

Hungarian University of Fine Arts Doctoral School

# **The Other in Me**

'Othering' and the Brazilian White Middle Class

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## **Thesis summary**

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.