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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**

"Goldstein returns anthropology to what it does best while taking the reader on a no-holds-barred ride through the tragicomic world of a Rio favela. She captures the bittersweet laughter of Brazil's vast subterranean underclass of domestic servants who keep their anger and despair at bay by laughing and spitting into the face of chaos, injustice, and premature death."

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laughing and spitting into the face of chaos, injustice, and premature death. In this affecting and deft 'comedy of manners,' Goldstein emerges as urban anthropology's new Jane Austen."<sup>15</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes, author of *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*"Goldstein takes us right to where anthropology should be: into the blood, sweat, tears of shantytown life. *Laughter Out of Place* tells the story of a Brazilian family on the edge of survival where women and children struggle, not just to stay alive, but also for joy in the face of poverty, men, and mutual betrayal."<sup>16</sup> Philippe Bourgois, author of *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*"A stunning ethnographic achievement that should become an urban anthropological classic. Goldstein brings us close to women who under extraordinary circumstances of poverty use humor to reveal the penetrating truth of their relationship to structures of power and the ironies of their raced, classed, and gendered lives. Superb and engaging ethnographic analysis is framed by sophisticated social theory and a comprehensive treatment of the literature on contemporary Brazilian society."<sup>17</sup> Judith Goode, co-editor of *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics and Impoverished People in the United States*

I purchased this book for an ethnographic presentation for my cultural anthropology class. Goldstein takes you through a journey into the shanty towns of Rio and paints a clear picture of the distinct anthropological themes of race, class, sex, gender, poverty, really driving home the essentials for any analysis while keeping the people real for the reader. Striking that balance really makes this book and essential for anyone wishing to learn more about poverty within an industrialized society and giving the reader a lesson in humanity. Great read.

I ordered this for a friend. He has found it to meet his needs. parts were more interesting than others.

Goldstein is a cultural anthropologist and unfortunately writes like one. While I realize that this is an ethnography, it is also a powerful story that should be read by everyone with a sense of social justice and humanity, not just other anthropologists. In some places in the book, she does an adequate job of describing and, in part, evaluating the problems and hardships experienced by the working poor in Brazil. But in others, she is overly analytical, digressing from the storyline in an effort to deconstruct certain aspects of the situation ad nauseum. It would have been better if she had written one version for the anthropological community and had a professional journalist ghost one for public consumption.

great

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. This choice might seem odd at the first glance but at the end of the book it is clear that the framework of humor as a survivalist strategy and also as a place of disjunction between aesthetics of the poor and aesthetics of the middle and upper classes brings all aspects of Goldstein's work together. This book is also written with a clarity of thought that I believe will draw both academic and non-academic audiences.

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. Does the use of themes artificially differentiate the life in the favela from our own, or other social conditions where poverty subjugates its population? Are we getting a picture of what life is like there, or rather of what particularizes life in the favela from our existences? Admittedly though the book is seductive in drawing the reader into the discussion. And issues touched upon in the book can be applied to many other geographies. Donna does not try to ingratiate herself in pure relativism, as she says, she is often shocked by the ironic attitudes of the people who seem to accept their fate much more humorously than Donna imagined prior to her experience in Felicidade. She takes issue with some theorists, including Foucault, presenting and then unraveling their theoretical positioning. She also disparages the study of elites, or "cosmopolitan intellectuals, or transnational social movements" as a form of "ethnographic refusal," and a condition "that would fail to provide density to our representations, sanitize politics," or produce "thin version of culture with a set of dissolving actors" (43). Donna does not hold back. In her review of Donna Goldstein's book, Nancy Shepar-Hughes mentions that Golstein's book will not come without controversy because it may be painted in a "culture-of-poverty" conceptual framework. But I don't see that happening in this case because Goldstein concentrates on the conditions of life and the subsequent actions of people mired in a difficult situation and in the fragile structure of the favela. Donna is also quick to point out that she herself does not understand - at all times - the social structures in place. For example, out of generosity Donna sets aside some money for Soneca to attend a computer institute. The idea does not succeed and Gloria, the main informant of the book, is annoyed by the waste of valuable resources. Donna also employs modern electronic resources to make her point, and bring the reader directly into current attitudes and stereotyping concerning "Brazilian Mulatas." She enters a search engine with those exact two words and finds dozens of porn sites exemplifying popular viewpoints

related to sexuality in Brazil. She points out many of the inconsistencies and ironic attitudes present in the favelas regarding sexuality and race. Gloria, for instance, views the white coroa taking on a dark skinned lover as evidence for a "reluctance of Afro-Brazilian women to interpret certain kinds of interactions as racist" (124). While all of the discussion in *Laughter Out of Place* is interesting, for me the discussions on violence and gangs are/were most relevant in a changing second and third world. One can imagine the "trajectory into criminality by young men as a form of local knowledge (and as a vehicle for advancement)..." (203). Indeed, after the descriptions given of the lifestyle, poverty, abuse, and of course humor that saturate the favela, one can clearly see the seductive link of falling into gang violence and criminality. Donna also clearly demonstrates the functionality of bandit existence, quoting and borrowing from Hobsbawm the reasoning behind the formation of "primitive rebels:" "Social banditry becomes a form of self-help in the context of economic crises and social tension" (209). In Donna's short but cogent conclusion she does not try to offer monumental solutions to the problems she sees, but nevertheless her astute observations and solutions provided are idealistic and perhaps unrealistic. She points to endemic problems in the favela such as the "differential application of the rule of law," and the need to "reform policing forces" bringing an end to corruption and abuse" (273). She points out that in order for drug traffickers and gangs to be removed from the favela, "'good faith' social services need to be put in place to treat the everyday private injustices that are currently being handled by such organizations" (274). Like so many impoverished societies, an infrastructure or support girdle of municipal services needs to be put in place (or reformed) to aid all segments of the society of Rio. This remains a common need for societies battling poverty. Great ethnography and seductive reading examining a micro-world of global inequality. Carlos Torres, Ph.D. student

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