race, for example. Later, through the works of Ribeiro, hooks, Haraway, and Fanon, I came to see that everyone speaks from a standpoint—including whiteness. I reflected on how white Brazilians often fall into guilt, self-flagellation, or protagonism, which only recenters themselves instead of transforming power relations. My aim became to situate myself honestly within this debate and to ask how I could engage differently—through my artistic work—without reproducing the mechanisms I sought to critique.

It was through a robbery encounter that this reflection deepened. In that moment, I realized I could only see the boy in front of me through archetypes shaped by fear and social narratives. My father's words—"I am the other in myself"—echoed, and I began to ask: who was me? This question guided the next stages of my research, leading me to confront both whiteness and the Brazilian middle class as central to my own construction.

I examined whiteness first, through my family history, my father's ambiguous racial identity, and the racist jokes that shaped my childhood. I reflected on how colorism, myths, and daily experiences taught me to value whiteness as a crutch for my self-esteem. Over time, I realized these were lies that sustained white supremacy. Asking what racism had made of me, I began to move beyond guilt or denial toward an anti-racist stance—using self-reflection and art to expose how whiteness produced both privilege and fragility.

From whiteness, I turned to the middle class, where I recognized myself equally implicated. Through everyday interactions with workers, encounters with robbery, and the constant fear of falling into poverty, I saw how this class sustained inequality while imagining itself as elite. Drawing on Jessé Souza and Milton Santos, I realized that I was not an observer of these dynamics but deeply shaped by them. In asking who I was, I came to see that part of the answer lay in this contradictory middle-class identity.

The theme of fear then tied these threads together. Using my testimonies of robbery, I showed how fear structured my movements in Brazil and how the middle class exchanged freedom for the comfort of privilege. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics, I argued that the *us versus them* logic organized urban space by deciding who should be protected and who was deemed a threat, with walls, violence, and death as its instruments. I revisited my childhood interpretations of reality—sometimes romanticizing poverty—because I sensed my own citizenship was broken. Bringing in a story by Clarice Lispector, I exposed how middle-class complicity with state violence sustained this broken system of inequality. Ultimately, I showed that alterity in this context was toxic, dysfunctional, and impossible, and that what we call privilege was precarious and under development, sustained more by fear than freedom. Most importantly, I came to see that fear was not exclusive to whiteness or the middle and upper classes but circulated across classes—the difference being that some could withdraw from it, others could not, and still others became its direct victims through state violence. Fear, in the end, functioned both as a constraint on freedom and as complicity with the very structures of inequality. When I called them criminals, I declared myself innocent; when I said they were dangerous, I affirmed that I deserved protection.

Guided by Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity, I understood that freedom was relational: in reducing the other, I diminished myself. After having examined my fears, my class, my contradictions, I turned the camera back on myself—to expose how othering had also acted upon me.

My artistic practice is both research and method, I presented them alongside the processes and reflections they generated. Each piece functioned as a living experiment, where making, thinking, and writing came together to question how fear, privilege, and othering

shaped the white Brazilian middle-class experience. By turning the gaze onto myself, I challenged the conventions of documentary and used autoethnography to show how othering acts on me as much as I enact it.

In conclusion, I reflected on how this journey had revealed the contradictions of whiteness, middle-class identity, and fear—showing that what we call privilege is precarious, sustained by complicity, and deeply entangled with inequality.

I conclude that looking inward is not the only path. Engaging with alterity remains a fundamental task of art, and the challenge is to do so without reproducing the logic of walls. I argued that we must perform the dynamic and democratized practice of looking at and representing each other, not just ourselves, so that no single group always dominates the gaze.

Thesis statement

My work began with a question: To what extent am I a product of my relationship with the 'other,' and how does this dynamic of 'othering' function within a context of inequality and fear? To find the answer, I turned to **autoethnography** and **self-testimonial writing**, choosing to use my own story as the raw material. Locating myself with **standpoint theory** , as a person from the white middle class, and putting myself at the center, I take the camera and the **gaze**—the power to look and to define—and turn it back onto the privileged self.

In this process, I haven't worked alone. I've brought others into the conversation to help me understand what I see. I've used the writings of thinkers like **Jessé Souza** and **Milton Santos** about Brazilian society, as well as documentary films, as mirrors. This has allowed me to identify the pitfalls in my own self-representation. I've also found an ethical framework in the work of **Simone de Beauvoir**, and in the powerful critiques of the gaze by **bell hooks** and Frantz **Fanon**. Their insights allow me to engage with myself and with others without falling back into the same patterns of exclusion that I'm trying to break.

By blending my own personal testimony with critical theory, my dissertation challenges the traditional documentary gaze. It proposes a reversal: the privileged subject becomes the one who is scrutinized. Confession becomes critique, and self-exposure becomes a method for dismantling the very myths that sustain whiteness and the middle-class imagination in Brazil.

This dissertation examines how the act of "othering" shapes the moral and political self-perception of Brazil's white middle class, arguing that class privilege, urban fear, and racialized gazes are not only tools of exclusion but also forces that construct the identity of the privileged themselves. Through a blend of autoethnography, standpoint theory, and critical film practice, it explores how shifting the documentary gaze toward the filmmaker's own class can reveal the myths, insecurities, and structural inequities embedded in Brazilian society, challenging both representation and self-representation.

About

When I started playing on being a documentary filmmaker at 17, it was because I wanted to learn dimensions I wouldn't have access to otherwise. My first "work" was a birthday gift for my mother. I interviewed family members and her colleagues, asking them to talk about her. I filmed my father and, for the first time, heard the story of how my parents met. He even shared details he might not have revealed if it weren't for the camera. I went to her workplace and filmed her colleagues, capturing how she was seen beyond our home. Her sisters shared their own stories, revealing aspects of my mother I had never noticed before.

Even in a world where I already belonged, the camera and the project became more than just tools—they became a pass. They gave me access to stories, emotions, and transformations that wouldn't have unfolded the same way if I had just been there as myself.

When I think about making films, I think more about discovering than convincing others of a truth I already know. I think about what I could find out in the process and the possibility of transformation—entering with one belief and leaving with questions.

This research, for example, began with a desire—to understand why I exist and move through the Brazilian socioeconomic context in the way that I do. What underlies the beliefs I hold, particularly regarding my perception of others? The *other* of class, the *other* of race. How do I perceive them? How do they perceive me? And, in turn, how do I perceive myself?

These questions began to arise during my time living abroad in Europe, where I experienced a different relationship to urban space—one in which I no longer avoided certain places or people due to fear, and one in which I could walk freely.

I took advantage of this distance from the Brazilian context—first in Portugal, then in Hungary—to reflect on the fear that had shaped my movement through space, a fear produced and sustained by both social narratives and constructed realities.

Being away from that environment allowed me to question what I had previously accepted as solid or given. In order to interrogate fear, I also needed to interrogate myself—my assumptions about the world, my relationship to the "other," and the positionality that has shaped my perception.

I am central to this research because the way I choose to represent others stems from my own self. Hence I have adopted a mix of autoethnographic and confessional art approaches—to get closer to understanding myself. At the same time, I recognize that the forces within me are not merely personal; they arise from my social position and intersect with a constellation of other standpoints and identities that move through me.

In this research, to understand the ground I stand on, both literally and symbolically, I turn to Brazilian history, geography, and sociology through authors like Milton Santos (2011), Jessé Souza, Alberto Almeida de Campos, Dunker. Their work helps me trace how inequality is embedded in space and how cities themselves are constructed through lines of exclusion, fear, and privilege. What we perceive as "normal" or "real" is, in fact, constructed—and my white, middle-class identity is deeply intertwined with that construction and imaginary.

I draw on standpoint theory, particularly from Donna Haraway [1988], bell hooks, and Edward Said, to acknowledge that the way I see the world is shaped by where I stand—my position, my experiences, my body. Haraway introduces the concept of situated knowledge, hooks discusses how power and privilege shape not only how we see, but also how we are seen, and Said's work on orientalism helps me understand how systems of power construct the "other" as fixed and inferior.

I also engage with theories of othering and reification, particularly through Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir. Fanon explains how colonial and racial structures shape subjectivity through violence, fear, and the internalization of the gaze. Beauvoir's reflections on ambiguity remind me that the boundary between self and other is fluid, shifting, and never fully resolved.

Drawing from Michel Foucault ([1975]2012) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2010), I explore the gaze not only as something directed outward, but also as a tool of self-surveillance—a mechanism through which power operates via our internalized norms. Mirzoeff's concept of the "right to look" challenges this: it's not only about seeing, but also about claiming subjectivity. Those who are not seen—or who can move without being seen—often occupy a space of power, or at least freedom, while those who are constantly exposed to the gaze are disciplined by it. This tension between visibility and invisibility plays a central role in how I

reflect on my own position and perception, as both a white middle class Brazilian and filmmaker.

All these ideas both shaped and were shaped by my video pieces—fragments that construct a vision of Brazil as filtered through my own subjectivity, influenced by the affects that move and inform me. The process was iterative and reflective, grounded in a Freirean cycle of reflection, action, and reflection. Insights emerged not only through formal research, but also through embodied artistic practices such as writing, filming, collecting footage, editing, and engaging with the impressions and responses of others.

Context

Locating my Brazil

Assuming you are not Brazilian, what you know about Brazil is likely shaped by the representations that have been produced and exported. Perhaps you have watched City of God. Or perhaps you picture the jungle. But my Brazil is elsewhere — an urban coastal city in the northeast: João Pessoa.

When I was 8 years old we moved to a residential building by the beach. Like many coastal cities in Brazil, João Pessoa's beachfront was not always reserved for middle- and upper-class apartments. Fishermen and their families once lived by the sea, but urban planning projects deliberately displaced them into housing complexes, opening the coast for real estate speculation and tourism. The result was a city where the poor were pushed inland, while the beach became a symbol of privilege.

The problem with privilege is that everyone is taught to desire it, yet not everyone can have it. From a young age, I learned that I possessed "things" others lacked and wanted, and that I had to guard myself so they would not take them from me. I learnt to fear others by their looks—I learnt to fear others that looked poor.

Those without privilege were often framed as a threat. From these peripheries, young people organize *rolezinhos*—collective outings to malls, beaches, and other public spaces—as a way of claiming the city. In João Pessoa, they are often labeled "môfi," a term popularized by a daily police television program that sensationalizes crime and violence. The show mocks and criminalizes minors, and over time môfi became shorthand for peripheral youth—a word heavy with connotations of delinquency and danger. As a result, what for these young people

is simply participation in the city is read by authorities, elites and us as intrusion, their very presence treated as a threat.

Locating myself

I am a white, middle-class, northeastern Brazilian, cis, straight woman, born in 1990, and I have been living in Hungary since 2017. This is my standpoint—it is from here that I make documentary films. This list is not exhaustive; the identities that intersect within a person are multiple and complex. Yet, while I recognize my own position and its complexity, I was not always aware of how it shaped the way I saw and represented others.

When I first started making documentary films, I wanted to address social issues. I sought out characters in public spaces—communities, workers, those in poverty and vulnerability—believing their stories needed to be told and I should give them a voice. They were accessible, visible in the public sphere, and due to certain power dynamics, it was often easier to enter their homes than it was to film my own mother, for example, who would only allow it if she could first dress up and fix her hair. They welcomed my presence, and I felt entitled to represent them. They did not question my right to portray them, to gaze upon them.

At the time, I did not question it either. Later, when I came to Europe to pursue my Master's in documentary film and began shooting films in Portugal—the country that had once colonized mine—the weight of the camera felt different. I felt I did not have the right to point the camera at them, when I myself was being othered. This was made visible in everyday interactions, such as corrections of my Portuguese or the projection of stereotypes onto my identity, including the recurrent association of Brazilian women with prostitution. The power dynamics had shifted.

This realization gradually led me to a fundamental change: instead of continuing to direct my gaze toward those who have always been gazed upon—those habitually framed as subjects of social critique—I turned the camera toward myself and the white middle class I am part of. I recognized that this would be a real challenge. I began to see us as subjects in

the same social game, equally shaped by the dynamics we so often analyze in others. This shift was not just aesthetic or thematic; it was ethical.

In seeking a framework for my approach, I found resonance in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity (2015)*. Beauvoir argues that our understanding of ourselves is inseparable from how we are perceived by others. If I enslave another human being—or passively allow their subjugation—I cannot be free. Their freedom is intertwined with mine. This concept shapes the ethical foundation of my work: to recognize that my own social position is not neutral, that my gaze is never without consequence, and that true ethical engagement requires an acknowledgment of how power operates in representation (Edward Said, 2003).

This dissertation explores how we can continue to make politically and socially engaged documentary films while shifting the traditional gaze. Instead of reinforcing existing hierarchies of representation, how can we turn the lens toward ourselves, exposing the structures we are part of? How can documentary filmmaking move beyond simply *giving voice to the voiceless* and instead interrogate the very systems that produce silence? Through this work, I seek an approach to filmmaking that embraces ambiguity, responsibility, and the recognition that no one stands outside the frame of power—including the filmmaker.

Theoretical framework

Being looked at and my right to look

I embody an archetype that grants me the right to look—yet in other contexts, I too am the one being looked at.

It took me a long time to see myself as one of the archetypes of white privilege. Perhaps this blindness came, in part, from the feeling of not belonging that marked my adolescence. Between the ages of 14 and 17, I often occupied social spaces where I felt like an outcast—ungirly, not bubbly enough, too naive. At school, I didn't speak the language of popularity: makeup, brands, fashion, parties, appearances. I was treated as a second-class presence, mocked by my peers, especially the popular girls, who used to joke that they could "fix" me. *"Your blonde hair and green eyes have potential. With some makeup and straightened hair, you could be something."*

That sense of inadequacy deepened when I traveled to Southeast Brazil at age 14. There, people would mock my northeastern accent, asking me to repeat things just to laugh at the way I spoke. These moments—though painful—also planted the idea in me that I might *not* belong to the dominant group. I wasn't "cool," not elite, not included.

I learnt that as a *Nordestina*, a person who comes from the northeast of Brazil, I was also under the gaze, seen as ignorant or backward. Still, the belief in the inferiority of people from the North and Northeast, as if we are somehow less, sub-people, is so pervasive that, if we investigate further, we'll see that most Brazilian diplomats come from the Southeast or South: nearly 60% of Brazilian diplomats come from just four southeastern states (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Espírito Santo), and a similar regional imbalance can be observed in other elite institutions, like the Supreme Federal Court, where justices also overwhelmingly come from the South and Southeast.

Many times in my life, people from the Southeast assumed I was from their region because of my light skin, eyes, or hair. But the moment I opened my mouth and my accent gave me away, they would ask:

"Where are you from?"
"Oh… you don't look like you're from Paraíba."

That kind of comment, framed as a compliment, as if to say, *"You could pass as one of us; you don't look like them"*, always felt deeply disgusting to me. The tone they used was one of acceptance, as if offering me a pass, a very valuable one, they were welcoming me into their "us," to invite me to "other" myself with them. They would go on to say obscene things about Paraíba or the Northeast: "No, because they are ignorant, ugly, you know, out of place...", but then add, "But you're not like that." This kind of interaction happened many times, especially in taxis. The taxi driver would say such things, and I would feel like getting out of the cab. I wouldn't indulge them; I would simply conclude, *"I'm Paraibana, I'm from the Northeast."*

But they would insist, "*But what about your ancestors?"*

I would reply, *"We are from Paraíba."*

They would press on, *"But you must have some European background. In the Southeast, we have Italian ancestors, and even Germans."*

Being othered, or the invitation to self-othering, always felt painful, even when I had the passability of blending in before I spoke. But none of those jokes, assumptions, or instances of symbolic violence were rooted in a structure that could justify state violence against me: I was still white in a racist country. And that whiteness—my phenotype, my privilege—preceded me, even when I didn't know it.

Years later, while studying documentary film as part of my Master's program, I spent some time in Amsterdam, visiting the IDFA and the Film University. One day, I came across a small Brazilian grocery store —black beans, couscous, tapioca. I was overjoyed. As I stood

at the counter, the cashier—who was also the store's owner—asked where I was from. "From the Northeast of Brazil," I replied, smiling, disarmed.

He looked at me, then asked, "Why are you buying these things if you don't even know how to cook?". I told him I did know how to cook. But he didn't believe me. "You only learned that here, in Europe," he said bitterly. "In Brazil, you had maids cooking for you. You're white and blonde, of course you had a maid."

I don't remember exactly how I responded. I only remember the flood of shame, embarrassment, and hurt. I stuttered something, but I knew it didn't matter. His words weren't just a personal accusation; they were a confrontation with everything he thought I represented. I had walked into that shop disarmed, but to him, I was already armed with an archetype. My light skin, hair and eyes spoke before I did. They triggered something.

In Brazil, some would call it *reverse racism*, the phenomenon of racism being turned back on white people. But they forget that racism isn't just personal prejudice; it is systemic. The system was never built to exclude, oppress, or kill white people—structural racism has other targets.

I found an explanation for what happened in that shop in Fanon. In Black Skin, White Masks, he analyzes the psychological effects and dehumanization caused by racism, showing how it traps both black and white people in fixed roles and archetypes, which prevent true freedom and authenticity. In that situation, it prevented us from seeing each other.

He was from Bahia, the Brazilian state where 79.5% of the population identifies as Black, and which ranked fourth in the country for reported racism cases in 2024. I've always associated Bahia with Black pride. The first time I went there, I was a child, and I was mesmerized. I saw *capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian martial art that blends dance, acrobatics, and music; *Olodum*, the iconic percussion group from Salvador known for its Afro-Brazilian rhythms and messages of resistance. I saw beautiful women dressed in flowing white garments with a turban on their heads selling *acarajé* and other Afro-Brazilian foods I had never encountered in my own state, black hair was braided, coiled, worn natural—with pride. I saw dignity.

A friend of mine, a white middle-class photographer from the same state I'm from, once went to Bahia and started taking street pictures of children in a public square, as he often did back home. A black woman approached him and protested: "Don't you dare take pictures of my kids to profit." And by that, I believe she meant: "Just because we're on the street, you think we're public, or yours to take?"

That protest came from a long history of exploitation. It didn't matter that he was a Marxist photographer and sociologist, aware of inequality and trying to challenge it through his work. No, what she was resisting was their very existence within that system. She wasn't just confronting him, but his archetype, the assumed right to look, a right she had not given him, but he had, and the deep-rooted power dynamics of exploitation still in place.

Although my friend was aware of those dynamics and had his own way of challenging them—he would, for instance, print the photos he took and give them to his subjects, as a gesture of reciprocity—he could not run or hide from his own position. He was still a white, middle-class Brazilian photographing black, underprivileged children. And that mother saw it clearly. She spoke up and freed her kids from that gaze, rejecting not only his gaze, but the entire system it was part of.

The gaze

bell hooks offers compelling perspectives on the power dynamics of looking, for her the gaze has always been inherently political. She reflects on how, as a child, she was punished for staring at adults, an act deemed confrontational. In other instances, adults would demand that she look at them when spoken to, yet she was too afraid to return their gaze, gradually realizing the power embedded in looking. She also examines how enslaved individuals were punished for daring to look back at their captors, being subjected to the white gaze without the right to oppose it (hooks, 2010).

Mirzoeff, however, situates the same phenomenon within a longer history of visuality, tracing it back to the plantation system and its afterlives. For him, cases like the 1951 conviction of Matt Ingram[1] for "reckless eyeballing" exemplify how visuality functioned as a technology of control, policing who had the right to look and who did not.

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[1] North Carolina tenant farmer Matt Ingram, 1953. Ingram was acquitted by the state supreme court for assaulting a white girl by looking at her from a distance of 75 feet. He spent over two years in prison: https://www.flickr.com/photos/152681050@N03/34255701981/in/photostream/

Both bell hooks[2] (2010) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011)[3] highlight how black men were accused of violating white women simply by looking at them, underscoring the political charge of vision. For hooks, this illustrates how the black male gaze was criminalized within a white supremacist, patriarchal order — an order that punished even a glance, while offering limited, mediated spaces (cinema, television) where the repressed black male gaze could find room.

The white gaze is central to Fanon's (1952) work, which Mirzoeff cites extensively throughout The Right to Look. Fanon describes the experience of being fixed and marked by the gaze a profound exercise of psychological power: it objectifies, alienates, and destabilizes one's sense of self. This encounter produces both the desire to resist and the impulse to escape, yet Fanon also insists on the possibility of looking back — reclaiming agency in the very act of being subjected to the gaze. Mirzoeff develops this insight into his broader counterhistory of visuality.

Read together, these perspectives also illuminate racial dynamics in Brazil. My own experience leads me to reflect on how my gaze is shaped by, and emerges as a byproduct of, the gaze of the Brazilian white middle class. This dominant gaze constructs archetypes to "other" those who fall outside its narrow conception of the equal human, reproducing patterns of exclusion that echo the dynamics described by Fanon, hooks, and Mirzoeff.

A revealing commotion took place after Brazil's New Year's Eve celebrations, when a photo of a black child by the sea, watching the fireworks, was widely shared across social media. The photo showed a black boy standing alone in shallow water, centered in the frame.

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[2] "Given the real life public circumstances wherein black men were murdered/lynched for looking at white womanhood, where the black male gaze was always subject to control and/or punishment by the powerful white Other, the private realm of television screens or dark theaters could unleash the repressed gaze. There they could "look" at white womanhood without a structure of domination overseeing the gaze, interpreting, and punishing. That white supremacist structure that had murdered Emmet Till after interpreting his look as violation, as "rape" of white womanhood[...]"

[3] "This anxiety moved from plantation to metropole. In the North American context, "reckless eyeballing," or simply looking at a white person, especially a white woman or person in authority, was forbidden to those classified as "colored" under Jim Crow. Such looking was held to be both violent and sexualized in and of itself, a further intensification of the policing of visuality. As late as 1951, a farmer named Matt Ingram was convicted of the assault of a white woman in North Carolina because she had not liked the way he looked at her from a distance of sixty- five feet. This monitoring of the look has been retained in the U.S. prison system so that, for example, detainees in the Abu Ghraib phase of the war in Iraq (2003–4) were forcefully told, "Don't eyeball me!""

He is shirtless, his skin glistening, and his arms are crossed in front of his body. A large crowd occupies the shoreline behind him. Many people are dressed in light or white clothing, and numerous small points of light, possibly phone screens, glow in their hands. While some face toward the camera, others are turned away. The boy is looking upward, watching the new years eve fireworks.

The image quickly went viral, accompanied by countless comments laced with pity, social urgency, and empathetic awareness. Phrases like "A punch in the stomach!" and "A portrait of Brazil" became common. The photo was immediately associated with suffering and marginalization, and people felt an urge to share it, to denounce it, and to spread awareness.

This reaction reminded me of a passage from Susan Sontag's book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she discusses how our relationship with images of pain unfolds. The initial, and never fully abandoned, idea was that if everyone could see pain (the horror of war, in her example), they would work to stop it. In this view, the photographer's role was to denounce what was happening, to say, "Look at this"

We keep looking at it, while we still haven't stopped the pain (or the war), we continue to consume or spread its images, images of humans in pain, but the subject makes all the difference. The idea of "us and them" is a key part of her argument, as Sontag states: "With our dead, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face. [...] The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying.".(Sontag, 2003, p. 57)

If we replace "our dead" with "our livings in pain", we can understand the reverberation of the picture of the boy watching the fireworks on New Year's Eve in Copacabana. When Brazil acts as a colonizing power from within—with the upper classes and whiteness "othering," fetishizing, and exoticizing non-whites, poverty, etc, the picture's wide circulation figures. This distance from suffering also allows us to see others as objects, not as people with their own perspective, as she continues: "The other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees." (Sontag, 2003, p. 58).

That boy was under the gaze. Critics drew attention to the racialized gaze underlying these reactions, calling it a form of fetishism, a troubling pleasure in seeing black people framed through lenses of pity and hardship.

Djamila Ribeiro reflected on this fetishism when analyzing another picture[4]: "Taking pictures with these boys does not help at all in changing their reality, they will continue being in the periphery, while others will profit from their misery." (Ribeiro, 2018, p. 106).

Was there misery, was there pain in the picture of the boy watching the fireworks? As pointed out by voices within the black movement, that child could have been there with family, safe and happy, simply enjoying the fireworks. Why was the assumption one of vulnerability and deprivation? The image became a mirror reflecting how Brazil still views black existence: the automatic link between blackness and poverty, abandonment, or lack.

> Black folks with money think about class more than most people do in this society. They know that most of the white people around them believe all black people are poor, even the ones with fancy suits and tailored shirts wearing Rolex watches and carrying leather briefcases. Poverty in the white mind is always primarily black. (hooks, 2000b, p.10)

Whites have been taught, over and over, to expect black people to exist in positions of suffering. So when an image could break that narrative, even subtly, it's quickly reinterpreted to fit the mold. A black child standing by the sea, watching fireworks, not smiling, not crying, just *being*, and yet, we rush to fill in the gaps: *"He must be poor. But so full of hope. So inspiring, despite it all."*

Why do we believe they belong there? The idea that black children (or black people in general) *belong* in spaces of vulnerability, poverty, or struggle is a result of centuries of maintained structural racism, which is mirrored in media representation. These systems repeatedly reinforce the narrative that black life is naturally tied to lack, suffering, or marginality. Over time, these associations become so normalized that many people, including those who consider themselves progressive or anti-racist, don't even notice the assumption they're making.

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[4] The selfie Xuxa, a Brazilian celebrity, took with three black children who were juggling in the streets for money. Image available here: https://x.com/cartacapital/status/706921189256663041

Indeed, the photograph composition suggested exclusion, distance: the boy is sharply isolated in focus and light, contrasted against the more blurred, collective mass behind him. The reflective water adds texture and depth, amplifying the contrast between solitude and multitude. Even though the boy's face showed a kind of quiet contemplation, the viewer projected meaning onto it and onto him.

That meaning, just like us and the boy, is also located and situated in time, space, and politics. The white middle class saw what it saw because that's what we've been conditioned to do. We read pain where there may have been none and turned the child into a symbol, instead of letting him be an individual person. This happens because photographs indeed objectify, as Susan Sontag phrased it: "they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed" (Sontag, 2003, p. 64). This also happened because this child in Brazilian society has been "othered," and the "other" is almost never seen as an individual, but as a mass, or even a thing.

If we understood this child to be an integral individual, a citizen, with universal children's rights, then we would have perceived this picture in a different way. We would have asked: Why am I seeing this picture? Do I have the right to see his image? Are his parents or guardians aware of this exposure, and did they consent?

> Everyone should be ashamed of exposing these boys. They are underage; by any chance, was authorization from their parents or guardians obtained to expose them? They have rights. They are not part of a human zoo for privileged people. Would someone like to have their children's pictures spread without their consent? (Ribeiro, 2018, p. 106).[5]

The questions are many, and this one remains: Why does the Brazilian white middle class and above want to possess an idea of black life, which is never full, abundant, joyful, and complex, beyond pain? Why are we more comfortable seeing blackness framed through suffering? Because that's what we've been taught to recognize, that's the narrative most deeply ingrained. That's why, beyond historical reparations and affirmative action in universities and public service, black movements in Brazil call that representation in media and cinema must be reimagined. Not just increased visibility, but new narratives, stories that

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[5] Djamila Ribeiro commented about the selfie Xuxa, a Brazilian celebrity, took with three black children who were juggling in the streets for money. Image available here:
https://x.com/cartacapital/status/706921189256663041

portray black life in its wholeness: not reduced to trauma, not frozen in the aftermath of injustice, not fixed by an external gaze, but alive in reinvention, creativity, complexity, diversity and freedom.

But this raises the central question of my research: if the gaze disciplines black subjects, what does it do for white middle-class subjects like myself?

The answer is that the gaze not only constructs the other but also constructs the self. By gazing at poor or black Brazilians as objects of fear, pity, or fascination, the middle class simultaneously gazes itself into being: as respectable, moral, threatened, or superior. The child in Copacabana becomes a mirror in which the middle class recognizes itself—its empathy, its outrage, its distance.

This is where confession becomes necessary. I cannot write about the gaze without acknowledging my own. I was raised to scan the street for "suspicious figures," to fear *môfi* youth, to see poverty as either a threat or an object of compassion. When I was robbed, my first instinct was to describe the assailant as an archetype: young, black, poor. I did not see him; I saw only what my middle-class imaginary had trained me to see. In that moment, my gaze reduced him, and in turn it confirmed my own place as a victim, as a respectable citizen.

The gaze of the Brazilian white middle class, then, works in two directions. Outward, it produces others as inferior, dangerous, or pitiable. Inward, it produces us as moral, fearful, and distinct. This dual function explains why images of poverty are consumed so voraciously: they allow the middle class to look at itself, to reinforce its myths, without ever being looked at in return.

But what happens when the white middle class itself becomes the object of the gaze? When we, rather than others, are exposed, fixed, scrutinized as political beings? This is the reversal I attempt in my work: to turn the camera back on myself and my class, to see how we appear when stripped of invisibility. To ask whether we can bear to be seen as a collective that sustains inequality.

In this sense, the political task is not only to critique how we look at others but to invite—and endure—the gaze upon ourselves. To be gazed at is uncomfortable, destabilizing, but it is also necessary if confession is to become critique rather than narcissism.

Standpoint Theory in Brazil (Lugar de fala)

We got lost in translation. When Djamila Ribeiro (2018) introduced the term *lugar de fala* (standpoint) in an effort to bring black feminist theory into Brazilian public discourse, she wrote a necessary, concise, and accessible book explaining standpoint theory—its history, purpose, and application. She accepted numerous invitations to discuss and debate the concept in the Brazilian media and education institutions, always with clarity and precision.

However, for reasons I won't pretend to fully understand, the term was widely misinterpreted and misused. *Lugar de fala* came to be seen as something one either has or doesn't have—as if it were a kind of pass or permit.

Many white people, myself included at the time—before I read Ribeiro (2018) directly, and later bell hooks (1981), Donna Haraway (1988), and Frantz Fanon (2008)—initially understood it through word-of-mouth interpretations. I believed it meant that white people shouldn't speak about racism at all, assuming only black people had the "right" to do so, because only they were seen as possessing a *lugar de fala* (standpoint).

That was how I first understood it. And maybe, in some ways, that confusion speaks to a deeper truth: what white Brazilians might need most, at this moment, is to listen, truly listen, and learn the world seen through the Brazilian black oppositional voices and gazes. It's time for whiteness deconstruction, for reinvention. As actress and writer Fernanda Torres said in a *Roda Viva* interview:

> The problem is that the white intellectual used to be the spokesperson for the people; free, superior, and the voice of the people. But today, the people speak for themselves. [...] They have found themselves, and now we are the ones who are lost.[6]

She comments on not understanding her role in this debate—she explores some of the roles some Brazilian white intellectuals have taken, *o branco pelego de branco*, for example, a white person who will criticize and judge other whites for their privilege, when they themselves have the same privileges, but by presenting them as conscious they relieve

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[6] Original: O problema é que o intelectual branco antes era o porta-voz do povo, ele era livre, superior e o porta-voz do povo, e hoje o povo fala por si [...] Eles estão achados, quem está perdido somos nós. Roda Viva interview (2024).

themselves from the blame. In the interview she also mentions another possible white response, the white guilt, a type of discourse which is not productive and doesn't propose any changes, just gets stuck in a loop of guilt and inertia.

Another take on this, however, is more discomforting: claiming that we don't have a *lugar de fala,* and therefore shouldn't engage, became a comfortable excuse. If we believe we're not supposed to speak, then we can act as if the issue isn't ours to face. As the psychologist and researcher Lanna Elias has pointed out in an informal conversation, this misunderstanding made it easier for some people to withdraw, to remain silent, under the guise of respect, but ultimately out of convenience. As Djamila Ribeiro exposed in an interview[7]:

> People don't understand that discussing racism also means discussing whiteness, not just Blackness. Debating gender isn't only about femininity, but also about masculinity. And from our own standpoints, we must engage with these issues in search of emancipatory solutions. So everyone has a *lugar de fala* (standpoint) to speak from.

In an interview, Djamila herself advised white Brazilians to read books written by black people, which feels like an invitation to see reality and possibilities outside of the same old white gaze. It's also a matter of protagonism. In a culture like ours, where white supremacy is deeply embedded as the fundamental core of our society, the attempt by white elite to join the debate could easily become an effort to take the spotlight and lead the narrative. Once the topic is on the agenda, whites may feel compelled to speak on it—not just to engage, but to profit from it or claim credit.

I, too, have questioned my place in this debate. I've asked myself whether I have the right to engage by expressing my thoughts, making films or if I should simply be a reader and listener.

Eduardo Coutinho, a highly respected documentary filmmaker, is well known for his view of documentary filmmaking as an encounter with the other. In his work, the other refers to alterity or otherness, signifying a profound, reciprocal human connection, rather than objectification or othering. This approach is not patronizing but is driven by genuine curiosity and a deep dive into another person's life, which can offer a new perception of the world.

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[7] UOL Interview with Djamila Ribeiro (2020) available here.

In one interview[8], he articulated this philosophy: "Black people have to film white people, and peasants have to film black people. They have to switch. Indigenous people have to start filming white people — and nothing prevents white people from filming indigenous people. You need both sides, one from the inside and one from the outside."

The central issue, however, is the asymmetry of representation. Academic studies and industry reports in Brazil show that the majority of film directors are white, urban, middle-class men. This repetition — the same groups doing the looking while others are looked at — shapes what can be seen, who tells the stories, and whose perspectives are legitimized. Making documentaries has always been for me a way of existing beyond myself, however situating this "self" within time, space, politics, culture, gender, and race, and continually questioning how I should engage in these debates is crucial.

Wilson Gomes[9] a professor researching Social and Political Philosophy, Communication and Media and Political Theory, often uses his Facebook page to reflect on contemporary social trends in Brazil. One phenomenon he frequently discusses is the tendency of white Brazilians to use social media as a platform for publicly penalizing themselves for being white and, by extension, for their perceived complicity in racism and inequality. With a humorous tone, Gomes questions whether there is a certain *gozo*—a kind of pleasure or gratification—behind this public display of penitence and self-flagellation.

This makes me ask myself: how can I engage differently? How can I act in a way that allows for the emergence of a Brazilian concept of citizenship? One that creates space for something new to be built, where *othering* is no longer the dominant effect in play? How can I enter the public debate through my work without becoming complacent, without feeding the very mechanisms I'm trying to critique, and most importantly, without stealing the protagonist from those whose experiences must be centered?

In my work, I highlight the smallness, the pettiness of the self, and the ways in which one's sense of identity is often constructed on a foundation of lies. I'm interested in exposing the fragile scaffolding of illusions, inherited myths, and social hierarchies that shape how we see ourselves and others. By drawing attention to this artificial architecture, I hope to create

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[8] Article about Eduardo Coutinho available here.
[9] Wilson Gomes articles are available here: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/wilson-gomes/

space for something more honest, more relational, and less centered on domination or superiority.

I had once wanted to be others in order to know what was not me.
I then understood that I had already been others, and that was easy.
My greatest experience would be to be the very core of others:

and the core of others was me.

Clarice Lispector

The other in me

My father is a very meditative person who often says things out of context. I have no idea how long he spends ruminating on his thoughts before they come out. Sometimes, out of the blue, he'll say, "Viva a Revolução Francesa!" or "Viva o Brasil!"[10] He usually speaks in a humorous tone, as if not to be taken seriously. But I do think he means what he says—humor is just a disguise.

During one of my visits to Brazil, while I was living in Portugal, we were having an afternoon snack in our kitchen, just the two of us. Suddenly, he said: "*Eu sou o outro em mim mesmo.*"[11]

I asked him what it meant. He said it was about an ethic of existing in the world—being the other within yourself. That the other is not something completely external, and the self is not something entirely separate. My perception of myself is always in relation to how the other perceives me, and how I perceive the other. We are in relation to each other. I am the other to the other, and also myself. And they, too, perceive themselves as self.

That thought stayed with me that day, and in the days that followed.

Later that same month, I was robbed. I remember the encounter with the boy who demanded all my belongings—the gun between us—and the sentence that echoed in my mind: "I am the other in myself."

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[10] "Long live the French Revolution!" or "Long live Brazil!"
[11] I am the other in myself, in English.

The other—my compatriot—a boy whose height and weight were marked as inferior to mine, whose social worth was written as lesser, but who held a gun, and in that moment, seized a power far greater than mine. He kept repeating: "The bag, hand me the bag!". I obeyed, then was released to walk away. I headed toward my parents' building, where I grew up, lamenting the encounter—the nature of it, the history and politics that had brought us to that moment. I hated him, and then I hated my country for making me hate him. What ethic could hold this encounter?

The doorman lent me his phone. I called the police. I reported the robbery: when, where, how. Only the why was missing. The police supplied one: "Yeah, it's late. They do it around this time." There was a fatality in their tone—when all I wanted was for them to protect me, to serve me, to reverse it even.

When the police asked me to describe the robber, all I could offer was an archetype: a boy, thin, short, black, poor. The next day, using an app, I managed to trace my stolen phone, and the police accompanied me to the location it led us to. We arrived in the São José favela, an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Boys were loitering on the streets, and the police asked, "Is any of these him? Can you identify him?" I was surrounded by the same archetype, but I couldn't pinpoint the robber, since I had never truly seen him.. Our eyes avoided each other during that encounter because, by turning away, we could escape the gaze—seeing each other through each other's eyes. Neither of us wanted that. He had never truly seen me—he too saw only an archetype.

I had entered the police car wanting the robber to be punished. I wanted him to learn a lesson, to never do it again. I wanted my belongings back. My ID. My right to walk freely. I wanted not to be seen as a target. I wanted to be seen as human. I wanted to be seen as equal.

I left the car reflecting about the impossibility of recognizing him.

In me, there was no space for that other. I wanted his annihilation.

A new History—one that would never have allowed him to become *that*.
A History that would have never allowed **me** to become ***this***.

Because what is this, if not a reaction to that? What is that, if not a reaction to this?

What is this?

The deepest thing in man is the skin

Paul Valéry

Is this Brazilian whiteness?

In 2025, my father apologized for making me white, he said he should have made me black. At the time he thought it would be more convenient making me white and blonde. But now he regrets it, he should have made me black, "it matches you more". As I said before, my father says random things in a humorous tone, and it's hard to know the origin of it. But I do think he reveals interesting things when he does that.

A few years ago, I asked my father if he is black. He replied that for some people he is black, for others he is white, some would say brown. "But how do you see yourself?" I insisted, then he said "I'm black, you should have seen my grandma, she was the blackest and the kindest person I met in his life…" In Brazil, race is based on self-identification[12], so now when my father replies to my question, he goes back in time to hold onto an identity, a reference, an affection, that could clarify any doubt, and he finds his answer from love and admiration.

Here comes the contradiction: I grew up with my father making jokes about race, which I could never fully understand. Initially, I interpreted these jokes as his way of drawing a line between our family and blackness, a distinction that led me to believe he was white. However, I now understand that this confusion has a name, and it is rooted in how historical interracial mixing established a social hierarchy that led to *colorism*:

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[12] According to the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2022), the official classification of race and color is based on self-identification. The census uses five main categories: branca (white), preta (black), parda (brown or mixed-race), amarela (yellow or asian), indígena (indigenous).

Even in the face of racism's most cruel institution—slavery—the enslaved black people initially refused to embrace the white notions of inferiority. But this changed when the white racist distributed privileges and rewards based on skin color. As this happened, it not only divided black people amongst themselves, but also created a level of distrust and suspicion that did not exist when all black people were similar in skin color, while also laying the foundation for assimilation. The practices of white supremacy through the procreation by means of the rape of black women by their white owners produced mixed-race descendants, whose skin color and facial features were, frequently, radically different from the black norm. This led to the formation of a color caste aesthetic (DEVULSKY, 2021, p.33).

I ended up reproducing these jokes myself. When I was six years old and my (white) aunt offered me the chocolate "Diamante Negro" (Black Diamond), I replied: "I don't like anything that is black." She laughed so hard and commented, "She's just like her father!" in a mix of astonishment and humour.

In one of his jokes, he used to talk about my aunt's husband, who, he would say, used to be black but was getting whiter and whiter each day. "Cecília, you should have seen how black your uncle used to be. I don't know what is happening that he is getting white, maybe it's the aging. I remember he was black, which is why your maternal grandmother disapproved of his marriage to your mother's sister. I must be white, because she has always approved of me and your mother." Every time my mother witnessed these talks, she would ask in annoyance: "Stop this nonsense."

Later, I came to believe his jokes were also a clumsy way to address the subject, to make blackness visible and something that could be spoken about. It felt better to have jokes and nonsense than to have silence.

Since I did not know what that was, I could not name it nonsense. And I would not dare repeat his "jokes" in front of him, because I was not sure he would approve of it. When I told a racist joke to my cousin, who was seven years older than me, she reproached me, saying that both her father (the uncle my father would constantly mock) and mine were black. I was seven and speechless.

At first, I thought that only others could be black, not us. And for many years, a question followed me: "Is my father black?" When he stayed long hours under the sun and his

skin peeled off, I proved to myself he was white, "only white people's skin would peel off!". But then, some other proof that he could be black was on the way.

I thought having this answer would solve my own identity. Some parts of me were less accepted than others, and most of the avoidable ones were attributed to my father. A doctor offered to fix my nose when I was a child. My schoolmates wanted to straighten my hair. And someone even offered me deodorant in my puberty years, saying I most likely got a strong smell from my father. There was selective violence against my body.

This race confusion at home was so present that my teenage sister once bought a T-shirt with the saying "100% BLACK." Because she had a white phenotype, my mom advised her not to wear it, fearing people would make fun of her. We thought that having a black father, grandfather, and great-grandmother would automatically make us black.

We thought many things. Maybe we believed it would be easier to navigate the world as black since we were white. And as white people, maybe we even felt we had the right to be black if we wanted to.

When I was 21, I read the book A Negação do Brasil (Araújo, 2000), and a chapter on racial mixing as a project to "whiten" Brazil resonated with me. It described how, as part of a national political project, Italian immigrants were brought to the country and given better conditions than the existing black population. The hope was that through this mixing, the country would eventually look white.

When I read this, I felt as though they had won in my DNA and phenotype—that their project had succeeded. I realized that the way I could fight back was to claim my black identity. This effort, however, was short-lived, as my friends laughed and warned me that I am white. I then understood that my plan was delusional and I needed to keep looking for a new plan—which turned out to be examining my own whiteness, so I had to look deeper.

I remember, as a child, having a clear sense that I was worth more than those with darker skin or less money. I used to watch the series *Carrossel*, and when Cirilo, who was a black boy, painted himself white in order to deserve Maria Joaquina's love, I got sad, but I wasn't surprised. I saw it and thought: this is just how the world is. It felt like an unspoken truth—something we all knew but didn't talk about.

I remember how that racism and classism supported me. They were like crutches, helping me cope with my other issues of self-esteem. Even though I often felt abused and controlled by adults and other children, I found a strange sense of confidence in believing there were people officially considered less than me.

The Brazilian geographer Milton Santos was asked by a journalist[13] about his "resentment" towards whites, for being a black man in Brazil. He responded by questioning the interviewer: "*Resentment? I feel the white Brazilian's resentment at seeing how successful I am*."

This was not a cheap act of revenge or a mere retort to an offense. What Milton Santos was conveying was that racism is a problem for both sides—for white Brazilians and black Brazilians. Indeed, it was a shock when I realized it had all been a big lie. As I grew up, I kept encountering poor, black, and *pardo* people who, by the very standards I had internalized, proved to be far superior to me.

When a white person sees a black Brazilian in a position of success, a thought process can emerge: "*I was told my entire life that I was better than them. How did a black person get there when I didn't*?" This is then followed by a moment of self-doubt: "*Does this mean I'm not better?*"

It happened mainly at university—outspoken people with clear ideas, creativity, motivation, a pulsating zest for life, and deep literary references. And yes, it was almost funny to realize that I had built a large part of my self-confidence on myths. I had based much of my sense of self-worth on the mere fact of being white.

While not entirely, a significant portion of my sense of self-worth was undoubtedly rooted in the enduring myths of white supremacy. It's notable that some individuals continue to derive a sense of identity and security from these constructs and actively work to preserve them: "*I never truly believed I was naturally superior for being white. But I thought that the economic, social, cultural, and political systems were designed to give me the illusion that I was, grant me what is rightfully mine, and keep them in their places*." To counter this, I

decided to recognize these narratives as fabrications and engage in a process of self-reflection and personal development. Part of this process was to investigate what racism made of me.

In *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), a question is posed: How can there be racism if no one openly declares themselves to be racist? This is something I've heard all my life: *'I don't see color.'* I always understood it as a way of saying, *'Let's stop talking about it. Let's close the debate.'* So, my first approach was to declare myself racist—not proudly, but as someone who recognizes the internalized racism within me. This is not something particular to me alone; it's something pervasive, a result of systemic forces. I thought that by doing so, I would be taking a different approach—one that counters the gaslighting that has been so prevalent.

But self-declaring as racist does not allow for transformation. It's merely descriptive and fatalistic, with no room for change. It feels like resignation to a fixed truth, which is not the case, because racism is a construct. Declaring myself anti-racist, is acknowledging this structure(which is not solid) and adopting an anti-racist stance in both my words, actions, and artistic production.

But how? What does it mean to be anti-racist, and to express that through art? What kind of discourse should I engage with, one that might lead to real transcendence?

I've witnessed many white Brazilian discourses that feel incredibly simplistic. First, because they often completely dismiss the influence of class in their analysis. But it's not just that. There's a tone of penitence, confession, and guilt that seems more narcissistic and sadomasochistic than transformative. This awareness is publicly performed—less as an act of solidarity and more as a demonstration of moral superiority or symbolic nobility. At its core, it feels like the protagonism is being stolen again.

It's as if white supremacy finds a new expression—whites who are self-aware and regretful, yet still at the center of everything. It's a posture that doesn't challenge the status quo; instead, it reinforces it through ego. The other appears only to reaffirm the self, placing the white subject once again in a position of power—a power that, in reality, they do not possess.

How could I—a woman from the Brazilian white middle class—be framed as someone who *allowed* or *signed up* for the exploitation of black people? It's often presented in a way that suggests we had the power to establish that entire structure, when in truth, we are also in a position of subjugation, playing a game whose rules we did not create.

I see myself as this white middle-class woman, surrounded by poverty, feeling guilty for participating in it. But guilt, in this framing, becomes performative—it doesn't transform or dismantle anything. It keeps the system intact, while giving the illusion of awareness.

Is this the Brazilian middle class?

Comprehending Brazilian social classes, especially the middle class, where I place myself, was essential in constructing my documentary subject, as I sought to explore the intersection between individual and collective experiences. Throughout this process, I encountered resistance from some professors and colleagues regarding the use of the term social classes. Understandably so, since at least the 1970s, especially following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Marxist thought has declined, while neoliberal and postmodern approaches have gained influence. As a result, many sociologists have dismissed class as an outdated or ideologically driven concept, arguing that it no longer adequately explains contemporary social structures. Nevertheless, some scholars, such as Bourdieu (cited by Leal, 2020), have continued to emphasize its importance in analyzing social realities.

In my research, I align with this perspective, considering class not merely in economic terms but as a framework for interpreting behaviors, lifestyles, desires, fears, and collective imaginaries. Class remains a crucial tool for making sense of social reality, enabling us to analyze patterns that extend beyond economic status alone. It also allows me to portray my character (myself) as a representative of this class, whose behaviors, actions, and fears reflect a broader Brazilian collective reality: History has not ended

Brazil was forged under a colonial system in 1500, I would say it was invaded and exploited, others would say it was discovered, conquered and founded. Even now, after many centuries, some dynamics from that period are maintained. Jessé de Souza, a Brazilian sociologist whose work *The Brazilian Middle Class: A Mirror of the Nation* focuses on the Brazilian middle class, once used a metaphor to illustrate this enduring structure: "The power bloc formed by the upper middle class and the elite operates with the same modus operandi as a foreign colonial power, exploiting and usurping the wealth of the lower classes—the "other," an inferior and strange people" (Souza, 2018, 19). Reflecting on my own daily experiences, from childhood to the present, I can identify these dynamics from an early age. The phenomenon of "othering," deeply tied to how different social classes interact, will be central to this project.

The first challenge was defining class divisions, which, in this context, is not a simple task. Brazilian reality demands a perspective that highlights not only the economic factors that differentiate each stratum but also the power relations that reinforce inequality and sustain the privileges of a minority elite. In this chapter, drawing on Jessé de Souza's (2018a, 2018b) insights into the development of the Brazilian context, I explore how one emerges as a social actor in Brazil from the perspective of the middle class. Additionally, I examine how documentaries serve as a tool for reflection on power dynamics within this social stratum.

In general composed by white, male and business owners, the elite is a result of these characteristics and are located in this higher social power strata, dominating political and economic aspects. According to Moura Jr et al (2022, s.p., authors' emphasis) "There are **67 people in all of Brazil** who are billionaires. But there are plenty more we could consider elite". The phrase "we could consider elite" takes appearance and behaviour into account, as the middle class often seeks to emulate the elite's behavior and ideology through buying expensive products or having dinner at luxurious restaurants and traveling around even though this often compromises their income for basic necessities. While the elite does not rely on salaries, the middle class would see their lifestyle jeopardized if their monthly income were suspended, a truth that some try to ignore.

> Nowadays, the precarious worker doesn't consider themselves poor but middle class. The poor are only the excluded and marginalized. The real middle class, in turn, sees itself as

'elite,' contributing to a fatal self-deception with terrible consequences for the destiny of Brazilian society and the middle class itself (Souza, 2018, p17).

I took part in this game of self-deception, and locating myself within the middle class was daunting. One of the most crucial yet simple realizations in my journey was finally understanding that I am part of the social issues that once seemed external, issues I had felt above. A social game was unfolding, marked by struggles, domination, and power dynamics. At times, I believed I was merely an observer, rooting for the oppressed. But my perception would shift; sometimes, I felt like part of the elite, an oppressor myself, based on my daily interactions with maids, doormen, cleaning staff, and delivery workers. This feeling would peak when I was robbed, something I occasionally interpreted as a form of social punishment.

A comedian in Brazil, Gregório Duvivier, wrote a piece about this phenomenon, *The stages of a robbery*:

Stage 1: Dementia. What just happened? Someone pointed a gun at me. They took my cell phone. Wait. I think I was robbed. Of course. That's it. I was robbed. Shit. I'll call the police. Where's my cell phone? Oh, I don't have it. I was robbed. Sons of bitches. Whoa. You just cursed out the mugger. Do you know what that means? It means the second stage has begun: reactionary dementia. These thugs have to die. Human rights are for righteous humans. I have nothing but goodwill for these thugs. I vote for Freixo because he defends these thugs. Then a thug comes and robs me. I should have voted for Bolsonaro. A good bandit is a dead bandit. You know what I'm gonna do? I'm going to find this thug and blow up his corneas. Whoa. Wait a minute, dude. (Entering the third stage: leftism.) This guy is a victim of consumer society. The one committing the violence is the State. It was capitalism that robbed you. Besides, you didn't have to have your cell phone in your hand, flaunting this device whose value could lift three families out of poverty. In fact, you asked for this robbery.

Then, we return for the understanding of classes. In general terms, according to Thompson (1963), class can be understood as a social and cultural formation that evolves over time. It is a living process shaped by traditions, values, and political movements. This is particularly important in demonstrating how Brazilian culture has developed differently from that of European countries. In "*Subcidadania Brasileira"*, Souza highlights:

The middle and upper classes of a society like Brazil's do not merely share the same consumer privileges as their European and North American counterparts. In Brazil, these classes also benefit from a veritable army of cheap labor in the form of domestic workers, nannies, cleaners, doormen, office boys, and couriers. This allows them to save time for well-paid, prestigious activities and even alleviates, for instance, gender struggles within these classes by transforming them into an invisible class struggle. Drawing attention to superficial problems or creating false oppositions always serves to blind us to real and more significant conflicts.(2018, p. 23, translation mine)

It is interesting to highlight how cheap labor plays a crucial role in sustaining the entire system, benefiting both the middle and upper classes. When public initiatives aim to increase the minimum wage for domestic workers, for example, they often face strong resistance and even protests from the middle class, a group that typically does not participate in demonstrations. A key factor in understanding this resistance is the deep-seated fear of becoming poor. The middle class clings to a sense of comfort that makes them feel aligned with the elite and superior to others, and any shift in the economic balance threatens this fragile position. As Milton Santos used to say: *the middle class doesn't want rights—it wants privileges, at the expense of others' rights*.

At this point, many questions arise about the formation of the middle class in Brazil, how this concept took shape in daily life, how it influences human interactions, and how it determines the way people navigate social and geographic spaces. How do the middle and upper classes interact with their veritable army of cheap labor? An *othering* mechanism is at play, leading to the objectification and dehumanization of workers and service staff, reinforcing rigid boundaries over who belongs where and who is allowed to do what. Rooted in colonial history and the legacy of slavery (in theory abolished in 1888), these divisions remain embedded in the very architecture of homes: service elevators separate from social elevators, workers do not share the same dining table as their employers, and they are expected to enter through back doors (kitchens) rather than front doors (living rooms). Even in private residences, the so-called *quarto de empregada* (maid's quarters) or *dependência*, typically a tiny, windowless room near the kitchen or laundry area, physically marks the separation between employer and employee. These discriminatory practices are not just remnants of the past, they continue to shape everyday life.

This social division is constantly shifting, shaping human perceptions of others and forming distinct groups that dictate each person's (or each social class's) place in society. By place, I refer not only to geographic spaces, often controlled by a minority of the population, but also to the subjective limitations that will be explored throughout this work. Who is expected to dine at expensive restaurants? Who should have access to public universities? Who can afford private schools? Who should be seen in airports and on airplanes?

After President Lula's first government, the so-called emerging middle class gained the right to consume and access spaces that had previously been exclusive to the preexisting middle and upper class. This shift triggered a reaction from the established middle and upper classes, who resisted sharing these spaces with people whose appearance and behavior did not align with their own. The fear of losing exclusivity and privilege, fueled by a pre-existing *othering* mechanism and elitist mindset, reinforced social barriers and deepened class anxieties. This reaction highlights the co-dependency between classes and the inherently unjust and exploitative nature of their interactions, where the very notion of Brazilian citizenship (*cidadania*) appears more like a privilege than a universal right (Milton Santos):

> But there are different kinds of citizenship. In underdeveloped countries, in general, there are citizens of different classes—some who are more citizens, some who are less so, and others who are not even citizens yet. (SANTOS, 2011, p.87).

The public space is not really for all. There are plenty of subjective boundaries that are formed for this social imaginary and propagate a sense of belonging on one hand and social exclusion on the other. Who belongs to which place? This question helps us to understand this social division and the reason why it still remains this way in the 21st century (Souza, 2018a; 2018b).

While thinking about the story I wanted to tell, I initially saw it as my own unique personal experience. I didn't consider my imagination, behaviors, values, and emotions as a package that could belong to a group—or worse, a social class. But as I dug deeper into my memories, I recalled a particular situation: I was sitting in my car with a friend, waiting for a third friend to join us in front of their house. It was evening, already dark. Anxiously, I kept

looking around, checking for any suspicious people nearby. Then my friend mocked me: "You are so middle class."

It's funny—based on wealth, she would also be considered middle class. But at that moment, it became clear that it wasn't just about how much money we made. Maybe it had more to do with values, how we perceived public spaces, and how we saw others. She lived in a neighborhood built on human interactions, where neighbors helped each other. I, on the other hand, lived in an area where people simply resided and only met to argue at condo meetings.

It's interesting to realize how much we isolated ourselves as we climbed the social ladder—or should I say, the economic one? I was born in a working-class neighborhood where my parents were friends with the neighbors; they helped each other, and to this day, my parents still tell stories about them. Then we moved to an officially middle-class neighborhood, where they befriended only a select few. In the next move, we met no one at all—we had no idea who lived around us. Maybe it was because we had moved to an upper-middle-class neighborhood facing a community (slum), and we didn't dare to walk around. Then, due to safety concerns—after repeatedly having our clothes stolen from the drying rack (the boys from the community would jump over the wall and take them while we were sleeping)—in 1999, we moved to a high-rise condo. Now, even though my parents have lived there for 25 years, they haven't befriended a single neighbor.

It seems that as we became more self-sufficient, our lives also became more private. I remember that whenever we had an argument at home, my parents would first close the windows, as if to make sure no one heard us. We kept a safe distance from the neighbors, no longer needing to exchange favors, since any service we required could be outsourced. Our social life revolved around family gatherings. With both of my parents having eight siblings, there were birthday parties every month. Surrounded by people with shared histories, that we can trust. Everything beyond that felt like unfamiliar territory.

Maybe that's what my friend sensed when she called me so middle class. Consequently, I began trying to understand how I am perceived by others, how others are

perceived by me, and how I perceive myself in response. I had to identify myself as someone belonging to a social group—one that reproduces behaviors and beliefs without fully understanding the reasoning behind them. I felt the urge to place myself within the narrative, occupying a social position called the Brazilian middle class.

In my early adult years, I tended to see myself as an individual, separate from any social group, similar to those people who, when asked if they are feminist, left-wing, or right-wing, simply reply, "I'm myself, that's all.". Jessé Souza (2018) describes this as a childish narcissism, one that can persist for a long time. He claims that in the case of the middle class, where the idea of autonomy is central to its self-image, this perception is even stronger. A group that does not see itself as a group. This makes the development of class consciousness seem even more distant, especially since the media and cultural products representing this class tend to focus on individuals rather than collectives—portraying personal experiences rather than shared realities.

Brazilian films about the middle class often follow a specific pattern, emphasizing personalities and celebrities who are portrayed as autonomous and authentic—people who "wrote their own history." This aligns with the discourse of meritocracy. Few cinematic representations depict the middle class as a collective, as a social group analyzed from an anthropological perspective, focusing on shared experiences and historical movements rather than individual uniqueness. However, *Opinião Pública* (1977) by Arnaldo Jabor and *Um Lugar ao Sol* (*High-Rise*, 2009) by Gabriel Mascaro stand out as noteworthy exceptions. In these films, individuals are not presented as singular figures but as allegories, representing broader societal tendencies.

In *Opinião Pública* (1977), the way subjects appear in the frame is particularly interesting. They are often seen as part of a collective, with multiple characters sharing the frame, engaging with one another, and debating opinions. A prevailing morality is evident—the Protestant work ethic, as described by Souza (2018). The film's title plays with the concept of a group frequently discussed in the media yet often perceived as faceless.

The middle class is sometimes depicted without context, lacking an environment or landscape. Often, we see dramatic lighting and a generic background, stripping them of a

broader social setting. This is why films like *Opinião Pública* and *Um Lugar ao Sol* are so compelling—they provide context, showing characters in relation to their surroundings.

The documentary *Um Lugar ao Sol* (Gabriel Mascaro, 2009) is an insightful example. The director explores the lives of penthouse residents in Brazil, shedding light on privilege and social inequality. The upper middle class, positioned at great heights, sees everything below and identifies with the elite, adopting its values and beliefs—where nothing seems to exist above them. The director avoids using voiceover to impose an interpretation, allowing the subjects to effectively expose themselves. By the end of the film, it feels as though the upper class has willingly confessed to its own political illiteracy and "selective" psychopathic traits. In one striking scene, a penthouse resident remarks, "We have fireworks displays almost every day; they are very beautiful." She then clarifies that these "fireworks" are actually stray bullets from shootouts in a favela. She concludes, "Rather tragic, but very beautiful."

I explore Brazilian documentary history to examine how the middle class is represented, how it represents itself, and how it challenges its own representation through the gaze of the other. Although I perceive my social class as somewhat cowardly and insecure—recognizing in it the very flaws I repudiate in myself—the most intriguing portrayals are those in which the middle class is framed as a new enemy. In these cases, the filmmaker seems to be saying, *Look, they are bad!*, positioning themselves as an outsider, someone who has escaped the cave and achieved awareness. The side effect of this approach is that it grants the viewer permission to do the same: *Look, they are bad! I'm different.*

While I believe these portrayals have contributed to our collective consciousness—forcing us to see ourselves as political, confront our behavior, and reflect on our role—I propose a different approach. I position myself within the narrative, using a first-person, confessional, and self-reflective tone. I recognize this behavior within myself, and I believe that openly acknowledging it could take us deeper, exposing the imaginary that shapes these behaviors and searching for their origins. Ideally, this would encourage the viewer to undergo a similar exercise, placing themself in this political and social space and inviting them for self-reflection: *I recognize this imaginary within me. I do behave like this.* In making this audiovisual work and through watching this piece, both the audience and I take on the challenge of self-reflection that, as Jessé says, has only one prerequisite: courage.

The other, walls, fear, death and me

Now we are stepping into a danger zone, where any mistake in conceptualizing urban violence and its relationship with social classes or race could result in a caricature of reality. Interestingly, these caricatures exist regardless—not only in how Brazil is perceived abroad but also in our own understanding of our reality. When discussing violence, we must distinguish between two concepts: the reality of violence itself and the reality shaped by the idea of violence.

"Don't go there, it's dangerous." I heard this countless times, first as a command, later as advice, from childhood to the present day, whether from my parents or from strangers. The idea that I could be the target of violence has been present in my life in Brazil for as long as I can remember. Of course, it's important to acknowledge that I am a woman, raised in a middle-to-upper-class family and neighborhood. Still, even now in Budapest, when I gather with my Brazilian friends, insecurity turns to dinner topics. Even men say that violence and insecurity were the main reasons they moved abroad.

"*Be careful!*"—I've even seen some of us warning our non-Brazilian friends who might want to visit Brazil. I have a colleague at work who is European, and once, he was given the opportunity to go to Brazil—free tickets, hotel, and daily allowances. He turned it down, and we, as Brazilians, didn't understand how he could reject such an opportunity. He then replied, "*Guys, you always say it's dangerous and tell those stories. I don't want to be robbed*".

As I write this chapter, I fear I might paint a catastrophic picture of Brazil again and make you, the reader, afraid of it.

As I was growing up, I tried to make sense of the social dynamics I encountered. Since they weren't openly discussed in my daily life—either at home or at school—I assumed they were so obvious that I had to figure them out on my own. They seemed so clear to everyone else that asking about them would make me look foolish. As a result, I came up with my own explanations for everything, applying pre-existing logic to interpret completely different situations.

For example, I once believed that black people were originally white but turned Black because they had to work outdoors from a very young age, constantly exposed to the sun. In my mind, poverty made people turn black. I "knew" this because whenever I didn't use sunscreen, my skin would darken or turn red; all the children selling water and orange juice by traffic lights were black; my classroom was mostly white; and on television, poverty was almost always represented by images of blackness. This was my attempt to understand why most of the people I saw in vulnerable situations were black.

This is just one one of the many flawed explanations I came up with as a child to make sense of a reality that seemed absurd to me.

It felt very strange when I was on vacation at the beach and saw one very white, blonde kid doing errands that I was used to seeing black kids do. My older cousin noticed my astonishment and explained, "*He is an albino. They don't have melanin. And you have very little of it—that's why instead of tanning, you turn red, get sick, and your skin peels. black people have a lot of melanin.*" As a child, I believe there was only one thing they had that I did not: freedom.

Since I was very young, public space was never something to experience—it was simply something to pass through. From the house to the car, the car to school, school to the car, and back home again. I was surrounded by protective layers, by walls that promised to shield me from everything outside.

When I was eight years old, I got a bike. It felt like a promise of the outside. I remember the first time we put the bike in the car and went searching for a square where I could ride. They took me downtown, and for the first time, I felt the freedom of biking without walls or fences around me. I finally understood what a square *was*. But it only happened once, it never became a routine. It was simply too impractical.

We'd have to take the car, drive seven kilometers to the city center, find a parking spot, and make sure we went at just the right time, not too hot, and definitely not too dark. Darkness meant insecurity, and in my city, the sun sets around 5:30 p.m. After that single taste of freedom, I went back to riding in circles inside our garage.

I found ways to cope. I would bike for hours, making up stories, imagining I was running errands, living out different adventures. Even though I was enclosed by walls and fences, my imagination took me far beyond them. But even so, there was a sense of longing.

Through the gate—made of metal with tiny holes where I could slip my fingers and my gaze, I used to watch the street and the movement in the favela. I saw black kids walking by and felt a strange envy. The street belonged to them. Adventure belonged to them. Public space was theirs in a way it wasn't mine. I had already bought into the narrative of "*us and them*", but I could never fully accept the idea of "*Poor them, lucky us.*" I somehow knew we were *both* missing something essential, even if I didn't have the words for it at the time.

The contradiction was hard to ignore. While I longed for a freedom that wasn't mine, an independence I couldn't quite access, I also accepted the logic that kept me inside. I believed there must be a reason why *I* was indoors and *they* were out. When someone once asked me whether I preferred the sea, the river, or the swimming pool, I answered without hesitation: the swimming pool.

The walls around me existed in many layers of life.

I didn't go to public school; I was enrolled in a private one from the start. I don't know if it was intentional, but my parents chose a school in the city center with a socially diverse student body. Many students were on scholarships, and I became friends with some of them.

It's important to clarify that the economic gap between my schoolmates and me was not the same as the one between me and the kids in the favela at my front door. There were different layers and distances, but again, I saw a type of freedom entering wherever there was lack.

They were the ones who walked through the city, took buses, and navigated the streets. I admired them. I wanted to be like them. But sometimes, I also sensed sadness in how some of them felt they had to pretend, telling me that the old car their father drove was just temporary, that they had another, better one. I didn't care about any of that. Their lives seemed so much cooler than mine, I wanted what *they* had.

But not everyone pretended. Some were proud of what they lacked. They said openly, "*We're poor. I can't have this or that.*" And I internalized that as cool. I even started lying that I couldn't have things either, because I wanted to feel I was one of them.

What I didn't want them to find out was how overprotected I was, and how parts of my brain felt underdeveloped because of it. I remember during my first week at that school, a new friend, on a half-scholarship because her dad worked there, took me under her wing and showed me around.

When we got to the bathroom area, she pointed it out to me. It was about 20m², with four separate toilets: one for boys, one for girls, one for women, and one for men, each marked with different symbols on the doors. I used the girls' toilet, but when I came out, I realized my friend was no longer there.

I tried to leave, but instead of finding the exit, I kept walking into the different bathroom doors, unable to figure out how to get out. I was stuck in this loop for what felt like a long time. Eventually, my friend's father walked in, laughing in astonishment: *"Did you actually manage to get lost in here?"* I was seven years old, and even now I get lost very often, not remembering how I got to places and how to leave them.

What I've come to understand is that this disorientation, this inability to navigate space confidently, isn't just a quirk of my personality. It's a social symptom. There are studies suggesting that a lack of orientation can be linked to a childhood with limited exposure to public space. And in my case, this makes sense. I grew up extremely overprotected,

surrounded by the logic of fear that often guides middle- and upper-class families in Brazil. Like many in my social group, my world was largely confined to gated buildings, cars, malls, and private schools. My contact with the urban landscape, the unpredictability of real city life, was minimal.

This withdrawal from public space is not an isolated behavior; it's a broader, class-based phenomenon. As scholar Patricia Rodriguez Alomá (2013) discusses, what we often call "urban agoraphobia" is not just a psychological issue, but a consequence of how the city has been shaped by economic models that favor sterilized, privatized, profitable spaces—leaving the rest of the city neglected or invisible.

As a middle to upper middle class member I have the "privilege" of retreating from public life, insulating myself from its uncertainties. Meanwhile, the poor who share similar fears as me, and are often the direct victims of urban violence, don't have the option of opting out of the streets. They are forced to engage with a public space that has, in many ways, been abandoned by those with power and privilege.

I see now that my constant disorientation, my anxiety in open or unfamiliar urban spaces, isn't just personal, it's political. It speaks of a class that has, out of fear, renounced the city, and in doing so, has lost part of its spatial intelligence, its urban belonging, and its own citizenship, a lost right being mistakenly seen as privilege or even luxury.

I remember a Brazilian gay friend once explaining to a Belgian, who asked how violent Brazil is, that violence in Brazil is like winter in Europe—you just need to prepare for it, take some precautions, and have some techniques. You won't die from it. For the middle class, it's manageable. The degree of exposure often depends on your social class. For example, some of my upper-class friends were never robbed, they never used public transport, they live in private condos, and only walk along the seashore; the rest of the city they travel through only by car. If you're from a lower class, you might feel more exposed to violence, depending on where you live, as crime rates can be higher. You might not have the financial means to take an Uber or own a car, so you'll rely on public transport and walking the streets—both of which can make you an easier target for robbery[14].

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[14] Poor people are more vulnerable to robbery in João Pessoa, article published in 2023: https://www.portalt5.com.br/noticias/paraiba/2023/07/178758-pobres-sao-mais-vulneraveis-a-roubos-e-furtos-de-celulares-em-joao-pessoa/

I have the impression we began avoiding public space even before it actually became dangerous. Sometimes I wonder how much danger there really is today—and how much of what we perceive is simply paranoia. Ítalo Marinho, a friend from my hometown, wrote his undergraduate dissertation in law on this very topic: public security and the role of citizen presence in preventing crime. He argued that people, simply by occupying public spaces, naturally act as agents of vigilance. Their presence creates a form of informal surveillance that contributes to safety. In this sense, the avoidance of public space can actually make it more vulnerable to crime.

It becomes a chicken-and-egg situation: did public space become dangerous first, prompting us to retreat? Or did we begin to abandon it, thus allowing it to become more dangerous? Either way, the result is the same, we continue to avoid it. And this avoidance seems to have no clear boundaries. Its goal isn't simply to protect us from life's hazards or real threats; rather, it aims to shield us from what we perceive as out of place, even if that means other human beings.

Urban planning, especially when driven by private initiatives, appears to reinforce this fear. High-end condominium developments promise a world of their own, enclosed within gated buildings and free from the presence of "others." These spaces are designed to ensure that only people of a certain class will encounter one another, all within a supposedly safe and protected environment.

As Mary Douglas (1966) notes, dirt is "matter out of place"—a powerful insight that intersects with Jacques Rancière's (2004) notion of the "distribution of the sensible." Dirt is not defined by its nature, but by its placement; what is considered dirty is simply what appears to be out of place. This logic extends into the spatial and social organization of private condominiums, where symbols are used to classify and separate individuals. People are increasingly tagged and categorized to indicate who they are, what group they belong to, and how they are permitted to exist within a given reality. Designated signals—such as clothing, roles, or spatial positioning—are used to signify belonging: *us* and *them*, the certified others, the useful others, the outsiders, the invaders.

The rich, along with their upper-class neighbors, also live in gated communities where they zealously protect their class interests—their way of life—by surveillance, by security forces, by direct links to the police, so that all danger can be kept at bay. Strangers entering these neighborhoods who look like they do not belong, meaning that they are the wrong color and/or have the appearance of being lower class, are stopped and vetted. (hooks, 2000, p. 8)

Uniforms, for example, become visual markers that indicate someone is allowed to be let in—because they are there to serve or protect. Without such markers, the same individual might be perceived as a threat. In the film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972)*, there is a comic yet revealing scene in which a bishop arrives at a wealthy family's house offering to work as a gardener, simply because he enjoys gardening. The maid asks him to wait outside until the family returns. While waiting, he changes into gardening clothes. When the family arrives and sees an unfamiliar gardener inside their house, they immediately ask him to leave. The maid insists that he is the bishop, but the family ignores her. It is only when the bishop changes back into his ecclesiastical attire to leave that the couple recognizes him—and they quickly apologize for the misunderstanding.

This scene illustrates the deeply ingrained logic of spatial and social exclusion: identity and legitimacy are contingent on recognizable signs. Without the uniform—without the proper "label"—one's presence becomes suspect. These dynamics aren't limited to fiction. They mirror real-world structures of fear and control that define how space is used, accessed, and policed.

Christian Dunker (2022), in *Mal-estar, sofrimento e sintoma* helps us frame the fear of public space not only as a response to violence, but as a symptom of a class structure that privatizes security and produces a collective form of isolation. This fear is more than a reaction—it is a socially constructed symptom rooted in inequality, surveillance, and segregation.

The city I grew up in is full of walls. They are everywhere—gated condos, electric fences, high-rise condos with security booths, and shopping with uniformed guards. These walls don't just divide space; they produce and reproduce inequality. They are material expressions of fear, but also of desire for control, for purity, for sameness. In segregating the "inside" from the "outside," they create not only physical borders but also psychological

ones: between the safe and the dangerous, the deserving and the undesirable, the self and the other.

Dunker (2022) also suggests that much of our contemporary suffering is linked to these mechanisms of alienation. What he calls *mal-estar* is not a private symptom but a socialized discomfort, a consequence of structures that isolate, exclude, and suppress conflict. The walls we build around our homes reflect the walls we build within ourselves—internal borders meant to filter out difference, contradiction, and vulnerability. But in doing so, they also alienate us from the city, from the public, and from ourselves. The walled-off lives of Brazil's elite—mirrored by a middle and upper-middle class striving to imitate them—reflect internal walls: lives in which discomfort, difference, and contradiction are filtered out in the pursuit of emotional and material security.

> The logic of the condominium is premised on the very act of excluding what lies outside its walls. Therefore, there is ultimately nothing to be said about the tension between this walled-off space and its exterior. There is also not much to consider regarding the tension within its walls, since, as we have observed, the only area of true public coexistence is the playground. The space is already conceived and lived as a false universal. Because of this, those who live outside are left without a place, without land, a roof, or a destiny. And those who live inside are too deeply embedded in their space, their place, and their position. (DUNKER, 2022, p. 52)

In the documentary *Alphaville - Inside the Wall* (2009), the director interviews residents of the first condominium in Brazil—women, men, and children. The adults speak of a deep fear of the city, justifying their need to be inside the walls with electric fences and armed guards. They name the threat, with one resident saying, "a 'leftover of society' comes and points a knife to steal…". They talk about a sense of safety and a desire to be protected from the chaos and violence of the city.

The words of one child, however, reveal a profound contradiction:

> I think the city is very violent, very dangerous for a child. When you live in the city, you can't go out to play on the street, you can't do almost anything, you can only stay inside the house. So there I feel nauseas, because I like to ride a bike, I like to do sports, I like to skate, I like to play on the street. So I'm happy in this condo.. nothing happens. Nothing happens. Nothing happens.

Walls do not merely promise protection; they perform a kind of class-based narcissism, as Freud (cited by Dunker, 2022) suggests. They are built on the illusion that danger always lies outside, and that if we can just close ourselves in tightly enough, we can escape history, responsibility, and relationality.

My social class privileges could have allowed me to avoid exposure to certain dangers—if I had obeyed the rules and narrowed my world between those walls as expected, if I had convinced myself that that was simply life. But privilege does not feed the soul, so I was constantly hungry —I wanted to be a citizen. I wanted to feel that the city was mine, to cross the boundaries imposed on my body, gender, social class or country reality, seeking out places where I believed life truly happened. I refused to give up my right to exist and move freely in urban spaces—I wanted to walk… then I was robbed.

The first time I was robbed, I was 14 years old. I had just been given permission to take the bus as a means of transportation—a long-time dream of mine. I had always hated being driven to school with a private transport escolar; I found it embarrassing. When I was finally allowed to take the bus, I wanted more. I realized that some distances could be walked, and I wanted to walk.

On one of those walks, two boys approached me and stole my mobile phone. They pretended to have guns under their T-shirts, but it was only their hands, shaped like a gun. I handed over my phone and broke down.

I cried not just because my phone was gone, but because I had no control. Because I wanted the robbers to be punished. Because they were just kids. Because I had seen them coming and ignored my instinct to cross the street—doing so would have felt prejudiced. Then I cried because it felt unfair: I could be given a phone, while they had to steal to have one. Because I was afraid to tell my parents—I had been walking, and look what happened. Because life had proven them right: the world *was* dangerous.

The robbery had taken more than my phone. It had taken away my right to be in public space. It had taken walking and the city from me. It had taken freedom away. Insecurity wasn't just a story my parents told to control me—it was real. And now, I had to

learn to fear the world just as they did. I had to fear *the other* who does not have what I have, and wants to take it from me.

But I still wanted to walk…

My mother tells a story that feels like an early manifestation of that desire. As soon as I learned to walk, I somehow managed to wander out of the house. She says a teenage boy found me near the bus station and was able to locate the house I had escaped from because the little gate was open. I was just a toddler in wet diapers, yet it seems I already knew the streets were mine too.

Recently, I asked my mom to describe the boy who had brought me home safely that day. She told me: a teenager, around 12 years old, very thin, serious-faced, brown, wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and probably poor. Of course, it was the same description I would later learn to fear, the same image I had been conditioned to avoid in urban spaces during my small attempts to hold on to the illusion of being a citizen in a country where there are no true citizens. If there were, I wouldn't have to fear a child. I wouldn't feel such hatred toward a child or wish that they died—as I did during that first rage outburst after being robbed for the first time, when I was a child myself.

I was robbed in 2004 and again in 2016, this was the exact description I gave to the police—out of the four times I had been robbed: teenager, around 12 years old, very thin, serious-faced, brown, wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and probably poor.. It's the same description the police use as an indicator of danger, the same profile they target for stop-and-search operations, and the same description of many people killed by mistake during a police operation. Ironically, it's also the same description that fits most of the military police officers who had helped me—when they were kids themselves.

This boy is both an actor of violence and a victim of violence. In the documentary *Behave!* (Juízo, 2007), we see how the violence they are victims of is far greater than the violence they seem to inflict. The director follows minors who have committed crimes, from their trials to the juvenile detention facilities. The trial itself is already symbolically violent, as a judge applies a moral framework that doesn't seem to account for the extreme

circumstances the minors face. *"Why did you join that guy to commit a robbery? Why were you holding a gun?" "Because they threatened to kill me if I didn't do it."* It's at that moment that the state appears: to punish them while demanding a decision-making process that seems alien and idealistic, given the forces at play. *"Why weren't you at school?" "I quit school when I was 14 because I needed to work."* Or, in the case of another convicted minor: *"You're 17 and still in 4th grade, and you think you're doing well?"*.

This is the paradox of violence in Brazil: the poor are both its main victims and its main suspects. As Souza (2009) argues, the middle class sustains the myth that poverty naturally leads to crime. This narrative is not a reflection of reality but a moral ideology. It blames the poor for their own condition and, in doing so, obscures the structural violence and historical exploitation that produce inequality. By projecting criminality downward, the middle class preserves its privileges and absolves itself of responsibility.

There are missing conditions that would allow some individuals to follow the traditional path of education toward dignity—conditions that the system fails to provide. It's not just about having enough schools; the entire framework is lacking. A stable family structure is essential, where parents also have access to job opportunities and education that would enable them to support their children's learning after school. Children should not have to work to help the family budget or take care of their siblings due to the lack of daycare centers or full-day schools. Instead, they should be able to focus exclusively on their studies, development and the right to play, in an environment that is not marked by violence and coercion from organized crime.

Although there is no balance, and not everyone is granted the same opportunities, social mobility is often presented as a possibility. However, everyone is measured by the same standard, as in Brazil, most of us believe we live in a meritocracy, dividing individuals into two groups: those who have earned success and those who have not, supposedly due to their own merit. The punishments are also unbalanced. A person from a non-privileged background may be judged harshly and sent to prison, while others are afforded the privilege of being judged under different standards, as if they were immune.

I do believe in the power to make decisions—you always have choices, but how wide are the possibilities? How much could your own reality support you in making that decision sustainable? As a child, I often wondered: who would I be if I were born into the reality of the boy who robbed me? Would I be robbing too? And I'm not sure if it was based on my own inner morality, or if it was a way to justify and make peace with him and accept the robbery, but I would usually convince myself that, yes, I would be robbing as well. So, the system is what I should be blaming, not the boy. At the time, I was unaware of the coercive system in place; I was only considering whether or not they had things — the purchasing power — meaning they were robbing me to have what I had.

There is a connection between social class and violence, but many myths cloud our understanding of it. The most common assumption is to equate poverty with criminality. However, the moral values prevailing in impoverished communities are often the same ones I was raised with: honesty, hard work, responsibility, discipline, and more.

> [...] the elite of the ruling classes forced the most hopeless and desperate segment of the poor—those who had descended into the "hell of pauperism"—to change their traditional behavior and move from the ranks of the proletariat to the ranks of the lumpenproletariat; to transform from a reserve of the "world of labor" into a reserve of the "world of crime"; to shift, in short, from the "working classes" to the "dangerous classes" (Guimarães, 2008, p. 260).

This cause-and-consequence relationship is rarely highlighted. The most repeated narrative is that of a bad nature—someone who chose to do wrong. This is the discourse we see daily in the news: the boy who chose to become a *bandido*, as if his range of possibilities were the same as those of a middle-class child.

In everyday discourse, violence is almost always associated with the poor. News programs and sensationalist television shows transform poverty into entertainment, staging endless images of black youth as criminals. The refrain bandido bom é bandido morto ("a good criminal is a dead criminal") echoes as common sense, feeding the fantasy that violence originates from lower classes. Meanwhile, as Guimarães (2008) reminds us, the greatest robberies are not committed on the street but in the offices of the elite — corruption, embezzlement, money laundering, tax fraud. These crimes drain far more resources from society than street robberies, yet they are rarely framed as existential threats.

The documentary *Notícias de uma Guerra Particular* (Lund & Sales, 1999) documents how the drug trade in Rio emerged as a response to decades of police abuse and neglect. A trafficker interviewed in the film insists the cartel was born not from choice but from necessity, from the state's own violence. Yet narratives like these rarely reach mainstream circulation. Instead, television prefers to broadcast daily spectacles of arrests and shootouts, reinforcing the association between black poverty and criminality. The violence of the state — raids, executions, humiliation — remains largely invisible. As Ribeiro (2017) notes, the representation of marginalized groups often serves less to empower them than to reaffirm the moral position of those who consume such images.

While winter in Europe is a natural phenomenon, the violence we must protect ourselves from in Brazil is not. "Brazilian history is a story of violence—just as human history is. While some societies have made deliberate efforts to reduce violence, in Brazil, it has remained an institutionalized tool". (Guimarães, 2008). Violence in Brazil is not an aberration but a structure. From colonization and slavery to *capangas*[15] and *grileiros*[16], from police brutality to modern-day incarceration, violence is woven into our history. As Guimarães (2008) shows, researchers encounter evidence of violence in archives even when they are not looking for it, because it is constitutive of Brazilian society itself.

The role of public institutions, especially the police, has shifted from fostering solidarity to containing, managing, and eliminating the risk posed by certain lives. As Vladimir Safatle (2015) argues, fear has become the dominant affect of our time. Echoing Hobbes, he notes that the modern state no longer positions itself as the guarantor of freedom or the organizer of communal life, but rather as the protector of one man from another. In this configuration, the "other" is inherently seen as dangerous.

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[15] *Capanga* in Brazil refers to a hired gun, thug, or henchman, typically employed by powerful individuals, landowners, or politicians. They are used to intimidate, threaten, or commit acts of violence on behalf of their employer. The term carries a strong negative connotation and is associated with violence, illegal activity, and political corruption.

[16] *Grileiro* is a Brazilian term for a land grabber. It refers to an individual who illegally seizes public or Indigenous lands, often through the use of violence, fraudulent land titles, and political influence. This practice is a major source of conflict, deforestation, and environmental destruction in Brazil, particularly in the Amazon region.

This shift leads us inevitably into the realm of necropolitics—the power the state exerts in deciding which lives are worthy of protection and which can be abandoned, surveilled, or extinguished. The wall is only the surface. Behind it lies a system of racialized fear, militarized security, and sanctioned violence.

Achille Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics, inspired by Georges Bataille's reflections on sovereignty and the transgression of limits, deepens our understanding of this dynamic. For Bataille, politics stretches beyond reason into its boundaries, revealing sovereignty as the power to violate prohibitions—including, ultimately, the prohibition against killing. Mbembe expands on this by connecting Bataille's notion of transgressive sovereignty with Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. Biopower refers to the state's role in managing life—deciding who must live and who can be allowed to die.

Mbembe pushes this logic further, asserting that in modern regimes of power, the decision over life and death is no longer hidden—it becomes strategic, visible, and racialized. In necropolitical governance, the line between "us" and "them" is drawn through technologies of othering. Racism becomes the central mechanism by which certain populations are marked for death—whether through abandonment, surveillance, incarceration, or state-sanctioned violence.

As Maria Augusta's documentary shows, the boys in prison are those the state allows to die—whether through literal death or through a life stripped of dignity. Incarceration excludes them from public life, enacting political and social death: the loss of time, rights, place, and representation. Prisons are not only structures of protection for some but instruments of extinction for others. Death here is not always physical; it also occurs when the possibility of living fully is denied.

Fear becomes a political tool. The middle class feels exposed — it is not the elites in their armored cars, but the middle and lower strata who encounter robbery and assault most often. Instead of addressing structural inequality, however, this fear is channeled into punitive demands: lowering the age of criminal responsibility, supporting militarized policing, voting for candidates who promise security through killing. I recognize myself in this paradox. Violence kept me abroad, not only the events themselves but the anticipation of them, the

constant readiness for danger. It was easier to live elsewhere than to fight against the erosion of freedom at home.

The second time I was robbed, I was about 19 years old. They took my car. I was sitting inside, parked on the street, saying goodbye to my boyfriend. We kept scanning our surroundings, making sure no one suspicious was nearby. Then, we noticed a couple walking hand in hand—a well-dressed man in a polo shirt and a pregnant woman. Their presence reassured us; the idea of family made him seem harmless.

We continued talking, relaxed. Suddenly, the man approached my boyfriend, pressed a gun against his hip, and demanded I leave the car. I stepped out as he ordered, and he drove off a few meters—only to stop and pick up the pregnant woman who had been waiting for him ahead. Then, he suddenly sped off, accelerating abruptly. We're left standing there, overwhelmed by a deep sense of helplessness and loss of control.

"What is it, brother?"

That was my boyfriend's first reaction when he felt the cold metal of a gun pressed against his body. His instinct, like mine, was to believe it was some kind of prank, that maybe it was someone we knew messing with us. There's a strange resistance to accepting that it's really happening. Even though we had always anticipated this moment, feared it, imagined it—when it finally arrived, our minds refused to believe it was real.

"Brother, what? This is serious. Leave the car, leave the key in, and the bag inside. Go away and don't look back.

The gun—that cold, alien object—felt completely out of place. It jolted me out of my previous mindset, one filled with love and excitement for life, and replaced it with the chilling awareness of possible death. My only instinct was to follow instructions, just as we constantly hear on TV: never resist a robbery—it could escalate to death. At that moment, I realized our lives were entirely in someone else's hands.

Every phase of a robbery is painful. Reporting it is the second step: telling the police and your loved ones. We ran back to my boyfriend's building, still shocked and shaking. The doorman asked what had happened. We explained, and he responded, "Well, you know this

area is dangerous. You shouldn't be out on the street so late." I broke down crying. I called my parents to tell them what had just happened, and the interrogation began: "What were you doing on the street so late?" Once again, I had to justify my right to exist in the world outside walls. Because urban space is dangerous, and it's not mine. The pain of feeling guilty for something that wasn't my fault. The same thing happened when I reported it to the police. The questions, and the ultimate conclusion: "You should avoid this, and you should avoid that." And the message I kept hearing: "You should avoid living."

I have a friend who went through a similar experience. For months after the robbery, after having a gun pointed at her head, she couldn't shake the doubt: Had she actually survived that day? Or was everything that followed just a dream, an echo of a post-life experience? She avoided being in public space and from that moment on, leaving the country became her dream.

My parents gave me that car when I turned 18. A brand-new popular car. The kind that children of the upper-middle or middle class receive from their parents so they can come and go feeling safe, avoiding exposure to the outside world. Most of my middle-class friends got a car when they turned 18. But I had broken the rule, as I had spent an unnecessary amount of time *dando vacilo*[17] in the street. The main purpose of having the car was to avoid being on the street. The street is a place we pass through, but we don't truly experience it. The car was meant to take me from one set of walls to another. It is, of course, an exaggeration, as at certain times of the day and in some parts of the city, we do see people walking by, though they tend to avoid holding their phones. Robberies don't happen all the time or everywhere, but when we're on the street, we live with the constant possibility of them. We keep scanning our surroundings.

My car was found four days later, abandoned in a field. The police called me, and I had to go there to identify it and retrieve it. Inside, I discovered it was filled with ID documents belonging to different women. It seemed the couple had used the car to move quickly, targeting women as their preferred victims. This experience reminded me that violence also has a gendered dimension. Poor women are especially vulnerable, living at the

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[17] "*Dando vacilo*" is a Brazilian Portuguese slang expression that refers to a moment of being distracted or spaced out, giving space to risk or vulnerability. It implies a lack of attention or awareness that can lead to potentially risky situations or mistakes.

intersection of class, race, and gender inequalities. Middle-class women like myself are also positioned as "potential victims," constantly reminded to discipline our movements and accept restrictions on our freedom. Yet our privilege allows us ways to shield ourselves: we can rely on private cars, avoid walking in certain neighborhoods, or take an Uber. These options do not eliminate fear, but they allow us to reduce our exposure — a protection that poorer women cannot afford. Their lives unfold in spaces where violence cannot be sidestepped, where vulnerability is constant.

And within the middle class, fear is not confined to whiteness. A black middle-class subject is not spared from this paranoia, but experiences it in a distinct register. Evandro Cruz Silva, a Black intellectual from the Brazilian middle class, has written[18] about being robbed by a "very black and very thin" boy, a moment that exposed the unsettling recognition of being both victim and implicated in a racialized logic of fear— "I, the robber, and the police officer were not Black in the same way":

> Afterward, I became paranoid. I saw danger everywhere and was startled by the presence of any stranger, whether black or poor. I adopted behaviors that I myself would attribute to a stereotypical and demophobic "white middle class." I felt pathetic and despicable, as if that violence had revealed something shameful: that I was, in reality, more "middle class" than "black."

Even though, in Brazil, robbery is legally defined as a crime against property, we experience it as a threat against life itself. There is the desire that criminals should pay with their own life.

At times, necropolitics offer a death that is brutally literal—carried out by police, who target their victims with precision, sacrificing certain lives in the name of protecting others. The state of exception is not dormant; it is alive and fully operational.

This harsh reality is captured in Clarice Lispector's short story Mineirinho, which recounts the violent death of a well-known Brazilian criminal, executed by thirteen police bullets. Through the intimate yet politically charged narrative, Lispector meditates on the

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[18] Article available here:
https://marcozero.org/eu-o-assaltante-e-o-policial-nao-eramos-negros-do-mesmo-jeito-reflexoes-de-um-intelectual-vitima-de-violencia/

machinery of state violence and the moral rupture that occurs when the killing of some becomes routine, sanctioned, and even expected.

Clarice's reflection captures the moral conflict: "Yes, I suppose that it is in me, as one of the representatives of us, that I should find out why the death of a criminal is hurting. And why I prefer to count the thirteen bullets that killed Mineirinho to counting his crimes" (Lispector, 1964, p. 252).

Lispector understands that the man was killed in order to protect her—to safeguard her life and existence. She evokes Judaic-Christian moral laws: the commandment to preserve one another's life, the injunction not to kill, and by extension, not to allow someone to be killed on your behalf. If she feels a sense of safety upon hearing the first shot, by the thirteenth, she feels as though she herself has died—because she recognizes the Other within herself.

> This is the law. But if there is something that makes me hear the first and second shots with a relief of safety, by the third, it makes me alert; by the fourth, restless; by the fifth and sixth, it covers me with shame; by the seventh and eighth, I listen with my heart pounding in horror; by the ninth and tenth, my mouth trembles; by the eleventh, I say God's name in awe; by the twelfth, I call my brother. The thirteenth shot kills me—because I am the other. Because I want to be the other. (Lispector, 1964, [s.p.])

Lispector's voice resonates with a humanity that refuses to be silenced. She urges the reader to recognize the other, to cross the boundaries of the self, and to confront the painful truth that the other is, in fact, part of oneself. In *Mineirinho*, the criminal becomes a mirror for the narrator's own humanity, collapsing the distance between self and other, victim and perpetrator. She compels us to see the essence of this exchange—to question the walls, the killing, the passive complicity in letting others be killed, and the fear that sustains it all. Though written in the 1960s, the text remains startlingly recent in spirit—a sharp and intimate portrait of a Brazilian reality that continues to repeat itself, where violence is normalized, and certain lives remain disposable.

Thirteen shots were fired to kill José Miranda Rosa, known as Mineirinho, on May 1, 1962. Eighty (80) shots were fired to kill Evaldo dos Santos Rosa on April 7, 2019. In both

cases, the agents who pulled the trigger were representatives of the state, authorized to kill in the name of protecting others.

Evaldo was in the car with his family. He had no connection to criminal activity or illegal behavior. Still, he was executed in broad daylight by members of the military—an act later explained, though never justified, as a case of "mistaken identity." The officers claimed they had received a report about five suspects in a white sedan involved in a robbery. They pursued the wrong car and ignored every sign that contradicted the report: no weapons, no resistance, two women, a seven-year-old child, and two unarmed men who made no attempt to flee. Why wasn't it immediately clear this was the wrong target? Because the car was white and their skin was black? Or maybe because the neighborhood was poor?

The incident occurred in the Guadalupe neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, an area characterized by economic hardship and systemic neglect. Guadalupe is situated in the North Zone of the city, which encompasses several lower-income neighborhoods. According to reports, the shooting took place on Camboatá Road, near the Muquiço favela, further highlighting the socio-economic challenges of the area.

Once again, the state decided who could live and who could die. Guilt was not determined through due process, but through the logic of structural racism, where necropolitics revealed itself in action.

In necropolitics fear is political. For poor people, it is the constant reminder of their disposability; for the middle class, it is the pretext for withdrawal and control. Violence denies citizenship to both: to the poor through direct exposure, and to me through anticipation and avoidance. To be a citizen is to have the right to the city, to move freely without fear. Fear is what we share, but citizenship is what we are both denied.

For the (white) middle class, fear carries this double weight: it is both constraint and complicity. It restricts freedom of movement, but at the same time, it justifies inequality and the annihilation of others. Every robbery is read not as a symptom of structural failure but as proof that poverty itself is criminal. To live within this narrative is to inhabit a contradiction: to see oneself as a victim while endorsing the very structures that reproduce violence. In this

way, fear is not simply an emotion. It is an ideology — one that binds the white middle class to its myths, and that shapes how we look at others and at ourselves.

If fear defines how we move through the city, it also defines how the Brazilian white middle class imagines itself — as both victim and guardian of order, clinging to privilege while reproducing the very structures that sustain inequality.

Reflections

The other and the othering

In the process of examining myself through this dissertation, I could not avoid speaking about the other— my class other, my racial other and the feared other. Most of the time this other did not appear to me in their alterity, but as a figure of reification, I turn them into things. The trap was always the same: an *us* versus *them*. The other as a threat — imagined as the one who lacks and wants to take what is mine. Or the other as vulnerable — provoking in me either pity or fear. In both cases, the other was reduced to an image that served my own sense of self.

It was in response to this realization that, during my DLA, I decided to film myself. To do the exercise of placing myself as something that could be seen. This was not about self-exposure alone, but about uncovering how the act of othering had also acted upon me. The walls I built toward others became walls within me. By turning the camera on my own class and fears, I sought to reveal not only the othering I have enacted, but also the way it has shaped me in return.

Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity helps me to articulate this demand. She writes: "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (1947, p. 73). Freedom is not an individual possession but a relation. My existence as subject depends on the recognition of the other as subject. If I reduce the other to an object — of pity or fear — I not only harm them, I also diminish myself. To film ethically, then, is to recognize that my idea of self only exists through the existence of the other.

The works you will see in the next section are reflections on these ideas — on my readings, my experiences, and vice versa. They are my attempts to put this ethic into practice, to test it in form, and to let myself be tested by it in return.

Beyond descriptions

A very good friend of mine, a filmmaker, often talks about how boring the new trends in cinema have become—this movement obsessed with showing only what could be real, with being accurate, with portraying only what already exists or could plausibly exist. It's as if we've forgotten that what does not yet exist can still be imagined.

I listen to her thoughts on the subject and find them compelling, and my mind drifts toward politics. So often, the attempts to describe the world have been driven by the best intentions: the hope of transforming life. We've tried to expose myths by naming them—because by naming, we can begin to define what is, and what is not.

Feminism has done a remarkable job of naming things, identifying patterns and phenomena, and creating a language that opens up space for transformation. The same goes for the Black rights movements, which had to produce theory and scientific research simply to prove that racism exists. The so-called "colorblind" worldview, often celebrated as progressive, was in fact a lie that allowed exploitation to continue unchecked. In these contexts, describing reality, making it visible and undeniable—was essential for reimagining and deconstructing the world as it was.

But what are the limits of description? How much do we risk locking ourselves into the status quo when we focus only on defining and documenting what already exists? At what point does clarity become a trap, another way of allowing things to remain unchanged, only now with precise, detailed language? We need room for what could be, for possibility, for the invention of what does not yet is. And alongside that, we must be careful with our descriptions and their implications. There is a level of description that slides into fatalism, into a kind of pain that paralyzes rather than liberates. It becomes a nihilism, a pessimism, truth that serves no one, not even ourselves. A truth that denies our capacity to dream, to act, to transform.

Wilson Gomes, especially through his posts on Facebook, often offers sharp critiques of discourses that claim to describe reality, but in doing so, end up reinforcing the status quo. One example that stayed with me was his response to an Instagram post by historian Lilia Schwarcz, who referred to an IBGE survey showing that the most common ethnic mix in Brazil is between European men and Black or Indigenous women. Schwarcz used this to highlight the country's origin in violence, especially the systemic rape that marked colonization.

Even though this is historically accurate, Gomes pointed out how repeating this narrative without nuance can have unintended consequences. He questioned whether Schwarcz (2010) herself—whose surname suggests European immigrant heritage, might be the product of consensual love, unlike the more common Brazilian surname "Silva" often associated with the mixed and colonized population. His critique wasn't about denying the violence, but about what happens when we describe ourselves only through it.

The fatalism rises, when we fix identities through these descriptions, especially without questioning how they operate politically and emotionally. It's as if being Brazilian means inevitably being the product of rape and domination, and what kind of future can be imagined from that place? Gomes's critique reminded me that naming things matters, but so does how we name them, and what kind of world we allow ourselves to imagine in the process.

That's why I often find myself inclined to appreciate some of Gilberto Freyre's (1946) observations, particularly his proposition that Brazil was a nation where racial harmony prevailed. His interpretation of reality seemed to carry a sense of hope. What interests me is how Freyre described Brazil not only as it was, but also as it could be, observing, interpreting, and imagining a nation in the making. He paid close attention to how Black Brazilians played a fundamental role in shaping the country's culture and civility. Brazil, for him, was a melting pot, and its unique process of socialization held transformative potential.

Perhaps his vision stemmed from a sincere aspiration to articulate a more inclusive national identity. However, belief alone has never been enough. The country's deep social and racial inequalities required not just imagining but also naming, describing, making visible and deconstruction.

It is in this context that contemporary thinkers like Silvio Almeida return to the notion of "racial democracy", not as an accurate description of Brazilian society, but as an ideological construct, a kind of aspirational horizon. For Almeida, this concept, when critically reinterpreted, can operate as a utopian objective: not a reality already achieved, but one that might be realized through structural transformation, including affirmative action and broader social equity policies.

Still, the question remains: how do we move forward from here? How can we envision what does not yet exist, how can we propose it, without falling into naïvety or silence, without ignoring the painful realities that persist? In Brazil, Black social movements have long carried the additional burden of having to prove that racism exists before they are even granted the legitimacy to demand rights or to organize themselves. This constant need to justify one's own struggle is itself a form of violence. So how do we acknowledge these enduring structures, not to merely affirm or describe the status quo, but to speak from a place of hope and transformation? How do we name what is, while still imagining and working toward what could be, for the sake of Brazilian citizenship as a whole, not just for some, but for all?

In contexts where scientific discourse has at times obscured certain truths, art emerges as a critical intervention, an urgent gesture aimed at unveiling what has been silenced, exposing structures of power, and declaring, in no uncertain terms, that the emperor has no clothes.

I find myself questioning my own practices, my impulse to describe, to over-describe, as a way of highlighting absurdities. I realize that my intention is not to "save" the other, but to save myself: from my own misconceptions, from the illusions I carry about others, about myself, about what life is, what quality of life means, and what it means to be a citizen.

Artistic Work and Practice

Introduction

My artistic practice sits in the context of my research, it is both the method and the subject of this research, the ground where it takes place. Each piece is a site of inquiry into how fear, privilege, and othering operate in the white Brazilian middle-class experience. These works are not illustrations of theory but living experiments, where the process of making is inseparable from the act of thinking and the processes through which I confront the myths and mechanisms that shape both my view of others, myself and our realities.

Conceptual framework

These works engage directly with my core themes: othering, whiteness, middle-class identity, fear in public space, and the gaze. Drawing on hooks, Fanon, Beauvoir, and Mirzoeff, I frame each piece as a challenge to the traditional documentary gaze, reversing its direction to place the privileged self under scrutiny.

Őr Utca (video, 2020, 10')

Composed entirely from surveillance camera footage recorded in João Pessoa, *Ör Utca* presents the city through the cold, mechanical eye of institutional vigilance. The pixelated images reveal patterns of movement, absence, and control, showing how urban space is monitored, policed, and implicitly divided. The title comes from the street in Budapest where I lived while watching this footage online, creating a deliberate dislocation between the place where I inhabited and the place I observed. Over these images, my voice overlays family memories, reflections on class, race and fear of the future. The juxtaposition

of impersonal imagery and the intimate testimony creates a tension between public surveillance and private self-examination suggesting that the forces that shape my subjectivity are as structural as they are personal.

Process

Selected and edited institutional surveillance recordings; added voice-over.

I watched and monitored places in my hometown using live surveillance videos of João Pessoa, which were once available on an open website[19]. I recorded my screen to preserve these moments, and months later I added a voice over, reading excerpts from my writings about childhood memories in relation to class, racism and fear.

The decision to use surveillance footage came not only from the impossibility of being physically present, but also as a way to express my distance from public spaces, a distance shaped not only by living abroad, but by the privilege of my own middle-class background, which allows me to withdraw and protect myself.

The tone of the voiceover conveys a sense of longing or lamentation, while the text itself presents thoughts with a kind of childlike naivety. It speaks without fully understanding why it is speaking—marked by an unawareness of its own intentions and the origins of its thought processes. This naivety is intentional, reflecting the nature of the confession itself. Many of these thoughts were shaped during childhood and now resurface with the immediacy of memories that feel as if they have simply "popped" into the mind.

Besides the voice-over, diegetic sound effects were added to give the images more weight, making them feel heavier, denser and closer to the audience.

Connection to research

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[19] The website was originally available so residents could check traffic before leaving home. Later, the service was suspended after some criminal groups began using the footage ito plan robberies and other illicit activities.

This work is born from a state of displacement, driven by a process of introspection and critical inquiry. My narration weaves together personal memories, the history of race in my family, and reflections on the future, fear, and prejudice—linking structural and personal dimensions of othering.

The fear ingrained in daily life is the main character—we are conditioned to fear others. But despite being well-practiced in fear myself, I chose not to take it for granted. Instead, I sought to dissect it—to understand what it is, how it affects and constructs me, my interactions with others, my perception of the world, and how it influences my work as a filmmaker. Who is afraid of whom? And how does fear, as a primary affect, shape the way both the director and the characters are represented?

It's an effort to articulate the tensions inherent in transnational existence: what brings one to a new place, what compels one to remain, and what distances one from a former home. The piece engages with the affective and psychological dimensions of navigating between two geographies, each carrying its own set of gains and losses.

While the work originates in personal reflection, its resonance extends beyond the autobiographical. It speaks to broader patterns of mobility, belonging, class, racism, fear and the negotiation of identity across borders. In this sense, Or utca operates as both a confession and a socio-political commentary—a micro-narrative situated within a larger collective experience.

The formal and conceptual choices embedded in the work aim to foreground these ambiguities. By situating a personal narrative within a broader social and geopolitical framework, Or utca seeks to open a reflective space on the lived consequences of migration, the multiplicity of home, and the relational dynamics of selfhood in transitory contexts. Central to the piece is the tension between here and there—the attempt to reconcile the foreign land and the notion of home within a single life, a single body, a single present. This endeavor gestures toward an impossible synthesis, revealing the fractures and negotiations inherent in diasporic existence.

This work moves within the charged terrain of looking, power, and belonging. The

surveillance footage of João Pessoa is not just a technological archive, it is a stage where the politics of the gaze unfold. By repurposing a tool of state control into a site for personal storytelling, the piece both claims and questions what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls the "right to look." Yet, as bell hooks (2010) reminds us in The Oppositional Gaze, vision is never neutral; it is a practice shaped by domination, resistance, and the histories that dictate who may look and who must be looked at.

Here, the artist's position is central. Watching from abroad, shielded by the privileges of Brazil's middle class, means inhabiting what Jesse de Souza critiques as a class identity that often distances itself from the country's structural inequalities while benefiting from them. This social location allows for withdrawal, to be the observer and not the observed, reinforcing the asymmetry between safety and exposure.

The work refuses to ignore this tension. The voice-over, saturated with memories of class, racism, and fear, acknowledges how the middle-class gaze can carry the invisible scaffolding of othering: the learned ways of seeing that normalize distance from the poor, the racialized, the vulnerable. By juxtaposing this confessional narration with images stripped of their original "security" function, the piece turns the gaze inward, exposing its complicity while searching for forms of seeing that do not reproduce domination.

The result is not an absolution but a confrontation — an insistence that looking is an ethical act, and that the privilege to look without being seen carries a responsibility to unlearn the hierarchies embedded in vision itself.

Reflection

The work was part of the Parallel Hungary Exhibition (2020), examining the experiences of art students from outside Europe in Hungary.

Viewers noted the tension between impersonal images and intimate voice, creating discomfort and curiosity. Brazilians could relate to it and shared having similar perceptions during their childhood. Hungarian and other nationals showed astonishment and curiosity, asking me a lot of questions regarding Brazilian reality.

I often wonder why. What compels me to express it—to share it? In this ongoing effort to dissect myself, is there a kind of sadomasochistic thrill, akin to what Wilson Gomes once sharply identified: a performative impulse toward self-exposure, self-justification, and self-judgment, all masked as analysis and social critique? Perhaps it is the hope that, by confessing my own complicities, I will be absolved—seen as the one who is aware. The one who is not like the others, because she recognizes the structures at play and suffers not only under them, but also because of her awareness of them.

Yet even that awareness becomes suspect. There is a self-deception in believing that insight alone equates to action, that naming injustice constitutes a form of transcendence. She clings to the illusion that silence equaled complicity, and that complicity implied agency—therefore, that she holds power. That she could have spoken, and that speaking would have made a difference.

In highlighting the privileges from which she benefits—racism, classism, whiteness—there emerges another layer of contradiction: the very act of self-exposure risks centering herself once more. Whiteness, even in confession, demands protagonism. It seeks the spotlight not only to be judged, but also to be witnessed, to be distinguished as the one who "knows," who "feels," who "suffers too."

Is this desire to understand also a desire to unveil—to lay bare the mechanisms of thought and emotion, even at the cost of vulnerability? And at what point does this unveiling stop being critical and become yet another performance of moral centrality?

Am I not doing the same as the public figures whose discourse Wilson Gomes often critiques?

How do we move forward from here? How can we envision what does not yet exist—how can we propose alternative futures without falling into naivety or silencing what is already painfully present? In Brazil, Black movements have historically carried the extra burden of having to prove the existence of racism before their demands for rights, recognition, or self-organization can even be legitimized. Thus, the challenge is to acknowledge systemic violence while holding space for hope and transformation—not merely reaffirming the status quo, but actively reimagining it. This is not a matter of advocacy for some at the expense of others, but rather a call for the full realization of

Brazilian citizenship in its entirety. It is about freeing ourselves—especially those of us who are white—from the lies we were fed, not as an act of charity, but as a necessary move toward authenticity. It requires dismantling the false sense of innocence whiteness often grants, so that we might begin to engage with others and ourselves in ways that are honest, accountable, and capable of fostering new, decentralized expressions of brasilidade—forms that hint at what does not yet exist, but insists on emerging.

Institutionalized Crime *(video, 2020, 9')*

Available on https://vimeo.com/1114050539/bd93374738?fl=pl&fe=sh

This work is a direct, self-filmed confession. Seated before a static camera, I recount an act of racism I committed as a child—an act that inflicted harm on another child and revealed how my complicity in systems of inequality has been present since early in my life. I speak openly about that entanglement, allowing every pause, hesitation, and silence to

remain. The discomfort is deliberate. Here, confession is not framed as a cleansing ritual, but as an admission that awareness alone does not absolve us, nor does it dissolve our ongoing participation in, and reproduction of, systemic harm.

Process

My self-filmed confession addresses my personal participation in systemic inequality, violence, and racism. The video was recorded in a static setup, without editing out any pauses or hesitations.

Much is being debated in Brazil regarding racism as an institutionalized system and structure, which avoids seeing it as an individual personality trait or habit. Racism is a structure of power that organizes the world, and it is taught to us through official institutions (family, school, etc.). In my own experience, I tried to investigate occasions when I felt racism was being taught to me, but found it difficult to track. Instead, by examining my own behavior, I began to see instances where I had acted as a tool of this larger system.

In this video, I attempted to confront that legacy by acknowledging internalized forms of racism. It was an attempt to speak the truth—to practice parrhesia. The intention was to offer a form of radical honesty to interrupt the cycle of denial that suggests racism either does not exist or, if it does, is always external to us. I sought to challenge this narrative by positioning myself within the machinery of systemic racism—acknowledging that I, too, in my whiteness, am a part of it. Racism, in this sense, is not only a macro-level structural force but one that operates through the minutiae of daily life. It grows like weeds in our collective imagination, so deeply rooted that even children can reproduce it unconsciously.

Connection to research

Here, the critique by Jessé Souza is crucial: he argues that the Brazilian middle class occupies a social position that sustains inequality while imagining itself to be outside of it. By refusing to hide behind theory or third-person narratives, my intention was to take a counter-narrative approach. I confront my own position within this social structure, moving

away from the voyeuristic tradition of documentary film that portrays o povo as the sole subject of social critique. Instead, I turned the camera on myself, confessing that I have, at times, served as a tool of institutional racism. My goal was to avoid the common framing of the other so prevalent in documentary practices, where marginalized lives are observed, explained, and framed by someone outside their experience. I chose the opposite path: to examine my own whiteness and its manifestations since early childhood. In doing so, I positioned myself as the subject, confronting my own complicity in the very systems that produce inequality and exclusion.

Brazil's racial order was not only inherited from colonialism—it was consciously maintained, internalized, and naturalized over centuries (Almeida). Institutionalized Crime extends my research into how racism is both an external structure and an internalized logic, embedded in memory, language, and the smallest gestures, even of a child. The work uses personal confession as a method of exposing how systemic violence lives within the self.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is central here: the power to decide who may live and who must die operates not only through state policy and public institutions but also through the quiet, intimate violences of everyday life. In Brazil, this necropolitical order is historically tied to slavery's legacy, producing a racial hierarchy that normalizes the disposability of certain lives—especially Black lives—while rendering that normalization invisible to those who benefit from it.

Florestan Fernandes described a persistent "prejudice against prejudice," where racism survives by denying its own presence. Historian Lilia Schwarcz (2010) similarly observes that Brazilians are culturally conditioned to identify racism in others but almost never in themselves. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's notion of "colorblind racism" in Racism Without Racists parallels these observations: a subtle, institutionalized racism disguised under the language of neutrality and equality.

By naming my own complicity, the work confronts what Mbembe describes as "the banality of power over death"—the ease with which certain lives are diminished, erased, or harmed without consequence. It connects this to what Jesse de Souza identifies as the middle class's role in sustaining inequality while believing itself morally separate from it. In this

sense, the piece is both personal and structural: a confrontation with my own participation in a system that continuously reproduces the conditions for harm.

This confession therefore becomes a form of counter-memory, working against what Rebecca Solnit calls "collective gaslighting"—the societal erasure of violence even as it occurs. In Recollections of My Non-Existence, Rebecca Solnit describes the societal response to violence against women:

"It was a kind of collective gaslighting. To live in a war that no one around me would acknowledge as a war…" She continues: "One thing that makes people crazy is being told that the experiences they have did not actually happen, that the circumstances that hem them in are imaginary, that the problems are all in their head, and that if they are distressed it is a sign of their failure—when success would be to shut up or to cease to know what they know". (SOLNIT, 2020, p. 46)

Through this work, I attempted to confess that this internalized racism lives within me, even as I consciously choose an anti-racist practice every day. I wanted to make it visible, not veiled, but declared openly with my own body, face, and voice. The aim was to shift confession away from catharsis and toward a sustained recognition of this fact, insisting on the systemic roots of racism and our personal responsibility within it. By doing so, I hoped to provoke a reaction, an opposition, or a debate that could challenge both myself, the possible connotations, and the necessity of the work itself.

Reception & reflection

Some audiences described the work as uncomfortably intimate, forcing reflection on complicity.

To "confess" may seem like the wrong word. It carries connotations of seeking forgiveness, of asking to be absolved. But how can one be absolved of a crime that continues to be committed? This is not a matter of personal guilt alone—it is a collective crime. It is not psychopathy, though it may echo some of its traits. Nor is it an addiction to be admitted and

then cured. This is an institutionalized, everyday crime—embedded in our social fabric and perpetuated through both silence and speech.

Turning the lens on myself does not resolve the impasse; it only brings new questions regarding representation. For instance, how does self-representation function? Can auto-ethnography be a convenient road? And how can whiteness be not only represented, but challenged?

I remain uneasy about the piece. If such confessions by white individuals were to become common, they could easily shift public discourse toward the emotional catharsis of the confessor, recentering whiteness and white guilt and diverting attention from the systemic violence against black lives. Such a shift risks turning structural critique into a theatre of self-revelation, where the urgency of ongoing harm is replaced by performances of contrition.

Avoiding Future *(video, 2022, 4')*

Available on https://vimeo.com/1114022423/c936c9f2a8?share=copy

   An audiovisual exploration of uncertainty; an attempt to stop time from being drawn away by its own gravitational pull.

   Hungary runs parallel to Brazil. As I near the end of my planned stay here, I'm caught in the middle of these two lines that appear to never meet (despite my efforts to bend them). I'm bouncing back and forth between the two, while juggling the benefits and drawbacks. Weighing them in feels impossible. Choosing between the two countries/lives would be a failure in and of itself, because there would always be a lack. When any decision means a separation, there isn't even the smallest concept of continuity.

The safest place to be is in the moment's inertia, laying down in the present where no decision has been taken and the options of going back or staying are still open.

This inner state is often annihilated by the rush of outside noise, an entangled web of arrowlike questions concerning the future bursting the safe bubble of being solely in the stillness of the present.

Process

Shot entirely from fixed positions inside my flat in Hungary, the film was made during a time when my family was constantly asking when I would come back home. Looking around my flat, I found myself unable to answer. Yet, the noise of the sea seemed to keep asking the question for me.

Connection to research

This work was shown in the 2022 Parallel Hungary II exhibition in Budapest, at a time when we were asking ourselves, 'What now?' Should we go back home? In this work, there is a disconnection from my research, a will to ignore all questions, to be apolitical and unsituated, and to be stuck in the ethereal loop of the now. There are no classes, no violence, no 'other,' no danger, no fear, no territory.

Reflection

Avoiding Future is a work about distance and withdrawal. Away from Brazil's immediate political tensions, class dynamics, and daily insecurities, the still camera reflects a pause in my physical engagement with the spaces I analyse. While my withdrawing is also a byproduct of "privilege", the title points toward an unease with such withdrawal, suggesting that avoiding certain encounters in the present may also mean avoiding the futures they could create.

Circles *(video, 2024, 1' in loop)*

Available on *https://vimeo.com/1114492312/1ed05550cb?share=copy*

A continuous shot of a child cycling in a tight loop, encircled by walls, becomes a metaphor for how fear shapes space. The child needs openness to grow, yet we restrict it due to fear.. The image questions whether protection and privilege can become its own form of deprivation, limiting not only physical movement but the development of imagination, trust, and social connection.

Process

Every time I return to João Pessoa, Brazil, I see children playing in the underground parking lot of my parents' building, where I grew up. It reminds me of the times when I, too,

had to improvise in order to find space to play and grow. I recall condo meetings where neighbors complained about the noise we made, our games of riding the elevator up and down, ringing doorbells, and the impossibility of running freely—all of it under the watch of surveillance cameras. We called it our illegal play, moments of childhood claimed in forbidden spaces. I also remember an even earlier time, when my space was more limited, and I used to ride my bike in circles on our terrace. These images resonated with me so strongly that I tried to obtain access to the surveillance footage. However, the condo administration denied my request, since children are not officially allowed to play in that area. For this reason, I turned to AI to recreate it, using the following prompt:

Continuous realistic video, surveillance camera footage, fixed top-down and slightly side angle, recorded in daylight. The scene shows the terrace of a Brazilian house, with beige ceramic floor tiles, a space large enough for about one and a half cars. On the left side are metal security bars; on the right side are tall concrete walls. In the center, a girl with blond-style hair, wearing denim overall, rides a small bicycle in slow circles. She is learning to ride and occasionally attempts to release her hands from the handlebars. The camera remains completely still, with a slightly grainy, low-saturation image typical of security cameras. The mood is quiet and melancholic. Bright natural daylight casts soft shadows.
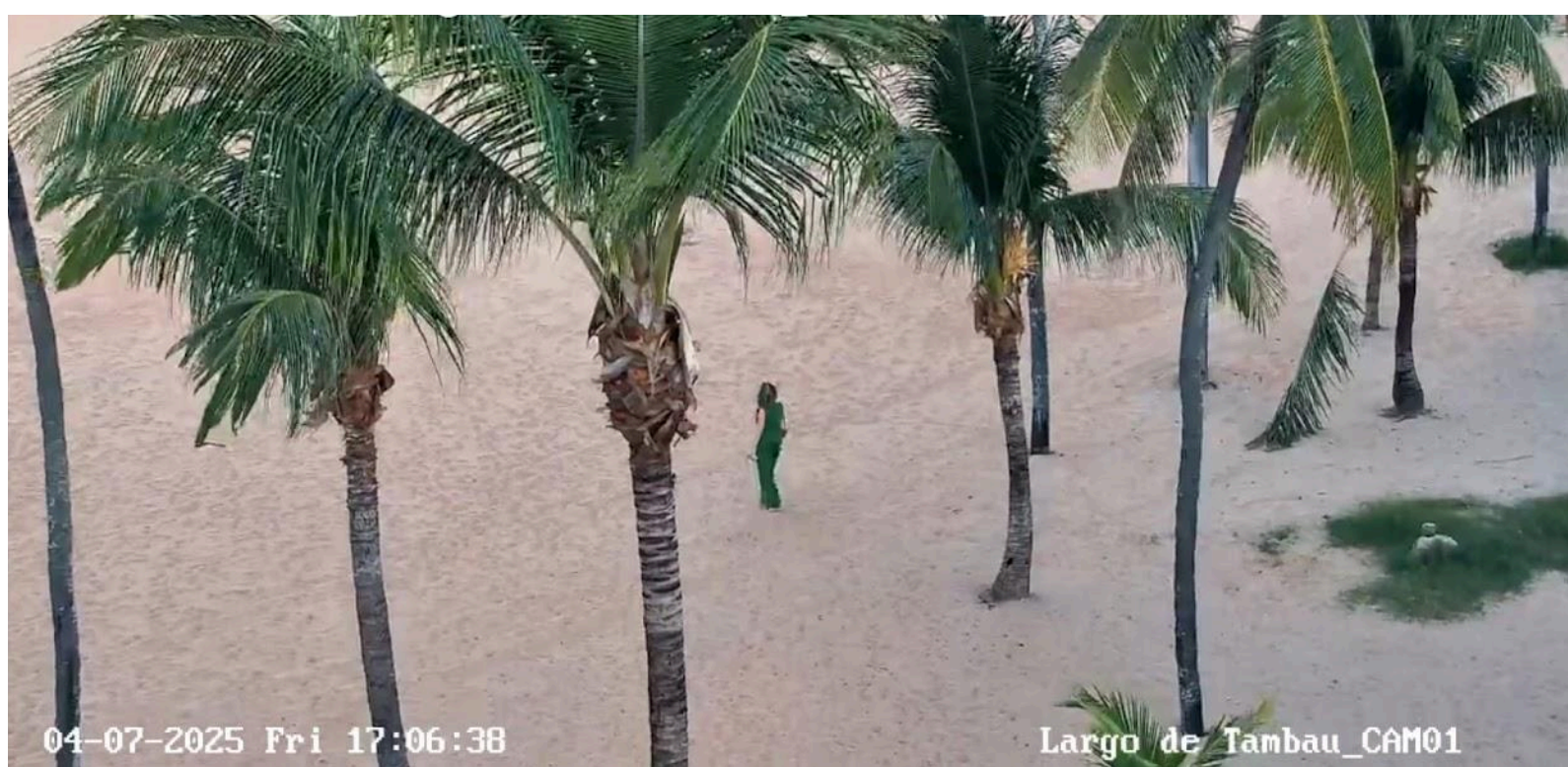

Connection to research

Circles builds directly on the dissertation's central inquiry into how fear and class privilege shape space and subjectivity. The looping movement of the child within concrete boundaries functions as a metaphor for how middle-class families often reproduce a closed architecture of protection that ultimately confines imagination, social connection and cognitive development. By re-creating this scene through AI, the work highlights how lived memories and collective fears are mediated not only through walls but also through technologies of surveillance and reproduction. This links to my broader research question: whether the mechanisms of safety and privilege embraced by Brazil's middle and upper class are in fact forms of deprivation, limiting openness to others and to oneself.

Reflection

The short loop of Circles is intentionally claustrophobic, echoing the repetitive gestures of fear that structure middle-class life. Watching the child endlessly ride within walls triggered me to confront the ways I too grew up circling within invisible cages, the repetition makes me feel a mix of nauseous and boredom. The melancholic tone suggests that what is imagined as protection can also limit growth and possibility. Through this piece, I realized how deeply these constraints have marked my own formation, leaving me both protected and deprived. In reflecting on this, I recognize that exposing these contradictions is not just a personal confession but part of a collective need to rethink how fear shapes urban life and social relations.

You can go, you don't have to open your eyes (*video performance, 2025, 2x11min*)

Video 1 https://vimeo.com/1114488435/b4e48ac1ff?share=copy
Video 2 https://vimeo.com/1114484051/ced31cb0cc?share=copy

I walk through the city with my eyes closed, guided only by the voice of a security guard speaking to me from the municipal surveillance room. Over a live phone connection, he tells me where to step, when to turn, and what to avoid. I am physically in public space, but my navigation belongs to the apparatus that sees for me. The piece makes tangible the paradox of mediated safety: I am both vulnerable and directed, dependent on a system that promises protection while dictating my movement. The work was inspired in part by Jill Magid's Trust, in which Magid entered a long-term correspondence with a surveillance operator, exploring intimacy, dependence, and power within the logic of the watchful state.

Process

When João Pessoa's public surveillance cameras were removed from online access, I first tried to obtain recorded footage through official channels. Access was initially granted, but bureaucratic layers stalled the process. I proposed instead a live performance: placing myself under the system's watch in real time. Connected via phone, a guard, stationed in the control room, would guide me live through the streets via phone while my eyes remained closed. In doing so, I exchanged my usual autonomy for the directional power of the state's gaze. I wanted to test whether others—civilians, not institutions—would intervene if they perceived me in a state of vulnerability. I imagined a network of civil vigilance that could operate alongside, or even in place of, state surveillance: a form of protection without the disproportionate power and necropolitics of institutional control.

As I walked, my route shaped entirely by the guard's instructions, I hoped for encounters that would disrupt the closed circuit of watcher and watched. Twice, this happened: once when a group of boys offered help as I faced an obstacle, and once when a man warned me of a steep drop. These moments hinted at the possibility of a different kind of order—an ethics of care emerging not from the apparatus above, but from the community around.

Connection to research

My intention was to challenge the belief that my body requires the state to protect me from others. This notion—first presented to me in high school—was framed through the saying "o homem é o lobo do homem" ("man is man's wolf"), a phrase originating with Plautus but later popularized by Thomas Hobbes in De Cive (1642) to describe a state of nature defined by mistrust and potential violence. I remember how this idea stuck with me, shaping my sense of safety, and how I wanted to resist it.

In Jill Magid's Trust, the state apparatus is not simply cold and distant, but also capable of intimacy and care. This duality inspired me to place myself under its gaze not as a

passive object, but as an active participant in its choreography. The influence of Jill Magid's Trust is visible not only due to the played game, but also in the way dependence, and authority are collapsed into the same channel of communication.

This work engages directly with my dissertation's central question of how middle-class safety is produced and maintained through surveillance and spatial control. It performs the shift from observer to observed, reversing the usual position of filming "the other" from a protected distance. Instead, I put myself under surveillance and control, in change for protection and direction.

With Nicholas Mirzoeff's "right to look," my surrender of sight challenges entitlement to vision, reframing protection as a form of unfreedom. In Simone de Beauvoir's terms, the work inhabits a space of ambiguity—freely choosing dependence in order to reveal the limits and contradictions of that freedom.

Reflection

What surprised me most during the performance was how the relationship with the guard unfolded. Although he was speaking from within the municipal apparatus, the exchange did not feel institutional or abstract. His voice became an anchor, almost like that of a companion walking beside me. The guidance was not delivered with authority, but with a sense of responsibility and care. I did not feel watched from above, but rather accompanied. This intimacy dissolved, for a moment, the distance between individual and institution. In this sense, my experience echoed Jill Magid's Trust, where the logic of surveillance gives way to a more personal, even tender, relation. Like Magid, I found myself entangled in a paradox: dependent on the gaze of the state, yet discovering within it a human presence that unsettled the usual boundary between domination and care.

Even more powerful were the interventions of people in the street. The man who warned me of the steep descent quite literally saved me from injury, and the group of boys who offered help reminded me that vigilance is not only the work of cameras and guards. These encounters revealed another form of surveillance: one grounded in mutual attention, in

the ordinary ways people look out for one another. It suggested that safety does not always have to flow from hierarchical control; it can also be woven horizontally through community.

The performance made me reflect on how surveillance, so often framed as domination, also carries the potential for relationality. At times, it felt less like surrendering freedom than opening myself to different modes of dependence—some institutional, some communal. The experience made visible a fragile but real possibility: that care and vigilance might circulate among us, not only imposed from above.

And yet, I am aware this experience is not neutral. As a white, middle-class body moving through public space, I am more likely to be protected than targeted by these forms of surveillance. The care I encountered cannot be separated from the privilege of not being read as suspicious or dangerous. Any proposal to imagine vigilance differently must account for this uneven terrain. Otherwise, we risk simply reproducing another system of necropolitical control, merely disguised as safety.

Conclusion

These works form a multi-angled examination of how I have been shaped by mechanisms of fear, control, and exclusion. By turning the camera toward myself, my class, and my whiteness, I question the beliefs and constructs that have shaped my identity. I expose this identity so that it can be seen, debated, and critiqued. Together, the works create a space to question whether protection and privilege are forms of freedom or cages we willingly inhabit—cages that confine our own ideas of others and ourselves.

Self-representation is a process of looking inward while inviting others to take a look as well.

Yet I believe self-representation cannot be the only answer. If every filmmaker turned only inward, the encounter with the other would disappear. We would risk reproducing the same logic of separation practiced by Brazil's middle and upper classes: building walls, moving into condos, avoiding the risk of relation. Filmmaking cannot become another form of retreat. The means of representation must be open and democratized, so that we can represent each other — with roles shifting, rotating, and unsettling. Only then can we move toward an ethics of alterity instead of reification.

While I have the intention to keep working on this self-examination, I won't give up looking at the other—This is the task I set for myself: to film not from above or from outside, but from within the ambiguity of my own position. To let myself be seen as I see. To insist that the other is never raw material for my narrative, but a subject whose freedom conditions my own.

Only then can filmmaking become both an ethical and a civic practice: a work of responsibility, of reciprocity, and, perhaps, of freedom.

The other human: not an object, not a symbol, not an enemy.

Human — complex, shifting, unfinished.

Film the other, but reveal yourself too.

You are never outside the frame.

Let the other see you (knowing that they don't need your permission for that)

Ask how they see you.

Do not fear their gaze.

It returns you to yourself, changed.

Do not recycle pity.

Do not freeze lives in suffering.

Reveal the structures that make them suffer.

Include yourself in suffering.

Do not stand outside of it.

You are not immune.

To share vulnerability is to recognize freedom.

Do not film as a savior.

To film is not to rescue, but to stand in relation.

Film yourself as other.

Place your class, your skin, your fears.

Awareness does not shield you,

It is not a pass,

not an absolution.

Awareness is not protection —

it is exposure.

It is responsibility.

It is a beginning.

Put your body in context.

Be present — fragile, implicated, accountable.

Be honest. Be vulnerable.

Be open to critique,

so that others may move beyond you.

Do not hide behind cynicism.

It closes doors.

Responsibility asks for openness.

Do not hide behind guilt.

Not white guilt.

Not class guilt.

Guilt centers the self and freezes the world.

Responsibility moves.

Do not just describe a reality

Provoke reality.

Imagine reality.

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Appendices

Őr utca

Original Transcription - Portuguese

Se eu estivesse aí andando nessa rua, taria com muito medo.
Meu coração para quando tô só numa rua e escuto uma moto se aproximando.

Um homem na moto.

Mas eu tento não demonstrar medo, continuo andando.

Tenho vergonha do meu medo, de acusar com o meu medo, meu medo racista.

Aí eu sou branca, loira, tenho até olho verde. Meu pai que é preto, filho de preto, diz que foi muito difícil me fazer branca. Quando ele me levava pros cantos, os amigos, colegas de trabalho tiravam onda: ei João, tem certeza que essa galega é tua filha?

Por sorte, nasci com o nariz do meu pai.

Eu fui saber muito tarde que meu pai era preto. Quando eu tinha uns 6 anos. Tava contando uma piada racista pros meus primos. Aí minha prima me interrompeu: Cecília, teu pai é negro, tu não deveria estar contando uma piada dessa.

Como assim meu pai é negro? Negro eram os outros. Negro era quem a gente não conhecia. Quem a gente não amava. Quem trabalhava pra gente.

Nesse mesmo ano eu tinha chegado a uma conclusão, olhando os vendedores ambulantes pela janela do carro: preto já tinha sido branco antes, mas de tanto trabalhar e viver debaixo de sol, tinha se bronzeado muito e ficado preto.

Eu, classe média, e sempre guardada na escola ou em casa, continuava branca.

Olhando daqui, a vida de lá, não consigo deixar de sentir medo. Medo de quê? Medo de quem? Medo do outro. Medo de quem não sou eu.

—

Meu pai caminha nessa calçada toda madrugada, vai de madrugada porque diz que tem menos gente.

Minha mãe diz que ele tá pedindo pra morrer.

Sinto muita culpa em morar fora do Brasil, sinto que tô perdendo tempo da vida dos meus pais.

Toda vez que volto, sinto que já perdi um pouco deles.

Eles nunca reclamaram, dizem que dormem bem sabendo que eu tô aqui, segura.

—

Os de branco pedem paz.
Os de amarelo, dinheiro.
Os de vermelho, amor.

Eu venho aqui olhar a câmera, não porque eu tô com saudades mas porque eu tô em casa, e já já vou me juntar a essa multidão.

Faz cinco anos que eu não viro o ano no Brasil, esse ano eu vou de branco.

Meu namorado fica tirando onda, dizendo que essa tradição parece com a festa de branco da Hungria. É a primeira vez que ele vem pro Brasil.

Eu quero levá-lo pra pular as ondinhas, sete ondinhas.

Essa multidão incomoda ele, a mim não.

Eu tava sentindo falta de sentir que eu faço parte de alguma coisa, que eu faço parte desse povo.

Apesar de eu olhar pra todo rosto me perguntando: esse aí, será que votou em Bolsonaro?

A gente atravessa a multidão até chegar no mar.

A gente senta na areia e conversa sobre um futuro possível, sobre um filho possível.

—

Acordo no meio da madrugada chorando, dizendo que quero que o nosso filho, que nem existe, cresça no Brasil. que o Brasil pode ser violento, mas se a gente arrumar um jeito de continuar classe média, classe média alta, talvez a gente nem sinta a violência.

Translation to English

If I were there, walking on that street, I'd be so scared.
My heart stops when I'm alone on a street and hear a motorcycle approaching.

A man on a motorcycle.

But I try not to show my fear, I keep walking.

I'm ashamed of my fear, of accusing with my fear, my racist fear.

See, I'm white, blonde, I even have green eyes. My dad, who's black, son of a black father, says it was really hard work making me white. When he'd take me around, his friends, his co-workers would joke: "Hey João, you sure this blonde girl's your kid?"

Luckily, I got my dad's nose.

I found out really late that my dad was black. When I was about six years old. I was telling a racist joke to my cousins. Then my cousin interrupted me: "Cecília, your dad's black, you shouldn't be telling a joke like that."

What do you mean my dad's black? black were the others. black was who we didn't know. Who we didn't love. Who worked for us.

That same year, I'd come to a conclusion, watching street vendors through the car window: black people used to be white, but after working so much, living under the sun, they'd gotten too tanned and turned black.

Me, middle class, always tucked away at school or at home, stayed white.

Looking from here at life over there, I can't stop feeling afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid of whom? Afraid of the other. Afraid of who isn't me.

—

My dad walks that sidewalk every single morning, at dawn. He goes at dawn because he says there are fewer people.

My mom says he's asking to get killed.

I feel so guilty living outside Brazil, like I'm losing time with my parents.

Every time I go back, I feel like I've lost a bit more of them.

They've never complained, they say they sleep well knowing I'm here, safe.

——

The ones in white ask for peace.
The ones in yellow, money.
The ones in red, love.

I come here to watch the camera, not because I'm homesick but because I feel at home, and soon I'll be joining that crowd.

It's been five years since I spent New Year's in Brazil, this year I'll wear white.

My boyfriend keeps joking, saying this tradition looks like Hungary's white parties. It's his first time in Brazil.

I want to take him to jump the waves, seven waves.

The crowd bothers him, but not me.

I was missing the feeling of being part of something, of being part of these people.

Though I can't stop looking at every face wondering: did this one vote for Bolsonaro?

We move through the crowd until we reach the sea.

We sit on the sand and talk about a possible future, a possible child.

——

I wake up in the middle of the night crying, saying I want our child, who doesn't even exist, to grow up in Brazil. That Brazil can be violent, but if we find a way to stay middle class, upper middle class, maybe we won't even feel the violence.