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Causing a Commotion: Public Scandal as Resistance Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes

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# Causing a commotion

## *Public scandal as resistance among Brazilian transgendered prostitutes*

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### DON KULICK

*The author is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Stockholm University, Sweden. His most recent book (co-edited with Margaret Willson) is Taboo: sex, identity and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork (Routledge, 1995) and he is currently in Brazil completing a monograph on the lives of Brazilian travesti prostitutes.*

Research support for fieldwork in Brazil was generously provided by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR) and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. Versions of this paper were read at the special session on 'Violence and Conversation', organized by Charles Briggs for the 5th International Pragmatics Conference, Mexico City, Mexico, and at the special session on 'Stigma and Resistance', organized by Moshe Shokeid, for the 4th EASA Conference, Barcelona, Spain. The paper first came into focus during a workshop on 'Recognition Struggles' organized at Stockholm University by Barbara Hobson, and I am extremely grateful to her and all the participants of that workshop for helping me to articulate the challenge that *escândalos* present to our theories of resistance and recognition. In addition, the paper has benefited from the expertise and critical commentaries provided by Cecilia McCallum, Bambi Schieffelin, Michael Silverstein, and Margaret Willson. Jonathan Benthall pointed out where the article needed some final spit and polish. I thank them all. My greatest debt is to the travestis with whom I live and work in Salvador, and for my understandings of *escândalos*, I am particularly grateful to a *finada* Tina, Banana, Erica, Adriana, Pastinha, Mabel, a *finada* Cintia, and, most especially, and always, to my research collaborator Keila Simpsom.

The political scientist James Scott's 1990 book *Domination and the arts of resistance* is a widely reviewed and influential attempt to theorize power and how groups articulate resistance to domination. Drawing his examples widely from anthropology, history, literature and linguistics, Scott argues that powerless groups in society frequently do not openly express their opposition to the dominant: not because they are the dupes of hegemonic power, as some social theorists have argued, but, rather, because open resistance is practically impossible, for the dominant are often so powerful that the consequences of open resistance would be too severe to bear.

Scott explains that in such situations, there are four principal varieties of oppositional or resistant discourse open to subordinate groups (1990:18-19). These are, in increasing order of open conflict: (1) appeals to the public self-image of dominant groups, whereby subordinate groups attain rights and privileges by obsequiously appealing to the dominant group's own presentations of itself – the King as protector, the slaveowner as facilitator of Christian teaching, etc.; (2) an offstage counterdiscourse that members of the subordinate group can develop in private, but not articulate in interaction with members of the dominant groups; (3) purposely ambiguous practices of subversion such as rumour, innuendo, tropes and euphemisms that criticize the dominant order without appearing to do so; and (4) open conflictual interactions, where what Scott calls the normally veiled, 'hidden transcript' of the subordinate group ruptures normal decorum and extrudes into the public realm.

A key idea in Scott's book is that the 'hidden transcripts' of subordinate groups will articulate ideas and values that 'reverse and negate' (1990: 44) those which are generated by the dominant group and which structure normal social interaction between the two groups. So if what Scott calls the dominant, official 'public transcript' holds that slaves are morally, socially and mentally inferior to their owners, for example, then the hidden transcript will articulate the opposite, and will be animated by desires of social reversal – what Scott, drawing on the work of Christopher Hill and others, discusses as fantasies of a 'world upside down' (1990: 36-44, 156-182). In this theoretical model of resistance, then, the subordinate group's own language is 'contrapuntal': 'the repository of assertions whose open expression would be dangerous' (1990: 25, 40), and resistance is the repetition and enactment of those oppositional assertions either covertly, or, in rare instances, openly and defiantly.

The arguments about hegemony, power and the dynamics of resistance that Scott develops in *Domination and the arts of resistance* have been widely discussed by political scientists, sociologists and historians, and the ideas are gaining currency within an anthropology increasingly concerned with articulating people's ability and desire to resist hegemonic and often violent economic and cultural forces. Recently, however, the linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal (Gal 1995), in a

lengthy review essay, has severely criticized Scott, arguing, among other things, that his notion of a 'hidden transcript' is shallow, and that his understanding of the relationship between language and resistance wrongly assumes that linguistic forms such as euphemism, indirection and tropes are transparent, context-independent windows onto a resistant consciousness.

### Travestis

My goal here is to extend the critical examination of Scott's work begun by Susan Gal. In this paper, I will explore issues of domination, resistance and violence, but I will be doing so by analysing a type of opposition of the weak that differs from anything Scott considers in his book. The examples will be taken from my current work on transgendered prostitutes in the Brazilian city of Salvador. What I will demonstrate is that the transgendered prostitutes among whom I work resist dominant depictions of them and their lives, but not by countering those portrayals with alternative, oppositional, offstage-generated, 'hidden' ones of their own design. Instead, they oppose and resist hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality that degrade them by drawing on precisely those notions, and using them to their own advantage in their interactions with members of the dominant group (in this case: males who are perceived to be 'normal', heterosexual men). Not only is this a type of oppositional practice not anywhere considered by James Scott, but it also calls into question some of Scott's basic understandings of what 'hidden transcripts' are and how they are deployed.

My data for this discussion are drawn from my 8 month long linguistic anthropological work among Brazilian transgendered prostitutes living in the city of Salvador, capital of the northeastern state of Bahia.<sup>1</sup> Transgendered prostitutes, called *travestis* in Brazilian Portuguese, are males who, sometimes beginning at ages as young as 8, begin wearing cosmetics and androgynous clothing. By the time they are in their early teens, many of these males are already wearing feminine clothing, cosmetics and hairstyles, and they are already consuming or injecting large quantities of female hormones, which are easily and cheaply purchased over the counter at any pharmacy in Brazil. The hormones are intended to modify the males' bodies to look more feminine. By the time they reach their late teens, many travestis have, in addition to consuming female hormones, begun injecting industrial silicone into their bodies (industrial silicone is a kind of plastic used to make automobile dashboards). The purpose of the silicone injections is to augment buttocks, hips, thighs and sometimes breasts, so that these become abundantly feminine. The majority of travestis in my acquaintance have injected between 2-5 litres of industrial silicone into their bodies. One very well-known travesti in Salvador, however, had 12 litres. And one travesti who no longer lives in Salvador is said to have 18 litres.

Travestis exist in virtually all towns of any size throughout Brazil, and in the large cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, they number in the thousands.

1. This paper is based on eight months of anthropological fieldwork and archival research in the city of Salvador. Located in the state of Bahia in northeastern Brazil, Salvador is the third largest city in the country, with a population of over two million people. In September 1994, January–April 1995, and July–October 1995, I conducted fieldwork in Salvador, living with travestis and visiting them nightly at their various points of prostitution. In addition to socializing with them more or less continually, I also recorded and transcribed a total of about 18 hours of naturally occurring conversation between travestis and others, and I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews (fifteen of the interviews are with individual travestis, and one is with the *marido*, or husband, of a travesti). These interviews lasted between one and a half and ten hours. All in all, my transcribed corpus of travesti speech is about 50 hours. All tapes of naturally occurring speech and several of the interviews were transcribed by myself together with Keila Simpsom, my travesti colleague and teacher. The majority of the interviews were transcribed by Inês Alfano, a professional transcriptionist. The transcripts prepared by Inês Alfano were subsequently checked (by listening to the tapes and going through the transcripts) by Keila Simpsom and myself.

2. As I noted above, travestis adopt female address forms and linguistic pronouns, even though they do not self-identify as women. The logic behind these linguistic forms, and, indeed, behind any other dimension of travesti gendered self-identification, is extremely complex, and is analysed in detail in another paper. I use feminine pronouns and possessives when discussing travestis not only in deference to their own linguistic practices, but also because I believe that travestis' linguistic practices perceptively and incisively enunciate core messages that are generated by their culture's arrangements of sexuality, gender and biological sex. For a detailed discussion of all this, see Kulick n.d.

3. Several days after this article (which is a translation of the Portuguese original) appeared in the paper, I met Karine on the street at night and recorded an interview with her about the incident referred to here. Her version of events differs dramatically from the newspaper's. 'Look', she told me and several fellow-travestis who had gathered to listen, 'it's like

Most travestis in large cities work as prostitutes, and in Salvador, virtually all travestis work as street prostitutes. One important fact about travestis to have clear from the beginning is that unlike northern European and North American transsexuals, almost no travesti self-identifies as a woman. That is, though travestis habitually adopt female dress, hairstyles, cosmetics, names, address forms and linguistic pronouns, and though they irrevocably modify their bodies to attain stereotypically feminine forms, travestis do not consider themselves to be women, and the idea that they might be transsexuals – 'women trapped in men's bodies' – is vigorously rejected by virtually all of them. Another significant difference between transsexuals and travestis is that whereas the majority of North American and northern European transsexuals self-identify as heterosexual, all travestis self-identify as homosexual (*veado* or *bicha* in the vernacular).

### Targets of violence

As homosexuals and as transgendered street prostitutes, travestis find themselves obliged to reassert continually their rights to occupy urban space, and they lead their lives aware that they may, at any moment, suddenly become the target of verbal harassment and/or physical violence from anyone who feels provoked by their presence in that space. All this means that violence is an integral part of a travesti's daily existence. While working on the streets at night, travestis are continually harassed by policemen, and by passers-by in cars and busses. Much of this harassment takes the form of verbal abuse, but policemen also assault, rob and brutalize travestis; gangs of young men sometimes severely bash them; and people speeding by in cars often throw at them objects such as rocks and bottles. Sometimes they even shoot them.

Even when she<sup>2</sup> isn't working, a travesti walking down a city street will tend to attract attention, and she must be continually prepared to confront abusive remarks from men and women, or physical violence from males who feel themselves to be provoked by the presence of travestis in public space.

Violence against travestis is so widespread and common that it receives regular attention in the Brazilian press, but usually only when a travesti corpse is discovered (although many times even this will elicit no mention in local newspapers) or when there is a wave of murders, such as when the *Folha de São Paulo* ran a series of reports after 16 travestis in São Paulo had been shot in the head during the first three months of 1993. Also relatively common in Brazilian newspapers are reports about crimes committed by travestis. These reports uniformly portray them as vicious, armed, drug addicted, AIDS-spreading criminals who lure men into dangerous situations and then assault them, often disturbing the public peace and causing pandemonium in the process. The newspaper article below, which appeared in the largest daily newspaper in Salvador (*A Tarde*), in August 1995, is a kind of concentration of these themes. The only detail lacking in this article that frequently appears alongside texts about travestis is a line drawing depicting ridiculously masculine looking males in wigs pulling one another's hair or brandishing menacing knives at frightened men.

#### Travesti attacks young man with a razor in Pituba

During more than 15 minutes of total pandemonium, motorists stopped their cars to observe the actions of the bloody battle provoked by the travesti known as 'Karine', who frequents the Our Lady of the Light Square, in Pituba, to attract customers. The victim, who attempted to flee

from well-aimed blows of a razor, was Roberto Carlos de Conceição Santos, 26 years old, from São Gonçalo dos Campos.

The event occurred at about 10 p.m. on Tuesday. The Our Lady of the Light Square was bustling with the presence of numerous travestis and prostitutes, who every night until daybreak afflict this dignified area of the Pituba neighborhood, not even respecting the presence of the soldiers stationed at the Military Police post there. 'Karine', a lanky mulata, 1.80 metres tall, in high heels, probably drugged, was inviting men to take part in amorous encounters. Incredible as it may seem, despite the threat of AIDS and a series of other dangerous diseases, men continue to frequent this locale to seek out travestis.

#### Chase

'Karine's' insistence finally attracted Roberto Carlos, who had already been in the area for more than an hour watching the travestis [!]. The two approach one another, according to a witness, and hold a quick dialogue. After this, the two disappear for several minutes, and, when there were fewer people about, 'Karine' reappears, running after Roberto Carlos, armed with a razor. The young man attempts to flee, but receives a deep blow to his right shoulder, even cutting his shirt. Blood begins flowing quickly, and people begin to scream, attracting the attention of passers-by and motorists. Having already removed her high heels, 'Karine' continues chasing Roberto Carlos and strikes him again, this time in the back. The young man throws himself into the middle of the road, with his shirt soaked with blood, and 'Karine' keeps up her chase. A third deep cut is made on the right arm of Roberto, who is unable to continue fleeing.<sup>3</sup>

This article, like the vast majority of newspaper articles about travestis, appeared in the crime pages, which constitute a special section of every Brazilian newspaper. Generally speaking, whenever travestis do appear in the news, they are featured there as dangerous criminals, as in the article above, or as corpses (often photographed in lurid close-up).<sup>4</sup> An interesting linguistic difference between these two journalistic depictions of travestis is that whenever they are accused of committing violence, this is always clearly spelled out in headlines. So, for example, a headline will read 'Travesti attacks young man with razor at Pituba' [*Travesti ataca rapaz a navalhadas na Pituba*], as it does in the example above, or 'Reporter wounded by travesti' [*Repórter foi furtado por um travesti*], or 'Assassinated with a knife in a car by a travesti' [*Assassinado a faca no automóvel pelo travesti*]).

In stark contrast to this, reports of violence against travestis are often either without agents (so we get, for example, '16th travesti in 90 days murdered in São Paulo' [*Assassinado em São Paulo o 16º travesti em 90 dias*]; 'August begins with the taste of blood: First victim is travesti' [*Agosto começa com gosto de sangue: Primeira vítima é travesti*], and 'Three are killed at Ponto Negro' [*Três são mortos em Ponta Negra*]), or the agentive, subject position of the sentence is filled with an instrument – a knife, or a gun, or a blow – not a person. (For instance, 'Death in Pigalle: Brazilian assassinated with shots from a hunting rifle' [*Morte em Pigalle: Brasileiro assassinado com tiros de fuzil de caça*], or 'Floripedes, the travesti, murdered with blow' [*Floripedes, o travesti, assassinado a murro*]). Thus in the case of reports about violence committed by travestis, agency and responsibility are underscored and foregrounded. Reports about violence inflicted on travestis, in contrast, often elide the agency of those responsible for the violence, or displace it onto weapons, in ways that leave in the background the perpetrators of the crimes (cf. Henley et al. 1995).

In any case, my point here is that regardless of whether they are seen as perpetrators of violence or its victims, there is an extremely salient link in the

this. I was there on my corner working [*batalhando* literally “batling”], right? And he came up and asked for 5 reais [approx US\$5]. I said I don’t have 5 reais And he said “you don’t huh” and went away”. The man, whom Karine knew to be a petty criminal that had previously robbed other travestis and female prostitutes who worked in the area, returned later, accompanied by another man, and brandishing a club to which nails had been attached. He again demanded money, at which point Karine, feeling threatened, removed a small knife from her purse (“we have to defend ourselves, right?”) and stabbed him. Karine was appalled at the report in *A Tarde*. “They lied”, she explained. “It wasn’t a razor. And he wasn’t a client. He wasn’t somebody who came to me wanting to pay for sex. He was a street criminal (*um marginal de rua*)”. Karine was apprehended by the police after this incident, but released after she payed them a small bribe (*um acuezinho*).

Since I did not witness the incident described by Karine and *A Tarde*, I can only speculate as to which of these two highly divergent accounts might be closer to ‘the truth’. Based on everything I know about travestis, however, I find it extremely unlikely that a travesti would chase a client down the street and out into traffic just to stab him. As I document throughout this paper, travestis are not interested in injuring clients. They are only interested in robbing them, and there are a number of well developed ways of doing that none of which involve running after them down city streets and stabbing them. I also know that it is not at all uncommon for men to try to rob travestis and female prostitutes who work in Pituba. And in addition to all this, I know, too, that the newspaper *A Tarde* is infamous in Salvador for its regular, virulent attacks on gays and travestis. The newspaper’s profoundly homophobic attitude is evidenced fairly clearly by the tone in which the article about Karine is written. So my own educated guess, based on all this, is that Karine’s own version of this incident is the much more believable one, and that the piece in *A Tarde* is one of the many instances of journalistic reports about travestis where interest in promoting and reinforcing derogatory stereotypes overrides concern to provide accurate information.

4. It is important, however, to not give the impression that travestis only ever appear in the news in this way. There are other images of travestis that

Brazilian popular imagination between travestis and violence. To be a travesti, so the story goes, is to lead a violent life, live in a violent, criminal milieu, commit violence against others, and risk being the victim of violence oneself.

But what about the objects of this discourse? What do travestis themselves think about all this? What is their relationship to violent acts?

### Perpetrators of violence

I learned very quickly in my work with various travestis that violence is a continual topic of concern and conversation. Travestis in Salvador spend a great deal of time discussing brutal police acts against them, and they continually keep one another informed about the current state of the street in all four areas of the city where they work. A police sweep along the highway at Pituba (the suburb mentioned in the newspaper article quoted above) will have travestis hopping into taxis and heading for the other areas in which travesti prostitution occurs. Similarly, repeated violent acts by known criminals or by gangs of males in Barra (another area where travestis work) will send the travestis who work there to Ajuda, or Pituba, or Aflitos for the rest of the evening, and maybe for several nights after that, until things return to normal. Whenever one travesti asks another how the street in a particular area of the city is (*Como tá a rua?*), she is asking both whether there is sufficient *movimento* (traffic) there to make money, and whether there is a risk of violence at the hands of police and others.

In addition to concerns about their personal safety, however, travestis also talk a great deal about the violence that they inflict on the clients who buy their sexual services. The overwhelming majority of travestis in Salvador habitually rob their clients (and only their clients, despite widespread beliefs that travestis assault anyone they set eyes on). Indeed, even though I was initially drawn to travestis because I did not understand *them* (i.e. I did not understand why they modified their bodies or how they constructed their identities as gendered persons), the people I gradually came to see as somehow even more puzzling than travestis were the clients, who returned time and again to travestis, despite the fact that they could virtually count on being pickpocketed, assaulted or coerced into giving the travesti all the money they carried (and frequently their watches and other valuables as well).

Men who pay travestis for sex are males of all ages, races and social classes. I spent virtually every night during my eight month fieldwork in the company of travestis working in different parts of Salvador, and taking note of the men who pulled up in their cars or who went with travestis off into dark alleys or cheap hotel rooms, I was unable to discern any one type of man who could be considered the ‘average’ client. The only thing that the overwhelming majority of clients seem to have in common, all travestis are agreed, is that they self-identify as heterosexual and maintain relationships with women. Beyond that, they range from about 13 to about 60 years old (the majority being between about 17-45 years old), they are white, black and everything in between, and they can be extremely poor or extremely wealthy and everything in between.<sup>5</sup> Different parts of Salvador attract different clients: so the highway running through the middle class suburb of Pituba attracts more middle-class men in cars than do the narrow streets and alleys in the centre of the city, where clients tend to be poorer and on foot. Travestis in Salvador are very familiar with the sexual and economic

topography of their city, and they work different parts of the city depending partly on how far from their rooms they feel like travelling and partly on how much money they need or want to make in a night.

### Pickpocketing

Regardless of who they are and where they encounter them, travestis rob their clients. This happens in one of several ways. The most common way is by pickpocketing them. Pickpocketing (known variously in travesti slang as *azuelar*, *dar a Elza*, *dar uma churria*, *beijar*, which literally means ‘kiss’, or *dar uma dedadinha*, ‘insert a little finger’) can occur with truly magical speed as a travesti stands massaging a potential client’s penis while negotiating a sexual encounter on the street: I have seen one particularly skilful travesti remove a potential client’s wallet, count the money, take most of it, replace a tiny amount of money plus the man’s identity card, and put the wallet back in his pocket in matter of seconds, all the while she was keeping him distracted by squeezing his penis with one hand (while she slipped his wallet out of his back pocket) and turning her back to him to rub her bottom against his crotch (in order to examine the contents of the wallet).

Pickpocketing also commonly occurs while a travesti performs oral sex on a client in the client’s car. Here the trick is to get the client to lower his trousers so that they are on the floor, and for the travesti to position herself across the client’s lap in such a way that her body, and especially her hair, which she will repeatedly fluff up and toss in the direction of the client’s face – this is known as *jogar o cabelo* – will obscure the client’s view of what the travesti is doing with her hands while her mouth is busy performing other services. Similar pickpocketing occurs during other forms of sex, in hotel rooms, in the travesti’s own room, or on the beach at night. Generally speaking, anywhere a client lowers his trousers or removes his clothing (travestis know that many men keep their money in their shoes, so those are often removed and examined at some point during a sexual encounter) is a situation in which a travesti will attempt to extract money.

### Assault

A second form of robbery against clients is direct assault (also *azuelar*, or *grudar*, *pegar*). This occurs if the travesti judges that the client is *mole*, soft. Usually the travesti has also determined that her client doesn’t have a weapon, or, alternatively, she has already located a weapon in the client’s car or clothing, and she has taken it herself. When the travesti is reasonably sure that she can overpower her client, she will grab his shirt at the neck and press him up against a wall or his car door, demanding money. This inevitably occurs at the conclusion of the sexual encounter, most commonly right after the client has paid the price that he and the travesti had agreed upon before the encounter. As one travesti explained to me when we were talking about assaulting clients: ‘If a man opens his wallet for me, Don, and pays me 50 [*reais* – approximately US\$50], and he has more than that [in the wallet], he’s gonna give me it all’ (*Se o homem abrir a carteira pra mim Don e me pagar cinquenta, e ele tiver mas do que euquele, ele vai me dar tudo*).

In assaulting their clients, travestis sometimes employ knives or razors or small nail-scissors, and one of my closest travesti friends sometimes uses a syringe that she fills with tomato extract and presses against the necks of clients, telling them that the red fluid inside is HIV-infected blood. No travesti in Salvador uses guns

circulate in Brazil, namely those that depict travestis as glamorous and mysterious objects of desire. Images underscoring the desirability of travestis reach a kind of frenzy every year during the famous Carnival celebrations that take place throughout the country in late February or early March. They are also present whenever famous travestis such as Roberta Close, Valéria, Thelma Lipp, or Jane di Castro are portrayed in the media. Indeed, the fact that travestis are depicted as both despicable and desirable throughout Brazil is another example of the pungent combination of patriarchal repression and steamy sensuality that so typifies the nation (and that so occupies everyone trying to 'understand' Brazil).

In this paper, however, I want to cut through the romantic images of travestis and emphatically foreground the fact that those travestis who work on the street as prostitutes are the victims of continual and brutal violence. I stress violence in this way both to reflect the experiences of my travesti friends in Salvador, and also because I am aware that many Brazilians, particularly in conversations with non-Brazilians, tend to play down the violence and play up the romance when they talk about travestis, in order to argue that Brazil is an unusually tolerant society. My point is that as far as the day-to-day lives of travestis throughout Brazil are concerned, there is very little tolerance at all. Only unending harassment, abuse, and violence.

5. I have been unable to interview, or even have a conversation with, any clients of travestis. The main reason for the complete inaccessibility of clients is that public revelation of the fact that one has had sex with a travesti is, for an overwhelming majority of men, shameful and embarrassing in the extreme: indeed, this shamefulness is precisely what *escândalos* depend on for their effectiveness. My travesti co-worker Keila Simpsom is fond of saying that if a survey were taken of all Brazilian men, it would conclude that not a single one of them has ever had sex with a travesti, since no one would ever admit to doing so.

Gal, Susan, 1995. Language and the 'arts of resistance'. *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (3): 407-424.

Henley, Nancy M., Michelle Miller, and Jo Anne Beazely, 1995. Syntax, semantics, and sexual violence: agency and the passive voice. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 14 (1-2):60-84.

to assault clients, largely because they know that armed assaults are regarded by police and the courts as much graver than assaults with other weapons, and if they are caught in the possession of a firearm, the consequences for themselves would be serious indeed.

Travestis frequently cooperate with one another in assaulting clients, in a system known as *fazer a portinha* (lit. 'do the car door'). This occurs when a client, after sex, drives a travesti back to the place where he picked her up (all travestis insist on this). As he stops the car for her to get out, the travesti will yank the key from the ignition and make her demands. At this point, one or more other travestis will come to their colleague's assistance and position themselves in front of the door on the driver's side, thereby blocking the driver's exit, and adding a further degree of menace to the situation. If the driver gives the travesti more money, his key will be returned and he will be allowed to drive away. If he resists, he will be openly struggled with and robbed.

### Giving a scandal

The third means of extracting more money from a client is the one that most interests me in this article, because of the challenge it represents to James Scott's understandings of power and resistance. This third means of extracting money from a client is one that travestis refer to as *fazer um rebucetê*, or as *dar um escândalo* – give a scandal. A scandal consists of a travesti publicly attempting to shame a client into compliance with her demands for more money. Scandals will be given if pickpocketing has been unsuccessful, if direct assault is for some reason impossible, if the client has discovered that the travesti has robbed or attempted to rob him and becomes aggressive, or if the client has no more money or valuables than have already been given to (or taken by) the travesti, but has been discovered to have an automatic teller bank-card or a chequebook (travestis will accompany clients to bank teller machines and wait for them to withdraw money. They also accept cheques for their services). In each of these cases, a travesti may decide to give a scandal.

A scandal consists of loud, abusive cries at the client that he is a *mariconsa safada* or *mariconsa desgraçada* (a 'disgusting faggot' or 'disgraceful faggot') who has engaged the services of a travesti and who, afterwards, is refusing to pay the agreed upon price. The key lexical item here, one that features prominently in all scandals, is *mariconsa*; a word that contains the culturally weighty assertion that the referent is a homosexual who enjoys being anally penetrated. Regardless of whether or not the client was in fact penetrated during sex with the travesti, the travesti will announce that she has 'eaten [penetrated] the ass' (*comi o cu*) of the client, and she will expand and embellish that announcement with details of how the client 'sucked [her] dick' (*chupou meu pau*), and how he wanted to be called by female names during sex. Extended scandals frequently also involve the travesti removing or threatening to remove all her clothing as she stands half-inside or beside the client's car (if a travesti has left the client's car to give a scandal, she will have also taken the car key or the client's identity card with her) or just outside the hotel room where she has had sex with the client.

The threatened or actual disrobings, and the language that foregrounds penetration, and oral sex performed by the client, are all craftily designed to draw public sharp attention to a very particular feature of the travesti's anatomy: her penis. Now in their day-to-day lives, travestis employ a number of practices (such as pulling

the penis between the legs and wearing tight underpants to keep it in place there) to conceal their penis, even from their live-in boyfriends (Kulick n.d.). In scandals, however, the penis is removed from concealment and vigorously brought forth, both linguistically and, sometimes, physically as well. The reason for this revelation, of course, is to draw public attention to the fact that a male has had sex with another male. Travestis give scandals on the assumption that a client will be so mortified at the thought of being publicly revealed to have had sex with a male that he will hurriedly comply with the demands for more money just to get away and avoid an even bigger scandal that could have serious repercussions for his private and professional life. Nine times out of ten, travestis are correct in their assumptions, and the client being publicly shamed quite quickly acquiesces by giving the travesti his watch, or by writing her a cheque or by suddenly discovering more money hidden somewhere in his car.

What is important to perceive here is the cultural background against which travesti assumptions about scandals exist. The reason why scandals have coercive power – the reason why they make pragmatic sense and why they work – is because it is considered to be profoundly disgraceful in Brazil for a male to perform oral sex on another male, or, even worse, for a male to be anally penetrated by another male.

One of the main reasons for this disgrace is because sexuality and gender are configured in such a way in Brazil that to perform these acts means that one is no longer a man. As anthropological studies of gender in Latin American and Mediterranean countries have abundantly demonstrated, males in those countries who allow another male's penis to enter their own body, either orally or anally, become symbolically resignified and regendered. They are no longer 'real' men – they become feminized men, homosexuals. And in that capacity, they often become the targets of all the many violent practices that have been developed in those countries to stigmatize and harass males who fail to maintain appropriate gendered behaviour.

In publicly calling a client a *mariconsa* during a scandal, therefore, a travesti accomplishes four significant discursive significations. First, she publicly engenders herself as a person in possession of a penis – that is, as a male. Second, she therefore announces that the ostensibly heterosexual client who has paid her for sex is, in fact, *homosexual*. Third, because sexuality and gender are configured in such a way in Brazil that to be a *mariconsa* is to no longer be a man, a travesti's words during a scandal simultaneously engender the client: he stops being a man and becomes reconfigured as feminine. But fourth, because the person who has penetrated him (i.e. the travesti) is an effeminate homosexual herself, scandals proclaim that the client is just as homosexual and even more feminine than a travesti. The pragmatic punch packed by a scandal is, thus, potent indeed.

### Scandals and resistance theory

The key thing to note here is that when travestis reconfigure their ostensibly heterosexual male clients as feminized homosexuals in this way, and use the label *mariconsa* to abuse and shame them, they are purposefully drawing on precisely the same attitudes and invoking precisely the same kinds of language that are continually drawn on and invoked by others to repress *them* as homosexuals and as transgendered individuals, and that motivate the violence directed against *them* by policemen, passers-by in cars, and gangs of young men.

Kulick, Don, n.d.  
Penetrating gender:  
Brazilian transgendered  
prostitutes and their  
relevance for an  
understanding of  
sexuality and gender in  
Latin America. Under  
review at *American  
Anthropologist*.

Scott, James C., 1990.  
*Domination and the arts  
of resistance: hidden  
transcripts*. New Haven  
and London: Yale U. P.

Such a discursive strategy is extremely difficult to account for in terms of the theory of resistance that James Scott attempts to work out in the book with which I began this paper. Travesti *escândalos* fit nowhere into Scott's typology of how subjugated groups resist those who dominate them. Referring back to the first three varieties of oppositional discourse that Scott discusses in his typology, and that are listed at the beginning of this paper, it is clear that there is nothing obsequious, veiled or ambiguous about scandals. Quite the opposite. And even though scandals could be considered to be an example of Scott's fourth type of resistant discourse – discourse that is openly confrontational – they differ significantly from what Scott has in mind here, because they do not give voice to some otherwise 'hidden transcript' which opposes or challenges the public attitudes that result in travestis and other homosexuals being routinely discriminated against, assaulted and murdered. On the contrary, in these scandals, travestis enunciate and employ exactly those attitudes in order to coerce their clients into acceding to their demands for more money.

Instead of offering up some oppositional, inverted view of social order, what travestis who have scandals are doing is expanding the sphere of their own subordinate, abject status so that it moves to envelop individual members of the group who uphold the structures that keep travestis and other homosexuals marginalized and dominated. Scandals *abjectify* members of the dominant group. They appropriate the language of the dominant and use it to draw the dominant into the despised realm of the dominated. They resist by turning the dominant language against members of the dominant group: asserting that the dominant are secretly just as sexually perverse and transgendered as those whom the dominant employ violent discursive and practical arsenals to oppress.

There is a dynamic at work in travesti scandals that Scott does not consider in his work. Indeed, given Scott's insistence that subordinate groups resist the representations generated by the powerful, one kind of subordinated group whose existence cannot be broached in his framework is the subordinated group that has great investment in maintaining the structures which keep it subordinated. And given Scott's under-

standing of resistant discourse as a 'hidden transcript' that articulates inverse, oppositional values, one kind of resistant discourse whose dynamics cannot be explained is the invocation of the public transcript by members of repressed groups to resignify the strong and draw them into the realm of the weak.

One of the criticisms most frequently levelled at attempts to understand resistance is that they tend to romanticize their object of study. Although James Scott is a sophisticated scholar who is obviously aware of this danger, in the end I must agree with Susan Gal (1995:420) that his understanding of resistance is heavily sugar-coated. The examples that Scott examines are, without exception, examples of resistance by groups whose interests resonate deeply with traditional liberal ideals of equality, freedom and justice for all. It is surely satisfying and certainly it is politically fortifying to be able to uncover hidden resistance in the everyday practices of slaves, peasants, workers, 'untouchables' and colonial subjects. But by concentrating only on such groups, Scott loads his dice. By choosing not to examine the resistance offered by oppressed groups whose goals may not always fit snugly with North American liberal political agendas, he not only ignores an entire spectrum of empirical data; he also fatally cripples any attempt to articulate a general theory of resistance.

The type of resistance I have described in this paper repels liberal attempts to understand it. One would be hard pressed to see anything particularly lofty in it. It does not strive for a 'world upside down', a society in which oppression will vanish and equality will reign. On the contrary, it depends for its effectiveness on structures and attitudes that maintain oppression and affirm inequality. It actively reproduces the structures that subordinate those who employ it. It is not pretty. But it is resistance nonetheless. It is a set of practices employed by a violently oppressed group of people to survive and maybe even prosper in a society that despises them and regularly hurts and kills them. What it offers us, in its raw, shameless and utterly non-progressive way, is a challenge to our current theories, and an acrid corrective to any perspective on resistance that imagines it to be necessarily noble. □

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# Imposing politics

## *Failed attempts at creating a museum of 'co-existence' in Jerusalem*

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In this article we analyse the issues and contentions that were involved in planning the renewal programme of the Tourjeman Post Museum in present-day Jerusalem. For over a decade, Beit Tourjeman (as it is known in Hebrew) existed as a museum devoted to Israeli heroism. The renewal programme – influenced by the euphoria that followed the peace process of the early 1990s – centred on an attempt to establish a museum of co-existence in the city. We define a 'museum of co-existence' as an establishment where the narratives of two or more groups marked by confrontations are set out side by side. Given that the Israeli directors wanted to set up a museum depicting a 'contemporary history of Jerusalem', the central story of the museum could not avoid the ongoing reality of the city. Because the focus of the museum was to deal with the meeting

point between the city's Palestinian and Jewish parts, this narrative could not escape these relations' confrontational character.

The museum's situation should be understood against the background of the manifold divisions between Arabs and Jews that characterize the city. These two national groups tend to be spatially divided, separated in terms of educational institutions, and belong to different niches of the employment structure. In Romann and Weingrod's (1991) very apt formulation, these groups 'live together separately': they inhabit the same city, but are actually estranged and detached from each other. Thus the renewal attempt by the Israelis within a political context marked by deep conflict led to failure: although the attempts lasted for over a year, none of the suggestions for creating a museum of co-existence were