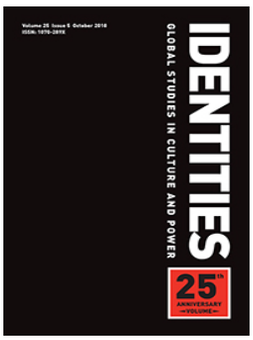

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# Eating bodies, growing selves in a Brazilian favela

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**ABSTRACT**

The economic growth of Brazil in the early and mid-2000s has created opportunities for people like my interlocutors, the young and media-savvy residents of Brazilian favelas to consume and partake in a global market of the production of the self. These have nourished their pursuit for both diversity and difference and shaped the eclectic qualities of their consumption practices. In its plural forms, consumption, or eating, which will take center stage in this article, has enabled an expanded palette and palate of being, acting and relishing life in the favela. I argue that eating can be understood as a method of becoming; it can be used as an active attempt at asserting agency over one's body and, by extension, at asserting subjectivity in a lifeworld open to multiple dimensions of uncertainty and insecurity.

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**KEYWORDS** Eating; food; favela; body; becoming; subjectivity

## Introduction

Throughout my fieldwork in a Rio favela, interlocutors would use the word for eating, *comer*, to refer to both the function that sustains us as biological beings and to mean having sex with someone. When talking about food and sex, historian Henrique Carneiro writes that they are the two 'most intense carnal pleasures taking in consideration that the first is indispensable in the everyday life of every human being' (2005, 73). Eating practices, which this article will dwell upon, are acts performed at the interstices between eating and being eaten. One can be eaten by one's own uncontrollable desires, but eating is also used as a metaphor in a wider sense than food and sex, so one can also be eaten by structural inequalities in Brazilian society based on one's ethnicity, gender or socio-economic capital. The favela has, in the past three decades, been the setting for a territorialisation of the drug trade. In 2014, a greatly criticised policing programme was put into place so as to contain the traffickers' practices, which gravely impacted my interlocutors' everyday

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lives. The favela was a violent place, so you may ask: of all the things to speak of, why eating? Food provides an entrance into the existential infrastructure, texture and, no less, taste of the everyday. We all have to eat. And as Brillat-Savarin's words ([1825] 2012), which have now become the adage 'we are what we eat' indicate, eating turns into an exercise of becoming what we want to be.

In this article, I propose that eating can be understood as a method of becoming; it can be used as an active attempt at asserting agency over one's body and, by extension, at asserting subjectivity in a lifeworld open to multiple dimensions of uncertainty and insecurity. This has led the analysis towards an examination of the aspirations of interlocutors, as they are revealed through the practices of eating. Living in the precarious socio-economic and material conditions of the favela, striving to make oneself, demands elaborate skills of navigation within this complex and moral field. Through their consumption choices, they create distinctions within these local worlds, all the while maintaining their palpable, or palatable, links to the global. Nonetheless, as I will show, overlapping, opposing and critical positions are likewise revealed through interlocutors' relationships to food. Eating can pose constraints on subjectivity, and set the stage for the unfolding of problematic kin, gender, and post-colonial relationships.

## Theoretical framework: the anthropology of food, and eating as an embodied practice

Food has captured the anthropological imagination since the beginning of the discipline. Boas in his work on the Kwakiutl (1921) and Malinowski on the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski [1922] 2002) took a keen interest in the ways in which food was produced, prepared and consumed. According to these anthropologists, the substance of the social fabric can be reached through meticulous attention to the nitty-gritty of everyday life. While trying not to essentialise the social makeup of human exchanges in particular contexts, I argue that food can be taken as a valid entrance point, one which is also attentive to local social and material configurations.

More recent studies which pay attention to eating also conceptualise the body and embodiment, the constitution of subjectivity and the relationship to other corporal beings. This is particularly the case in feminist scholarship that takes the body seriously (cf. Bordo 1993; Lupton 1996; Probyn 2000), to be the 'subject and object of thinking' (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 3). Indeed, studying the body has gained momentum in the social sciences. In the 1990s, authors such as Anthony Synnott (1991) argued that modern subjectivities are, in fact, corporal projects. Subjectivity will herein be understood as actors' thoughts, sentiments, and embodied sensibilities, as well as their sense of self and self-world relations (Holland and Leander 2004, 127). The aspects that

I pay particular attention to in this article are the sense of self and self-world relations, achieved through the embodied practice of eating. Lupton writes that food and eating are central to our subjectivity, or sense of self, and our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies, which itself is inked with subjectivity (1996, 7). Food habits, according to Lupton, are directed at self-care via the nourishment of the body with foods, constituting both a source of pleasure and acting as commodities to present a persona to oneself and others (1996, 19). The eating selves position themselves in relation to each other through the food they consume, or through the one they refuse.

And why do subjectivity and eating matter? According to Sherry Ortner, they matter because subjectivity is the basis of agency, a necessary part of understanding how people act on the world even as they are acted upon (Ortner, 2005: 34 in Luhrmann, 2006, 346). Eating cuts to the core of the vulnerable aspects of being an agent, one having both physiological and socio-symbolic semi-permeable boundaries (Mol 2008). While we can seemingly choose what we eat, where we eat it, with whom and how, our bodies live out the paradox of not being in full control of the physiological effect of food, nor of all the symbolic messages it has to convey about our social positions and subjectivities. One cannot control all of the social inscriptions of class, taste, difference and belonging within the items that the eating self chooses.

Besides the feminist scholarship on eating and embodiment, in order to approach the social aspects of eating, I found inspiration in practice theory, or more particularly, in Pierre Bourdieu's work on eclecticism (1984 [1979]). Bourdieu examined the linkages between class and taste, and he juxtaposes the autodidact – a victim of forced eclecticism of that culture, picked up in unguided reading and accidental encounters – with 'the elective eclecticism of aesthetes who use the mixing of genres and the subversion of hierarchies as an opportunity to manifest their all-powerful aesthetic disposition' (ibid.: 329). Bourdieu's upper-class aesthetes have the luxury of consuming across class boundaries without having their status threatened. The autodidact, on the other hand, has built his or her craft through improvisation, and their social status is always in the making. In order to offer a more dynamic view than what Bourdieu's work allows, wherein eclecticism is not necessarily a choice, but which can be nurtured by its practitioners and appreciated in the social worlds where it emerges, I have found support in the work of Lahire (2015). Lahire questions the unity of *habitus*, arguing that people throughout their lives have opportunities to participate to varying degrees in different social and cultural settings beyond their class belonging, thus undermining homogeneity of practices (2015, 4). It is along these lines that I understand the origin of the heterogeneous palette and palate for being and action that my interlocutors put into practice.

This article will likewise address the linkages between the local and the global, and how these are materialised through eating. According to Wilk, food is an ideal topic through which to understand the history of globalisation. Food connects bodies to the world, politics to health, mega-corporations to the kitchen table, and imaginations to time and history, as it is both a physical substance and an imaginary, nourishing the body and the mind (2006, 14). The economic growth of Brazil of the early 2000s and the expansion of imported consumer goods on the food market have provided my interlocutors a relatively accessible way to experience something different, and to experience themselves as different, as a steady stream of global products was becoming a part of their everyday lives and leisure choices. Their tastes stretched far beyond the borders of what, until a few years back, had been inaccessible for the economically disadvantaged classes of Brazil. Through food, my interlocutors and I could find points of recognition through the things we consumed, which were 'globally' available, like Heineken and sushi. Nonetheless, as I will go on to show, these expanded practices of consumption were done with a dose of post-colonial critique by some interlocutors.

## Context and research approach

The research herein presented is based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork and several sporadic visits in the period of 2014–2016. I do not specify the name or exact location of the favela, so as to protect my interlocutors' privacy. My interlocutors perceived themselves as young people, *jovens*. Youth are a large part of Brazil's overall population, peaking in the youth bulge in 2000, with 34 million Brazilians between 15 and 24 years of age, or 20.1 percent of the total population (Dalsgård, Franch, and Parry Scott 2008, 56). My interlocutor group was varied, though, as they were in a bracket between late teens and mid-thirties, pointing out how relative the category of youth is. I had ten key interlocutors, a majority of whom were male. The method I have employed has been one that reflects the field I was in, a favela. There was no transparency of process, there were no bureaucratised steps to take that would lead to access. I depended on people. Hence, I worked with a research assistant, Rodrigo, who introduced me to several of my interlocutors. The material herein presented has been gathered via participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

As aforementioned, the favela they lived in was occupied by state security forces in 2014. They were aiming to take control of all the favelas wherein armed drug traffickers have been operating for more than three decades. The violence that plays out in the favela – coupled with a life steeped in inequalities – has severe consequences for my interlocutors, reducing their opportunities to study, to work, and to lead a life of pleasure and leisure. However, as I seek to show, they did precisely this, create and pursue opportunities to live in the face of adversity through the avenues they could make available. Interlocutors went about acting

upon themselves and expanding their experiences by recognising that they were immersed in an open process of learning; a process wherein the body gained an essential role, enabling pathways of becoming, but also exposing the extents of their vulnerability. This vulnerability was something that they were reminded of every day, in more or less violent episodes common to or exceptional in their lives.

## 'What a day': eating into families and gendered divisions of labour

The house of Dona Bea was 'on the other side of the divide', or in the neighbouring favela controlled by the rival drug traffickers. Some of my interlocutors, particularly the ones in their late teens or early twenties, would not venture there, out of fear of being perceived as traffickers and harassed, or even murdered, a fear substantiated by gossip, memories and documented cases. Dona Bea and her husband, Seu Alfonso, both in their mid-fifties, had a *lanchonete*, a sandwich bar, in their front yard. When lunchtime approached, Rodrigo and I would sometimes eat there. On the way to the place, we would need to pass by the Pacification soldiers, and as Rodrigo instructed me, I would attempt not to attract their attention through eye contact, or by coming too close to their armoured vehicles and rifles. We would walk right through the lanchonete, exit through its back door, walk through the approximately nine square metre courtyard with a tree in the center and clothes hanging out to dry, all in order to get to the living room. Their private quarters could, in fact, be used for dining by 'special' clients. Unlike the younger crowd in the outer section, the occasional eaters in the living room were teachers from the sports school in the neighbourhood, with whom Dona Bea and Seu Alfonso were quite familiar, after years of interaction.

Comfortably lounging on the living room sofa, waiting for our food to be served by Dona Bea, a smell of fried liver and onions surrounds us. The portions would always be quite large: meat, rice, beans, pasta, *farofa* (manioc flour mixture), arranged together on a shiny aluminium plate, with a salad served separately. Rice and beans, or *arroz com feijão*, is a staple food in many cultures, as it is both affordable and rich in nutrients. In Brazilian cuisine it has a particularly significant role. As Lilia Moritz Schwarcz notes, the combination of rice and beans represents ideals about Brazilian national identity, and racial mixture (1998, 196).

In a period when Rodrigo and I were keen on shedding some pounds, we would ask for the meat and salad only and omit the rice and beans. That led to Dona Bea's utter confusion, and double-checking if she really understood our order because it did not seem to her that it was an actual meal we were having without them. Even with just meat and salad, portions would still be massive. At five and a half Brazilian real per portion (approximately two and a half Euros in 2015), it was one of the cheapest options in the favela. Rodrigo joked that the

lanchonete was a *buchinelo*, a term I had involuntarily coined in my fumbling attempts to explain, in what was at the time beginners' Portuguese, that I need to purchase a gas canister, *butijão de gás*, for my kitchen stove. That was how we referred to the lanchonete, and likewise to a stomach, which could be a buchinelo after eating there. Susan Bordo has written that the stomach is the ultimate symbol of consumption, threatening to take the body over (1993, 202), and it genders a body, as its protruding form alludes to motherhood. Having consumed our meals, we would always end by stretching out on the sofa and waiting for the buchinelo feeling to pass. At times we would take a nap, while Dona Bea would pass in and out carrying food for other customers, and while Laura, her five-year-old granddaughter, would watch children's shows on television, show us her school assignments, or dance ballet for us.

Rodrigo, who was in his early thirties, could do many things, he would often tell me; he could play music, dance, sing, but one thing he was really sorry about was that he never had a chance to learn how to cook. Since he could not make food for himself, he often found himself falling back on traditional gender roles, or in other words, it was most often a woman who would bring him a meal. Rodrigo had started going to Dona Bea's place after his parents and two older sisters moved away from the favela to a small town on the periphery of the state of Rio de Janeiro when he was in his early twenties. When an American Ph.D. student of political science, and Rodrigo's former employer, was living in the favela, they would eat at Dona Bea's almost every day. But in the last year, he had avoided going. Dona Bea and Seu Alfonso had financial problems, Rodrigo explained and seemed to be 'tired of life', which affected the atmosphere in the restaurant, but also the taste of the food. 'It is not as good as it used to be', he would say. Likewise, he no longer wished to eat meals that made him feel the buchinelo feeling. Our visits thus became increasingly rare.

The lanchonete had been Rodrigo's 'surrogate' family: not knowing how to cook for himself, this was where he got food that reminded him of his mother's cooking. It was also a space where he could relax after a meal as one could do in one's home, something Rodrigo no longer had in the favela. There, he could be at ease, going through familiar protocols of enjoying a meal, and relaxing on a sofa, like he would in the familiar settings of a family home. The lanchonete was also somewhere he would take other researchers he occasionally worked for, to give them a 'taste of the favela'. But that taste was not as good for the body as it was for the heart, as the rice and bean portions were something Rodrigo wanted to cut down on so as to get a slimmer figure. Because Dona Bea made the portions herself, he could not control what was on the plate; in other words, he could not choose for himself. Lupton argues that in an age of uncertainty and heightened self-reflexivity, discipline over eating habits is viewed as a way of taking control over the body (1996, 19). Given the current emphasis in western societies

upon the value of self-discipline, bodies thus become potent physical symbols of the extent to which their 'owners' possess self-control (ibid.). If he was to continue eating at Dona Bea's, Rodrigo could *de facto* not control his eating, and in extension, would maintain a body with a (buchinelo) shape speaking of this 'weakness'. This ties into the corporally constraining aspects of eating, as the familiar food was keeping Rodrigo from the version of himself he sought to build. If according to Savarin, we are what we eat (Brillat-Savarin [1825] 2012), here we can also see that eating can keep us from what we want to become.

Carsten has argued that food is essential for establishing personhood and relatedness (1997). Food and its consumption could be understood as an important ingredient in forging ties – ties that resembled the family ties Rodrigo remembered and missed. The habit he had set up constituted a family-like routine and, by extension, a structure of significance. This structure came with its responsibilities – of *compartilhar problemas*, sharing problems, and affective expectations, of feeling as if they were one's own. Having developed an affective relationship with Dona Bea and her family, he had to participate in their family troubles – divorce, economic problems and everyday bickering, something which caused him to diminish the time he spent there. This pleasure had thrown him right into the belly of family life; it became too proximate, too intimate, too real. Eating there thus enacted eating into their family life, as well as eating into a gendered relation. Being a man, being served food by a woman was a gendered practice with which, albeit familiar, Rodrigo was growing increasingly uncomfortable participating in. By taking food into the body, according to Bakhtin, we take in the world (Bakhtin 1984, 281). When consuming Dona Bea's food, he was also unable to manage how much of her domestic world he was taking in. His unease with eating at Dona Bea's illustrated the semi-permeable subject and the vulnerable aspects of agency (Mol 2008), as the food served did not enable him to control his body, and the problems served there did not enable him to control the boundaries of what he had come to consider as private matters. Thus, eating not only enforces embodied constraints in terms of kilos that pile up, but also social and symbolic ones, which keep the subject perpetuating relationships (e.g. of a gendered or class nature) they do not intentionally seek to engage in.

It was a particularly calm afternoon, and the breeze was entering the living room with its three-metre high ceiling and a three-seat velvet padded sofa – both luxuries in an area where every centimeter that could be used in a functional manner for construction counts, and where ceilings are more often two metres high and sofas are not built for more than two, or one and a half. The smell of newly washed laundry in the courtyard was mixing with the smell of food. 'What a day!' Rodrigo exclaimed. He started drawing pictographs on his arm – ideas for an essay that he wanted to write for the preparatory course for the university entrance exam he was taking. Small humans, letters,

exclamation marks, and geometric figures. It was an unforgettable atmosphere, which made us feel like we are in the comforts of a home, a home we both lacked, having moved from one temporary place to the other. But even at Dona Bea's, during that afternoon, Rodrigo was elsewhere. Or at least, he was in the otherwise, daydreaming of a different life, a life wherein, perhaps, there was no time for daydreaming, wherein he was a university student, with his own house, wherein he could make his food, the way he liked it. He was dreaming away from the things that tasted or felt familiar, in favour of a life that could offer something that family life, local relatedness or even Brazil, perhaps, could not. He did not tell me what the pictograms meant, but the essay he never had time to finish. His local life, with all the people he knew, all the things he had to do, what provided him his social life, his humble earnings, and fragmented CV, was also keeping him away from living otherwise.

## One real meal: food and aspirations

When Rodrigo did not have a steady stream of income, he ate at a state-subsidised canteen where a meal cost one real (approximately 50 cents of a Euro in 2015). It was housed in an industrial-style building, just across the highway from the favela complex. It was battered by the tooth of time, lack of maintenance and graffiti tags. The meal consisted of rice, beans, a piece of chicken, pasta, farofa, a small salad, and powder-based juice. The locale could host approximately 200 people, and the usual customers were construction workers from the projects close to or on the highway, and the approximately 80 crack users who had built small shacks on the industrial outskirts of the favela. Rodrigo told me that not many local residents would eat there because it was 'shameful'. Rodrigo ate there with Otávio, his oldest and closest friend. Otávio's father scolded him and Rodrigo when they did – why would they eat at a place like that if they could earn money? The price was later doubled to two real, which was still relatively low, but it was a 100 percent raise – perhaps even putting the meal out of reach for those in the most precarious positions. Eating at the one-real restaurant was a matter for joking. While lounging about in my apartment with Rodrigo and Kaíque, one of my key interlocutors, Kaíque said to Rodrigo:

**K:** Oh you look like you have been eating for one real! [Touches the belly of Rodrigo]

**R:** No, I have only been twice since December. I went jogging today!

**K:** At Vila Olimpica? [Open-air public sports facility, in a favela where armed drug traffickers from a rival gang operate]

**R:** Yes.

Kaíque then gesticulated the peace sign with his fingers, but it was also the symbol of the drug traffickers who operate in the favela we lived in, as opposed to the three pointing fingers from the favela where the sport facility is located, jokingly reminding Rodrigo that he had gone to the territory of the 'other', and again, underscoring that he had done something 'wrong' – even if it was not, as he first suspected, eating for one real. Eating there clearly disturbed Rodrigo too, and he would only do so in tough financial times. When he got a girlfriend, he told me that he felt it was important to have money, so that 'she is also taken care of in every way'. He cared about what happened if he wanted 'to buy her a present, or eat a nice meal with her'. Indeed, after the relationship commenced, Rodrigo, who was not a fan of Facebook posts, was often tagged in restaurants, eating sushi or the like.

Besides the one-real canteen, another way of saving money on food was to walk to the university island, some 30 minutes away, a journey filled with the adventures of exiting the favela, running across pedestrian-unfriendly motorways, and walking across the lawn of the university island. The canteen we used served a meal for two real for the public university students, and four for outsiders. One had to prove this by producing a student card. I had an A4 stamped print-out proving my status as a visiting student at a public university, which a precarious use of duct tape was keeping from falling apart. Rodrigo did not have a card, which he found ironic, as he would need to pay double the amount that I, a foreign-funded researcher did. So, while lining up in the metres-long queue, we would try to 'play it cool', *ficar tranquilos*, so that it seemed 'obvious' that we were both students and would get our serving of, yet again, rice, beans, pasta, farofa, a piece of meat (or at times a bean- or soya-based vegetarian patty) and a piece of fruit. The closest university canteen was that of Sports Science, and Rodrigo would always take the opportunity to admire the young female students waiting in the canteen line. '*Gostosa*', tasty, he would exclaim, making a rapid upward fist movement to underline his excitement. Rodrigo thought the quality of the food was good, and eating there never raised any questions, like eating at the subsidised canteen did.

Food, Antje Lindenmeyer writes, can signify 'home' and belonging; it can also evoke sensuality, sexuality and community. Further, 'bad food' can mark the eater as low-class, and awaken conflicts on eating, or not eating (2006, 2). In other words, foodstuffs can link into class-based hierarchies, where some foods express sophistication or even moral superiority (2006, 11). At both of these locales, for a small price, we could eat what seemed to me an identical meal, containing the same ingredients, and from what I could derive, the same taste quality. But the two experiences were not the same. Food and eating, it seems, cannot be extricated from the place the meal is consumed, the eaters with whom it is shared, or even the people merely surrounding us. Rodrigo preferred the university canteen, where the food was very good, *muito boa*, even though

it was more expensive and further away. The tasting experience was augmented by the atmosphere of being on the university island, buzzing with the movement of students in their early twenties, of whispers, laughter and, as he so enjoyed, 'tasty' bodies. It was a world he wanted to participate in. The subsidised canteen, on the other hand, resonated strongly in the local community as a place that those who were socially ostracised frequented. Food divides, as well as unites. It was a morally inferior act to eat there. 'Bad food' in this case was not about the type of items served or consumed, or about the quality and manner of their preparation; rather, it was about the social and moral significance it had.

Biehl and Locke, drawing on Deleuze, write that becoming is about the plastic power of people, worlds, and thought, that it is about the power of specifically growing out of one's self (2017, 4). Through his preference for the university canteen, Rodrigo's aspirations were revealed, for a university education, and for a middle-class life. It also revealed the kind of woman he could 'eat': young, with a firm and trained body, aiming for an education. The university canteen was the setting wherein he could taste his aspirations. There, even rice and beans tasted good, because they tasted like the Rodrigo he wanted to become. Back to the adage of one being what one eats, I add that one becomes whom one eats with, revealing the social and 'sticky' dimensions to both eating and becoming. In order to grow out of himself, Rodrigo sought ways to approximate the socio-material world he wished to participate in. Eating was a way about it. In the following section, I go on to speak of approximation to 'worlds' of difference through food and eating, and illustrate how they tie into processes of individualisation.

## Eating out: home-bound men and splurging

'What do Brazilian beer and sex on the beach have in common? They're both fucking close to water'. Gil cracked this joke in English one evening. Gil worked for a British-Brazilian NGO in the favela, and was one of the few interlocutors who did in fact speak English, which he spent the last few years learning in a private course financed by his British employer. He had been in the military, and had studied social sciences at a public university, without finishing. His latest project at the NGO was providing citizenship and gender classes. Gil was, as he often referred to himself, a *caseiro*, a person who spends most of their time in the home. I would seldom see him out and about in the favela. When I would, it would be in locales such as *Galeto Dourado*, or the Golden Chicken, used mostly as a buffet and restaurant during daytime, and a bar at night. It was a place where one could 'eat well', *come bem*. The restaurant distinguished itself from other buffets by having two floors, and a wooden interior. It was one of the few places in the favela where one could order wine, both national and from Chile and Argentina, at the price of 35 real

per bottle. In contemporary Brazil, consuming foreign food is still an element of social power, but it was at the time of my fieldwork becoming accessible to a larger part of the population. A typical lunch plate for Rodrigo and me would usually contain lettuce, tomatoes, palm heart, red beets, grilled cheese, mango and salmon imported from Chile. We would pay double the price of a meal at Dona Bea's, but it was still considered a good place to meet up with Gil and other friends. In the evenings, they would usually order what they called 'long neck' beers (343 ml), most commonly from international producers like Dutch Heineken. They would drink them individually, rather than the 600 ml or one-liter national beer varieties like Antartica or Brahma, which came in cooling Styrofoam containers and were shared in small glasses when they went to a *botequim*, a small store or boot where alcohol and household items were sold. Friends and families would sit at the Golden Chicken into the late hours, chatting around the tables placed on the sidewalk. Children's birthdays and other festivities were more usually held in the street, close to the family home, but in the last few years, I was told, 'closed' locales were growing increasingly popular. This was due to the increased violence by state actors and drug traffickers in the streets, but also because some families preferred to celebrate with a smaller number of invited friends and family.

While it was hard to get Gil to meet up in the favela, with the Golden Chicken as an exception, he would easily agree to go to restaurants downtown to eat. A favourite location was CADEG, the indoor municipal market a ten-minute bus ride away from the favela. At CADEG, one could find imported food products that were uncommon in the markets in Rio, such as pumpernickel bread from Germany, olive tapenade and pesto from Italy, American peanut butter, French cheese, chocolate from Belgium, and a variety of spices and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages from all around the world. CADEG also housed restaurants, including the perpetually full Portuguese one, live band included, and the meat lover's favourite – the Uruguayan barbeque. Gil loved meat. Talking about meat, about various kinds of steak, really got him going. Discussions about steaks would roll on endlessly about, say, the proper way to grill a *picanha*, the sirloin cap. CADEG was a space for splurging, or as Gil put it, *ostentação*, where we could indulge in Portuguese pastries, a glass of Argentinian wine, and a bar of dark chocolate with caramel and sea salt. Gil also fancied eating at Outback, an American grill chain located in the elite South Zone of the city. It was in the basement of a shopping mall, without windows, dimly lit, fiercely air-conditioned and with an *ad libitum* iced tea policy. On our first visit we arrived at seven o'clock on a Friday night and spent an hour in the queue – and when we were finally inside, we were the audience for at least half a dozen birthday commemorations in the cold and dark of the grill. The noise and temperature were drowned out by the attention paid to our portions.

Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979) drew on empirical research in France between 1963 and 1968 to argue that preferences are structured upon class belonging, varying greatly between the dominant and working classes, which could then be classified into the taste of luxury/freedom and the taste of necessity (Bourdieu 1979). In extension, Douglas B. Holt, drawing on Bourdieu, wrote that inequalities are perpetuated through the unintended process of selecting people with whom we share tastes, values and habits (Coulangeon and Duval 2015, 6). While social origin has a role to play with what interlocutors desired to 'eat', following Lahire (2015), I argue that the heterogeneous settings wherein interlocutors such as Gil could partake through education, labour and leisure, as well as the rapid dissemination of information through contemporary technological developments, have had an impact on what they perceived as 'tasty'. Gil and Rodrigo were guided by a desire for new experiences, and food was a relatively accessible avenue for it. The options available in the favela did not appeal to Gil as much as those in the richer areas of the city. The Golden Chicken was a notable example, as it allowed the assertion of his difference through the individualisation of a habitual practice, like drinking beer. He could link to a global imaginary of brands, by choosing foreign and much more expensive beer. There, as well as in the locales in CADEG and Outback, he could make different choices, that would create the distinction – being different is choosing and acting different. Gil's lust for the new, the experimental and the distant can be understood part of the pursuit for learning about the lives of others. Eating was an approachable and, at times, affordable way of experiencing oneself and the world differently, and being able to make and share something different.

And what was the difference which could be asserted through these practices? Drawing on Bakhtin (1968) and Elias (1976), sociologist Pasi Falk distinguishes between the closed and open body (1994, 25). The open body has its subjectivity tied to the group, and can eat itself into it through ritual food consumption, unlike the modern body in Western society, wherein taste guides decisions on what to eat or not to eat, thus diminishing the role of the communal meal (ibid.). This insight opens a window on understanding my interlocutors movement from the 'traditional' open body, willing to consume itself into a community, to a 'modern' closed one, which chooses on the base of individualised taste. In extension, consumer goods partake in constructing subjectivity when traditional sources of self-definition, like organised religion, high culture, class consciousness or political affiliation have lost potency and meaning (Lareman 1993 in Lupton 1996, 23). Gil, the housebound man, moved, but he moved in spaces wherein a meal or a drink did not oblige him to partake in relations that extended beyond monetary transactions. He could have his own Heineken in the Golden Chicken, where he did not think of the personal problems of the owners, as Rodrigo did with Dona Bea; he could eat the kind of steak he desired in Outback, and he could choose his

small pleasures at CADEG. Eating for Gil was an individualised experience for the kind of person, the caseiro, he perceived himself to be. Paradoxically, the home-bound man preferred 'global' food. However, these sorts of eating practices are not only about exclusion, but also about tapping into an expanded imaginary, or imagined community (Anderson 1991). The way Gil ate resonated with how he sought to ascribe his values and actions to larger scales than the locality of the favela, and to summon globalised flavours in his everyday routines. But not all interlocutors shared the enthusiasm for imported goods. Some, like Claudia, tried to valorise 'home-made' food.

## Food without taste and the taste of relationships

> In this system, 'taste', this sense through which flavour is perceived, plays a fundamental role. The words knowledge and taste have a similar origin, from the Latin *sapere* 'to have taste'. To have knowledge and to have taste become confused with each other – taste is also knowledge. (Maciel 2001, 1)

In the following section I explore some implications of a more careful and critical side to eating; one that more openly questions what is desired and why, and enables a reconfigured valuing of the seemingly known, the proximate, and what perhaps was taken for granted.

*Tenho paladar de crianca*, 'I have the taste buds of a child', Claudia said with a tone of irritation,

> I am so tired of all these things with imitating European cuisine, and drinking European wine, which is not sweet. To be honest, I do not like it! And no, I cannot tell the difference between this or that kind! Is there something better than coming home to your mom's *feijoada* [Brazilian black bean and sausage stew]?

Claudia, in her early thirties, is a pastry chef, and studied gastronomy at a public university. She identifies as black, and she is very tall and slender, with curly black hair, and 'bohemian chic' clothes. She lives on the outskirts of the favela complex in a private housing estate which ambiguously pertains to the favela geographically, but not symbolically, according to its residents, as it is built in the shape of apartment buildings, it is fenced off with walls topped by barbed wire, and the space between buildings is not populated by children at play and lounging teenagers. When we met, she was a teacher at a gastronomy and gender course in the favela, aiming to instruct women in gourmet cooking and their rights. The irony of the course, as many pointed out, was that the women – whose ages ranged from late teens to early sixties – 'already knew how to cook', but they needed the diploma to seek employment, as few of them had completed secondary education, or had proof of formal employment. Claudia had lived in the USA for a year with her American husband (they are now separated),

in a Miami beach house, with a Mexican maid. Not being able to take her husband's jet-set lifestyle and partying, she told me, she moved back to Rio and gave birth to her daughter, whom she takes care of with the help of her parents.

The idea of social status attained through food ties into colonial history, as for colonial elites, knowing how to consume and buy foreign foods was part of maintaining their cultural power (Wilk 2006, 17). This is where knowledge comes into play: knowledge about the food and its particularities, and about its effects on the body and wellbeing, becomes a way to accumulate a certain social status – that of a subject who has the conditions and means to choose, control and relish their nutritional experiences. Or as could be derived from Maciel's quote in the beginning of this section, taste is also knowledge (2001, 1). Wilk has further argued that his Belizean interlocutors were becoming sophisticated consumers through their awareness that they can use and manipulate goods to their own social ends (1999, 247). The new depth of knowledge, Wilk adds, does not in and of itself create tastes for foreign things (ibid.: 248). Presenting knowledge of and preference for European' food and drink was not the venue through which Claudia pursued the accumulation of status. This was not the taste she wished to cultivate. Having experienced the jet-set lifestyle full-time, and the knowledge of a broad range of food items, she felt that she could choose to prefer the feijoada. Relishing the traditional, and perhaps habitual, did not represent a threat to Claudia's aspirations. Claudia positioned herself as a different type of contemporary consumer. She signalled her sophistication by valorising food items that are associated with Afro-Brazilian and working-class identities.

Furthermore, consumption can be politically informed, when combined with awareness of inherent structures of power, emerging from educational, professional or personal background (Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2016, 155). Although Claudia was not explicitly political, nonetheless, she held a firm critical stance on the values enmeshed in consumption practices. She thus sought to disentangle eating for the sake of status from eating what she perceived to be food of substance. Unlike Gil, in the previous section, she did not render eating as an individualised experience, based on personal choice, but one which affirmed and reproduced the relationships with kin and local traditions.

Indeed, although Claudia had access to multiple gastronomic worlds, she does not fall into classifications of one desiring to taste the food and drink of the European or upper-class 'other'. She studies gastronomy, and has had first-hand experience in consuming a life of luxury. However, she expressed that she could not taste the food which was perceived as gourmet. What she could taste, though, was food that was made with love, like a bean stew made by a caring mother for her family. Her comment indicates that the sense of taste is seated not so much in the mouth as at the intersection of the kinds of

relations perceived as valuable, both by those who make the food and by those who consume it. The familiar and affective relations were the ones that Claudia valued more highly. Claudia could taste relationships, and the food of the 'other' did not taste as good. Claudia had both eaten and cooked out, so to speak, but preferred the taste of the proximate and the intimate.

## Conclusion

I have in this article examined eating as method, enabling pathways for the self to grow, and to engage in an ongoing process of becoming. Eating, as I have shown, takes place in a variety of locales in and outside of the favela. Increased purchasing power and global connections have led to diversification of desires and widened the choices possible. What unites my interlocutors is their perspective of food as empowering, albeit in differing manners. They all use their relationship to food as a way of asserting agency over their bodies and subjectivities, which would not have been as easily accessible through other channels, considering their disadvantaged position in Brazilian society. Examining food has also shed light on the shifting forms of masculinity, wherein the ability to care for oneself is gaining prominence, without giving strength to gendered dichotomies. If we are what we eat, as Brillat-Savarin would have it (Brillat-Savarin [1825] 2012), then we can also understand food as revealing my interlocutors' aspirations, since some preferred to eat among those who were better off, and try foods which had formerly not been accessible to them. However, food makes its marks on the body, and communicates the lifestyle one has, or has had; thus the body becomes an anchor, embedded in a particular class structure and way of life. We cannot always control what food does to our bodies, or what our eating communicates to those in our surroundings about who we are.

My interlocutors are of the Brazilian working classes, pursuing their taste for the world, and eating food is an accessible way to approach it in its diversity. They dare to mix, and to establish global links through their desires. Nevertheless, this is done with a dose of critique, as we saw from the case of Claudia, since she did not treat the food of the 'global other' as necessarily 'better' than that which she could make and consume with loved ones. Through eating, interlocutors create and re-create intimate and intricate social infrastructures, and thereby attempt to transgress or deconstruct the symbolic and physical boundaries imposed by their social origin. Eating is an incorporated method for the making of the self, for imagining and re-imagining heterogeneous networks of belonging. You eat as you are in a state of openness, in a perpetually unfinished process of becoming.

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