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Laughter Out Of Place: Race, Class, Violence, And Sexuality In A Rio Shantytown (California Series In Public Anthropology)



Synopsis

Donna M. Goldstein challenges much of what we think we know about the "culture of poverty." Drawing on more than a decade of experience in Brazil, Goldstein provides an intimate portrait of everyday life among the women of the favelas, or urban shantytowns. These women have created absurdist and black-humor storytelling practices in the face of trauma and tragedy. Goldstein helps us to understand that such joking and laughter is part of an emotional aesthetic that defines the sense of frustration and anomie endemic to the political and economic desperation of the shantytown.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Within the first few pages of *Laughter Out of Place*, I realized that Dr. Goldstein was going to embark on ethnographic analysis in a more personal vein. The introduction reads like a personal reflection of her time spent in "Felicidade Eterna," folding in memories of the people she met into a journal-styled ethnography, of the kind introduced to us by Ruth Behar. I found Donna's approach refreshing: a reader knew where she stood on issues, and there were no concealed objectivities in her observations. Donna's personality comes through in her writing in her style -which does not back away from harsh realities, nor delve into idealized or romanticized metaphors for Brazilian music, sex, or style. I found large scale conclusions were lacking, but her small conclusions peppered within her dialogue were cogent: clearly understood and explained by her

observations. Looking at the book's format in an overall construction, I thought she made an interesting and deliberate choice in segmenting the book around particular phenomena of favela culture. The overarching concept - of laughter in the favelas that seemed to be out of place - ran through the book, but other subjects like the aesthetics of domination, black cinderellas, short-term childhoods, gangs and violence, and the carnivalization of desire focused the book into themes particularized to the society of the favela. The choice of these themes and I can guess were synthesized from coded observations. The phenomena addressed were concrete and drew Donna's discursive writing style along into interesting, relevant, and "involving" territory. She used theory to bolster her arguments, but didn't saddle the story with overwhelming treatises. The choice of ethnographic writing - employing themes - makes me curious though.

Laughter Out of Place is a wonderful ethnography in a number of ways. It captures an incredible depth of understanding of lives of the urban poor women and their families in a favela. It reveals the complexity of their predicaments, and their predicaments are many: How can one try to move up in the society without reproducing the beliefs about black female sexual allure? How can Gloria keep her children in line, out of prison and alive but also how can she prevent them from joining a gang? How can she inflict harsh punishments on her children and at the same time witness the perpetual pampering of the middle and upper class children? How can young men in the favela stay out of gangs in a situation where there are virtually no economic opportunities for them and they are constantly criminalized by the elite? How can middle and upper classes stop their dependence on domestic workers without lowering their own class standing? How can the women in the favela break the cycle of domination and refuse domestic work when sex work is one of the only other viable alternatives for them? How can a black consciousness movement develop among people who believe that calling someone 'black' is an insult? These are just a few of very complex predicaments that Laughter Out of Place reveals to the reader through a great depth of analysis and wonderful story-telling. What might be most interesting, however, is that even though so much of the book is about violence -- either actual or symbolic -- Goldstein chose the lens of humor through which to cast the story.

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