Paradoxes of Intimacy: Play and the Ethics of Invisibility in North-east Brazil

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Abstract. In this article I examine ordinary ethical practices that underpin intimate relations in the Brazilian state of Maranhão. I focus ethnographically on jealousy and seduction as complementary forms of play, which simultaneously affirm and challenge such aspects of emotional relatedness as trust and love. I argue that since a measure of concealment is inherent in both these play-forms, they render invisible those actions that challenge conventional moral injunctions, such as sexual infidelity. I consequently offer an ethnographic theory of 'invisibility' by which opacity, uncertainty and paradox become intrinsic to the emergence of intimate relations as ethical practices in their own right.

Keywords: play, paradox, Maranhão/Brazil, relatedness, invisibility, ordinary-ethics, intimacy

Introduction

We left the village at night and arrived at dawn. We went directly to the police station and the judge asked me, 'Which one do you want to marry?' I said, 'This one, Dolores.' She was younger than the other, Isabel, but when they registered Isabel the next day they wrote 16, because being younger meant she had priority in marrying me. Her *padrinho* (godfather) was dealing with politics, so if I hadn't married her, there would have been one hell of a law suit.

Seu Reginaldo's 'forced wedding' [*sic*] took place in the Brazilian state of Maranhão in 1952 following a small-scale scandal. While Seu Reginaldo impregnated Dolores, a teenage girl from his native village of Guanabara, he also impregnated Isabel, a girl from a nearby village. As the story goes, at first Seu Reginaldo refused to marry Isabel and was imprisoned for one

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night. That persuaded him to sign the documents the next day. On completing this formality Seu Reginaldo nonetheless returned to Guanabara and Isabel went home with her parents. Seu Reginaldo then lived with Dolores but left her a while later when he discovered she was frequently 'betraying' [*sic*] him. He later engaged in yet another consensual union with Dona Roseana, who throughout the years had given birth to their ten children.[1]

I chose to begin with this vignette because it elucidates a profound ethical dilemma that still underscores the dynamics of kinship relations in contemporary north-east Brazil. On the one hand, research interlocutors regularly emphasise the indispensability of complaisance, respect and deference in the maintenance of abiding social hierarchies, which they frame as meaningfully intimate in and of themselves. On the other hand, and at the same time, both men and women consider the expression of desire, rage, longing and other emotive dispositions as the provenance of autonomous agency. Here, events associated with the drift of affective dispositions often entail truthful immersion in others' lives, which may contradict or transgress structured moral inhibitions (against infidelity, for example).[2] This dilemma can be summarised as the often paradoxical discrepancy between discursive representations of ethical personhood and their constant aberrations in mundane practice.[3] In what follows I explore mundane manifestations of jealousy and seduction in north-east Brazil in light of this paradox of intimacy. Building on ethnographic material from fieldwork in the Brazilian state of Maranhão, I will characterise these performances as complementary forms of play that always include a measure of concealment. Both jealousy and seduction thus render 'invisible' those actions that challenge conventional moral injunctions. I argue that the ordinary production of such invisibility is a regular quality of mundane ethical judgements that foreground intimate reciprocity. Opacity, uncertainty and paradox consequently become intrinsic to the dynamic of intimate relations in contemporary Maranhão and for that reason they may be considered as ethical practices in their own right.

[1] I interviewed Seu Reginaldo in 2010. Although the Brazilian law obliging men to 'assume responsibility' over loss of virginity or the impregnating of under-age girls was annulled in 1940, my data suggests that it was enforced in remote regions of Maranhão at least until the 1960s. See also Octavio da Costa Eduardo, *The Negro in Northern Brazil: A Study in Acculturation* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1966[1948]), pp. 34–5; and Sueann Caulfield, *Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early–twentieth Century Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

[2] See Linda-Anne Rebhun, *The Heart Is Unknown Country: Love in the Changing Economy of Northeast Brazil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), Introduction.

[3] This tension between discourse and practice is prevalent beyond the Brazilian context in other Latin American and Caribbean low-income realities. See for example Peter J. Wilson, *Crab Antics: A Caribbean Case Study of the Conflict Between Reputation and Respectability* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1995) and Amalia L. Cabezas, *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009).

I will unpack this argument in three meta-analytic steps. First, I will outline the paradoxes of intimacy in Maranhão in their full ethnographic manifestation. I will show how kinship relations in low-income contexts tend to take a rhizomic rather than a linear trajectory, which some of my research interlocutors describe as the coming into being of a cluster of intimate 'aggregations'. I will then explicate how persons manifest seduction and jealousy, and how these performances acquire ethical dimensions. The second step follows on from these ethnographic descriptions. Here I examine the relations between play and paradox in the generation of mundane sociality and show how my research interlocutors in Maranhão establish their own 'invisibility' as they simultaneously attempt to occupy mutually-exclusive social positions. This is evident in the case of extra-marital relations (e.g. being at once a wife and a lover) but also in the complex interconnectedness of amity alliances that at times dictate conflicting obligations towards kin and kindred. Through a detailed case-study I will exemplify the potential for social entropy when sudden visibility exposes repeated transgressions. The last analytic step will point out the wider methodological implications of 'invisibility' for the cross-cultural analysis of kinship and relatedness in Latin America and beyond.

Social Aggregations and the Dynamics of Kinship Relations in Maranhão

Intimacy and plural forms of relatedness in Maranhão

The state of Maranhão is located at the geopolitical division between North-east and North Brazil, bordering from East to West the states of Piauí, Tocantins and Pará. In 2007–8 I conducted a six months' ethnographic study on gender and kinship relations in the state capital São Luís, living in a low-income neighbourhood I call Santo Amaro. In 2009–10 I conducted a further 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the same neighbourhood, and a comparative study in a remote village located about 450 kilometres into the hinterland, which I call Guanabara. I sought to document the local ethical codes that underpin close relations in all their mundane manifestations.[4]

During my studies in both these contexts, I lived with four families for different periods of time and intermittently in a rented flat on my own. I participated in and observed the daily practices taking place in these houses and habitually hung out with wider circuits of friends and neighbours at local *praças* (squares), street bars and dance parties, as well as in private and

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[4] In 2010 Maranhão registered 6,569,683 inhabitants of whom about 37 per cent defined as 'rural population' and 15 per cent lived in São Luís. Here I mainly draw on material collected in Santo Amaro but the notions of play and concealment on which I elaborate below apply also to Guanabara. This is because a single theme of sociality, moral conduct and types of affective linkages characterise both these locations so that notions of ethical personhood ultimately encompass the rural-urban divide.

public events. I compared routine everyday arrangements of conviviality as they were articulated in domestic divisions of labour, the mundane enactments of gender performances, the education of children in the house, forms of play among both children and adults, and forms of exchange between kin and kindred. My research interlocutors included a variety of men and women across three (and in some cases four) generations, who self-identified as black (*negra/o*), white (*branca/o*) or 'dark-skinned' (*morena/o*).[5] Those living in Guanabara can be characterised sociologically as low-income peasants, while in Santo Amaro I interacted with a diversity of local residents working in different low-income professions.

A striking diversity of coexistent forms of relatedness and co-residence characterises both these social contexts.[6] In 2010, out of 1,885,000 registered 'familial arrangements' living in 1,701,000 permanent domestic units (*domicílios particulares permanentes*), 91.3 per cent reported a certain combination of kinship ties and only 0.2 per cent of the arrangements reported no kinship relations at all (e.g. student house-share).[7] Nineteen point eight per cent of all familial arrangements in 2010 were of the type 'women *with* children, living *without* a partner' and in 2008 the reported 'person of reference' for 20.4 per cent of the households in Maranhão was a woman. In fact, in 2006, 27.9 per cent of registered births were by women within the age group 15–19, and this was the highest figure in Brazil for that age group at the time. Students of Brazilian society tend to describe this multiplicity of co-residential arrangements as inherent to a dominant patriarchal moral order, which is thought to prevail on the Brazilian socio-economic margins. Under these terms domestic impoverishment and gender inequality shape almost every aspect of low-income sociality to marginalise poor women.[8] This prism nonetheless overlooks heuristic discourses that in Maranhão link the composition of houses

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[5] See Rita L. Segato, 'The Colour-Blind Subject of Myth: Or, Where to Find Africa in the Nation', *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 27 (1998), pp. 129–51; and more recently John Collins, 'Melted Gold and National Bodies: The Hermeneutics of Depth and the Value of History in Brazilian Racial Politics', *American Ethnologist*, 38: 4 (2011), pp. 683–700. For further reading on race and colour mixture in Latin America see Peter Wade, 'Rethinking Mestizaje: Ideology and Lived Experience', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37 (2005), pp. 239–57.

[6] The data presented here are taken from the IBGE, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics), available at http://censo2010. ibge.gov.br/.

[7] The term 'familial arrangements' (*arranjos familiares*) includes any grassroots definition of 'families' in the Brazil. This means that 'kinship links' technically include both contractual and consanguine relations that cut across domestic units (*domicílios particulares*); while 'families' are essentially isomorphic with co-residence. Socio-economic indices are measured in accordance with the differential composition of households.

[8] See for example Donna M. Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). For a historical perspective see Susan K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

with emotive acts of transfer that 'attach' (*agregar*) persons to one another and interconnect them in distinguishable ways. As Gabriela from Santo Amro once told me:

The word you should have in mind is 'aggregate' [agregar]. The notion of family here is a notion of aggregates. For example, look at the scheme of houses here in São Luís: you have a house, and then they add an extra room at the back, and another toilet, and another room. That is the way people are aggregated too… [this is so because] *Brasileiro* is very emotive: if someone shows you some affection [*carinho*], you immediately begin to frequent their house or you arrange a job nearby. These relations are like a web that never closes on itself.

Gabriela suggests that a sense of intimate bonding regularly expands in ways that build upon the emotive style of local kinship idioms. For example, my friend Oswaldo from Santo Amaro moved out of his parents' house to live with close family friends, whom he knew since he was a child, when he was only 12 years old. Oswaldo told me he chose this because he felt 'attached' to that other family. His parents approved his decision so that effectively Oswaldo was raised in two houses, visiting his biological and adoptive families intermittently. Today in his thirties, Oswaldo uses kin terminology to refer to both his birth and adoptive parents and siblings.[9] Or, my friend Chico from Guanabara once told me that he 'considers' Seu Sansão's sons as his cousins (*primos*) although they are not 'blood' related. Chico's analogy is framed upon the ritual kinship ties existing between Chico's father Seu Joaquim and Seu Sansão, who are co-fathers (*compadres*).[10] In both these cases, forms of association that aggregate persons into distinguishable networks of relatedness include transactions of money, food and favours, which flow vertically (across familial hierarchies) as well as horizontally (among peers) in the literal proliferation of meaningfully intimate social relations.

Gabriela's emphasis on affective exchange as the primary vector for meaningful relatedness coincides with much of the existing literature on kinship on the Brazilian socio-economic margins. In this context, similar modes of care

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[9] See Claudia Fonseca, 'Philanderers, Cuckolds, and Wily Women: Reexamining Gender Relations in a Brazilian Working-Class Neighborhood', in Matthew C. Gutmann (ed.), *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2003a), pp. 61–83; and Emily Walmsley, 'Raised by Another Mother: Informal Fostering and Kinship Ambiguities in Northwest Ecuador', *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 13: 1 (2008), pp. 168–95.

[10] In 1984, when the last but one of Seu Joaquim's ten children was born, he asked Seu Sansão to become her *padrinho* (godfather). He thus formalised their long-term friendship. For further reading on *consideração* as a vector of intimate relations see Louis Herns Marcelin, 'A linguagem da casa entre os negros no reconcavo baiano', *Mana: Estudos de Antropologia Social*, 2 (1999), pp. 31–60. Marcelin portrays a continuum between 'blood' and 'consideration' (*consideração*) across three concentric circles. The closer to the innermost circle a person is located (i.e. conviviality), the more he/she is 'considered' family. The further towards the external circle, 'blood' is used as a vector of relatedness.

underscore a wide range of structurally dissimilar sociological relations, which persons locally frame as meaningfully intimate.[11] This includes such categorical attachments as co-father/motherhood (compadre/comadres), 'co-nurture' brothers/sisters (*irmão/irmã de criação*) and 'child by nurture' (*filho de criação*). I call these structured relations 'intimate' because they typically involve high levels of trust and long-term affective investments.[12] I here follow Viviana Zelizer, who defines intimate relations as 'dynamic emotional entanglements that exhibit a high degree of mutual informal exposure, which enables at least one party access to information otherwise not publicly available to others'.[13] For Zelizer, such relations acquire moral legitimacy through financial or otherwise material arrangements that bind persons in different legal contracts. A sense of intimacy in various types of social relations then becomes compelling both on grounds of formal moral restriction (e.g. the demand to comply with familial responsibilities anchored in financial obligations) *and* the spontaneous recognition of ethical subjectivity and individual freedom (e.g. joking relations).

I consequently understand the aggregation of families in Maranhão as a multiplicity of coexisting intimate entanglements, which grow from fleeting affective events.[14] Persons must administer this emergent interconnectedness, which cuts across elaborate networks of relatedness in ways that at times demand mutually-exclusive obligations towards kin and kindred. Rather than focus on institutionalised gender strife, I contend that such description better explicates the rapid and often surprisingly flexible transformations in the shape and content of local networks of relatedness. Next I turn to examine this matrix in the realm of conjugal relations.

The Power of Desire: Seduction and 'Betrayal' in Conjugal Contestation**s**

One Saturday morning I sat at a street bar with my friends Jackson and Alberto in Santo Amaro, the urban low-income neighbourhood of São Luís

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[11] See Claudia Fonseca, *Família, fofoca e honra: etnografia de relações de gênero e violência em grupos populares* (Rio Grande do Sul: Editora da Universidade, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2000); and Maya Mayblin *Gender, Catholicism, and Morality in Brazil: Virtuous Husbands, Powerful Wives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

[12] See Claudia Fonseca, 'Inequality Near and Far: Adoption as Seen from the Brazilian Favelas', *Law & Society Review*, 36: 2 (2002), pp. 397–432; and Klaas Woortmann, *A família das mulheres* (Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro em co-edição com o Conselho de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, 1987).

[13] Viviana Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 18.

[14] See Matan Shapiro, 'Intimate Events: The Correctness of Affective Transactions in Northeast Brazil', *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 33: 2 (2015) pp. 90–105; and Parry Scott, 'Matrifocal Males: Gender, Perception and Experience of the Domestic Domain in Brazil', in Mary Jo Maynes, Ann Waltner, Birgitte Soland and Ulrike Strasser (eds.) *Gender, Kinship, Power: A Comparative Interdisciplinary History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 287–301.

in which I have conducted fieldwork intermittently since 2007. We started drinking early and at some stage came to a discussion of the pros and cons of sexual infidelity. Jackson suddenly stood up and exclaimed: 'The faithful wife doesn't exist! Put any woman in front of me and I will find a way to "get" her... [This is] because 'betrayal' [*traição*] is not physical, it is spiritual. For example, you sit here with your wife and she desires Alberto... This is already a betrayal.'

This statement does not merely convey the prowess and virility of machismo. It also exposes the vulnerability encapsulated in the figure of the cuckold (*corno*).[15] Men might 'get' women, but their wives could just as well attach 'horns' (*chifres*) to their own heads. A street vendor called Seu Raimundo humorously reiterated the neologism '*cachimblema*' to account for this cultural reality (*cachaça* [Brazilian rum], chifres [a cuckold's horns] and *problema*). He taught me a satirical rhyme dealing with this contested dynamic: 'Maranhão is a good land, where God is our Guide/During the day there is no water, in the evening no light/And if there is a house without a cuckold/It is only because Jesus was careless'.[16] Fidelity is here attributed to erroneous divine negligence while the misery associated with extra-marital relations becomes part and parcel of passionate relations in the *tristes tropiques* of Maranhão. Another popular joke ironically describes how God 'catches men by the horns' with a rod, thereby guaranteeing a place in heaven for all cornos. In short, persons locally represent 'betrayal' as the rule rather than the exception. The following drinking toast, which condenses together intimate family ties, eroticised courting manoeuvres and the heroic womanly canniness that are required to weave them together, further elucidates this assertion. I sat with friends in a bar when a group of teenage girls who were drinking nearby stood up and began reciting:

A toast for us women, the bearers of seduction, which no idle man is capable of destroying. That our men stay ours, that other women's men be ours as well, that those men never go back to them. If this should happen, they shall become impotent. I drink because in the bottom of this glass I see stamped the picture of a loved man; may he drown to death, the wretched bum. May our fountain not dry up and our mother-in-law never be called 'hope'; because hope is the *last* to die. And, from the age of 13 we take everything. For a man serves only three purposes: paying the bills, carrying the suitcase and growing a cuckold's horns.[17]

[15] See Roger N. Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); and Stanley H. Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980).

[16] Maranhão é terra boa/ terra que Deus nos conduz – De dia falta água/ de noite falta luz/ E se há uma casa sem corno/ É só por descuido de Jesus.

[17] Um brinde a nós mulheres, portadoras da sedução, que nenhum homem vagabundo é capaz de destruir. Que os nossos sejam nossos, que os delas sejam nossos, que nunca venham a ser delas. Se for para ser, que broxem. Eu bebo porque vejo estampada no fundo desse copo a foto

Seduction here attenuates networks of relatedness as much as it is crucial for sustaining their stability from within. On the one hand those seductive powers that are embedded in women, their 'fountain', incite adulterous competition between women and men, which destabilise every long-term relationship. Yet on the other hand those same powers are tested against utility, which intertwines insubordinate sexuality with material affluence to secure the boundaries of the conjugal pact. This duality outlines the differential social trajectories both men and women are expected to follow as they engender sets of intimate relations. Persons should assume the position of epic, reckless lovers, while at the same time they must also act as responsible husbands and wives, in-laws, and so on. Seduction thus stands for the constitution of a fragile balance, which is not always attainable, between the maintenance of intimate family ties and its relentless breach. Jackson reiterated this point:

Let's say a woman goes into the bank to pay a bill and that all of a sudden [*de repente*] she meets a man waiting in the queue. He starts a conversation with her and he gives her his number. And let's say that when that woman got back home she quarrels with her husband. She is sad and upset and all of a sudden she calls the number that the man from the bank left in her hands. A week later they meet, and by this time they are *already* together (*ficando*).

Here, affective investment during an 'innocent' conversation in the bank retrospectively transforms inhibitions against infidelity into personalised biases that encourage it. This hypothesis about what could happen 'all of a sudden' owing to just a little bit of playful agency is shared knowledge in Santo Amaro. 'It is never only the tip' (*nunca é só a cabeça*), as my friend Eva humorously explained.[18] The explicit imagery of penetration leaves no room for mistakes; seductive elicitations go deep, so that playful acts of seduction always perpetuate a substantial danger to structured conjugal arrangements. As my friend Caetano once told me, 'when the situation allows anyone would get tempted'. The aforementioned drinking toast suggests that this is not necessarily a masculine issue. For example, a hairdresser in Santo Amaro revealed to me various stories of 'betrayal' her female clients told her. Likewise, a female research interlocutor in her mid-30s told m that literally all of her friends had 'betrayed' their husbands at some point or another.[19]

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do homem amado, morre afogado, vagabundo desgraçado. Que nossa fonte nunca seque e nossa sogra não se chama esperança, porque esperança é a ultima que morre. E a partir de 13 anos estamos pegando tudo, porque homem só tem três utilidades – pagar conta, carregar a mala e levar chifres.

[18] This popular joke draws on an hypothetical situation of a man trying to convince his new girlfriend that he only wants to introduce the 'tip' of his penis into her vagina.

[19] See also notions of female infidelity in a low-income neighbourhood of Salvador in Sarah Hautzinger, *Violence in the City of Women: Police and Batterers in Bahia, Brazil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

'Betrayal' thus impinges on established matrimonial relations by introducing a tacit measure of uncertainty into them, and this posits a local problem that requires attention. By 'problem' I do not mean that infidelity threatens prototypical modalities for virtuous masculinity or femininity. Rather, I mean that the sudden visibility of betrayal (rather than actual transgression) gives precedence to the proliferation of intimate ties over the anchoring of relations in the fixed symbolism of the house. This paradox is inherent in local forms of aggregation precisely because the spatial and temporal constraints associated in Brazil with the house (*casa*) and the hierarchies of the family (*família*) are conceived in diametrical opposition to the anonymous freedom of the street (*rua*) and the egalitarianism of the 'people' (*povo*).[20] When 'betrayal' is discovered it thus destabilises, potentially even destroys, the hierarchies that underpin interconnected sets of structured relations. As I now turn to demonstrate, one strategy to constrain this entropic tendency is culturally inscribed in performances of control.

Performances of Control and the Restricting Power of Ciúmes

My research interlocutors in Maranhão regularly monitor the whereabouts of their spouses while publicly displaying *ciúmes* to secure marital fidelity. Ciúme(s) translates as jealousy or envy. *Novo Dicionário Aurelio* (2010) defines it as 'painful sentiment owing to the exigencies of an unquiet love; the desire to possess the beloved person; the suspicion of or the certainty that a spouse's infidelity may come about; competition, rivalry'.[21] In the context of both Santo Amaro and Guanabara, ciúmes usually denote intolerance towards any sign of transgression. For example, men and women alike read their spouses' text messages and survey the dialled numbers on their mobile phones. It is also common for persons to ring their spouses unexpectedly 'just to say hello' and make sure they are not involved in frivolity. Friends and allies are ultimately expected to pass information about possible betrayal or other types of disrespectful behaviour towards spouses. Surveillance, gossip and contestation are nonetheless generally considered a 'healthy' (*sadio/saudável*) element of romantic relations, as Renata explains:

Ciúmes is coupled with sentiment. It only happens when the person likes [you]. When it is not sick (*doentio*), ciúmes is really cool … So I think ciúmes is essential. Even the elderly taught us never to say to a man that we really like him, because later on he will use it as a weapon against you and try to control you. That is why so many people

[20] Roberto DaMatta, *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); and *A casa e a rua: espaço, cidadania, mulher e morte no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1997).

[21] *Novo dicionário eletrônico Aurélio* (Curitiba: Editora Positivo, 2010). I will use 'ciúmes' because unlike the English 'jealousy' and 'envy' it indicates simultaneously the possessing of and caring for a person.

think that it is easier to pretend (*fingir*). You only reveal real sentiments when you know that the other person feels more for you than you for him. This way you know that you are in control. This is what ciúmes is all about.

Although Renata distinguishes between these two types of performances it seems to me that pretence is not completely divorced from what she identifies as 'real sentiments'. This is so for two reasons. First, as Erwin Goffman has shown, when persons deploy 'control' they invite their interlocutors to *really* perform back.[22] For example, when I interact with the spiritual entity Dona Maria Légua I must 'pretend' she is Dona Maria rather than her medium, Pai de Santo Carlos, in disguise.[23] If I am not to negate the seriousness of the situation, and thereby treat Carlos as a charlatan, I, too, must 'embrace a role' in order to act ethically. Second, when persons demonstrate control they *really* establish new ethical criteria after core social values were challenged.[24] Ciúme enforces moral indebtedness after betrayal has renounced values associated with familial responsibilities. It is then possible to think about ciúmes as intrinsically split. It demarcates 'control', but at the same time it also expresses love, care and affection. An interlocutor called Laura articulated this duality when she told me of how she identified, acquired and ultimately acted upon the ciúmes her mother felt for Laura's father:

One day my father had an affair with a woman … So I took a small knife and asked my brother in law to come with me. We arrived to that woman's house and I told her the truth: 'if you don't dump my father I will beat you up wherever and whenever I encounter you'… I did this because I don't like to see my mother suffer… This is what happens when you have ciúmes – on the one hand you like (the person) and on the other hand you suffer.

Importantly, Laura said that what complicated the affair was not infidelity itself but the fact it had become explicit. While her father tried to conceal previous affairs (and thus avoided both the perils of betrayal and the sanctions of ciúmes) he went public with that particular lover. People 'began commenting', as Laura put it, and this transformed Laura's father's infidelity into a disrespectful act (towards Laura's mother). Publicly presenting ciúmes thus enabled Laura to 'take control' in an edgy, potentially humiliating situation, characterised by overt disrespect. By absorbing her mother's suffering Laura managed to display her own 'pretences' within the fabric of family structure

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[22] Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961).

[23] The Afro-Brazilian religion generic to Maranhão is Tambor de Mina. It draws on reciprocity of money, food and objects with spiritual entities during possession-trance ceremonies, which take place in a cult-house or *terreiro*. Priests are called *pais* (for men) or *mães* (for women) *de Santo*. See Mundicarmo Maria Rocha Ferretti, *Desceu na guma: o caboclo do tambor de mina em um terreiro de São Luís – a Casa Fanti-Ashanti* (São Luís: EDUFITIA, 2000).

[24] Michael Lambek, 'Introduction', In Michael Lambek (ed.), *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 1–36.

and morality while demonstrating care towards the people she loved. Ciúmes here ultimately 'recalibrated' the breached ethical register by re-invoking the moral force of conjugal and familial commitments.[25]

The innate ambiguity existing between positive and negative readings that characterise the bickering of ciúmes can be seen as analogous to the deceptive sting imbued in seduction. This is because both these forms of behaviour are structurally two-fold: they attempt to 'control' the other and yet always allow him or her space for transgression. Both these behaviours thus include a measure of uncertainty and intrinsic ambiguity. For example, through ciúmes Laura appears at the same time both the loving daughter and the aggressive bully. Or, the art of flirting that Jackson claims to master constitutes him both as a virile macho and a vulnerable corno. Both ciúmes and seduction consequently relativise the ethical drift of the interaction at hand, and they thus open myriad possibilities for conformity or defiance. I now turn to elaborate this ethnographic assertion through the theory of play.

Play, Paradox and Invisibility in Maranhão

Play and paradox in ciúmes and seduction

As they mobilise ambiguity into everyday practice, my research interlocutors in Maranhão maintain a constant tension between conformity and the possibility of violating the rules. Importantly, this is not an esoteric or marginal behaviour associated with Brazilian roguery (*malandragem*),[26] but a normative and inherently pragmatic approach to social interaction that accompanies persons since childhood. For example, in the early 1970s, when my friend Caetano was a child, and a mischievous one, his father would often scold him: 'I am only going to tell you one thing; I am not telling you anything!' This opaque moral lesson emphasises agility of thought, contemplation and double bind, all of which are intrinsic qualities of play.[27] Play therefore deserves further analytic consideration.

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argues that play is intrinsic to the emergence of cultural systems and equivalent to ritual practice.[28] For Huizinga,

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[25] See Michael Lambek, 'Towards an Ethics of the Act', in Michael Lambek (ed.), *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press 2010), p. 55.

[26] Roberto DaMatta (1991) describes *malandragem* as the weapons of the weak of the Brazilian poor, a performative improvisation aimed at making-do through deliberate subversion and the manipulation of rules.

[27] See Jean L. Briggs, *Inuit Morality Play: The Emotional Education of a Three-year-old* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000 [1972]), pp. 177–93.

[28] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1970), pp. 8–11; for a recent critique see Peter G. Stromberg, *Caught*

play is: (1) a voluntary action, 'in fact freedom [itself]'; which is (2) located 'outside real life'; (3) always temporal, as it is 'played out' within limits of time until it reaches an end; (4) demarcated within particular places; and (5) internally coherent, so that it becomes transmissible and anchored in tradition. Huizinga was one of the first to note that play is contextually significant and culturally diverse, but he perceived play in opposition to the 'serious' moral imperatives of everyday life.[29] Partaking in this critique, Roger Caillois claims that 'seriousness' in fact both creates the space of play and governs performances within it.[30] He thus thinks of play as a set of self-restrained forms of engagements *with* reality, rather than as an escape from it. Philosopher Eugan Fink goes one step further to collapse the distinction between 'reality' and 'play' altogether. He claims that we cannot positively presume that cultural reality is a priori to play, or that it is always stable. Rather, Fink argues, intrinsic to play is a symbolic duality, the capacity of players to be themselves from within a demarcated play-zone and simultaneously appear as others to themselves from outside that zone.[31] As Don Handelman puts that, in play 'a phenomenon is one thing and another simultaneously, therefore at one and the same time it is both, and so it may be neither'.[32] Following Fink, Handelman insists that playful utterances, gestures and frames introduce paradox into everyday life because they always substantiate the logical possibility of something being ontologically other to itself.

The banter of double-meaning catch-phrases (or *pegadinha*s) in Maranhão will elucidate this last point. Such mundane enactments of joking relations often include latent sexual tropes, in which one thing appears as itself, but also as something completely different. Once, for example, a friend of mine asked his sister why she dated a certain person. 'It's his *cabeça,* isn't it?', he commented, and they both rocked with laughter.[33] Or, during regular small talk someone would ask his interlocutor 'which team do you support' using a combination of syllables that could also mean 'who stuck

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in Play: How Entertainment Works on You* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 101–5.

[29] Jacques Ehrmann, 'Homo Ludens Revisited', *Yale French Studies,* 41 (1968), pp. 31–57.

[30] Caillois argues that the controlled boundaries of any instituted 'game' consist of a wide range of activities, which correspond to four types of play-forms: competition (*agōn*), chance/luck (*alea*), simulation (*mimicry*) and vertigo (*ilinx*: a game premised on thrill). Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 14–26.

[31] Eugen Fink, 'The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play', *Yale French Studies,* 41 (1968), pp. 19–30.

[32] Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998), p. 68. For example, when I emulate a pistol with my fingers my hand is at once my hand, a pistol or both, and therefore during the temporality of the play episode it may well be neither.

[33] Cabeça is 'head', which in this context could mean the man's 'brains' or the tip of his penis.

you up'.[34] In both these cases, play ridicules binary opposition (impenetrable/ porous, cognition/emotion) to introduce a subversive duality: The masculine football supporter is effeminised while the penis, which is commonly associated with unrestricted passion, dominates rational calculations.[35] As with the ambiguous lesson preached to Caetano when he was a child, play here encodes the rules governing social order while simultaneously annulling them, and this intrinsic double bind is paradoxical by definition.[36]

As I began to show, acts of seduction and ciúmes often produce a similar paradox because they are at once constructive and destructive, authoritarian and dismissing, formalistic and transgressive. Evidently, in Maranhão seduction attenuates structured romantic relations while also keeping their integrity from within. This is so partly also because both men and women locally stipulate eroticism as an essential predisposition for every successful romantic engagement.[37] And, as I claimed above, ciúmes at once expresses the caring for and possession of another. In both these cases the paradox of play is imbued with commitments towards others, as well as concrete evaluative criteria by which persons judge themselves as moral beings. I thus contend that the ethics of intimate relatedness in Maranhão may only be presented in its full complexity when those prevalent performances aimed at strengthening control (ciúmes) and those aimed at loosening it (seduction) are portrayed as deployments of play, which obscure social boundaries as much as they illustrate their contractual commands.[38]

Through this analytic lens, ciúmes and seduction become the main public arenas through which persons contextually determine boundaries between conformity and transgression. At times these performances impel conformity through visibility. This is evident in those acts of ciúmes that Renata identified as sick (*doentio*) and in calculated forms of seduction that prioritise material benefits (e.g. prostitution). In other occasions, however, the ethical threshold emphasises paradox and thus *conjoins prevailing oppositions*.[39] Here, the

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[34] 'Que time é teu?' ('Which team is yours?') vs. 'Quem te meteu?' ('Who stuck you up?').

[35] See Richard G. Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991); and Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[36] Don Handelman, 'Passages to Play: Paradox and Process', *Play and Culture*, 5 (1992), pp. 1–19.

[37] For example, women regularly expect their partners to have sex with them several times in a row, and see refusal as lack of interest. For further reading on sexuality and the construction of gendered identities see Cecilia McCallum, 'Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador da Bahia', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 18: 3 (1999), pp. 275–93.

[38] For distinction between different kinds of social boundaries see Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar, 'The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology* 2002, pp. 168–9.

[39] See Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors*, pp. 246–7. Handelman claims that clowns are epitomes of paradox because they do not break the moral precepts that distinguish seriousness and play but rather dissipate the boundaries between these oppositions. Like a Moebius strip,

internal constitution of boundary emphasises process, uncertainty and gradation rather than division or exclusion. This is evident in acts of ciúmes and seduction that emphasise doubt, ambiguity, and what I will call 'invisibility'. Invisibility is not merely an aesthetic feature of local forms of secrecy, nor is it essentially a breach of certain undying truths about love or passion. Rather, in Maranhão invisibility is a crucial aspect of intimate relations. As I now turn to demonstrate, invisibility is considered a common property of ethical personhood because it mediates between the emotional force of key cultural ideals and the affective zest of everyday encounters.

Spaces of invisibility and the ethics of concealment in Maranhão

My friends and interlocutors in Maranhão, across all age groups, generally find it difficult to adopt a confessional moral order marked by excessive honesty or enforced transparency. For example, my friend Wilson runs 'conjugal seminars' for an Evangelical congregation in São Luís, where couples are asked to look each other in the eye and reveal episodes of infidelity. Wilson told me that it is common in these seminars to hear men telling their wives that they 'do not want to know about these things'. Beyond the feelings associated with machismo, this plea for intentional obscurity perpetuates a space of conjugal intimacy that is premised on a measure of uncertainty. Persons in fact *expect* the concealment of transgression, and this entails what I tentatively relate to as the institution of social invisibility. An interlocutor from Santo Amaro called Rubem explicates this:

Society is like that; people like to gossip. But nobody speaks ill about me because I do not give them opportunities. This is the famous 'crack' (*brecha*). Nobody will be able to say 'Rubem was there fighting in the street' because even if it happens nobody will see this. So for example, if I am drunk on my way home and I see a familiar face I will not stop to converse. I will simply gesture to him, or say '*beleza? Lega*l!' [All well? Cool!], and disappear down the road.

Rubem claims that secrecy effectively organises face-to-face interactions in the neighbourhood precisely because it implicates the 'cracks' through which certain detractions from local notions of respectable personhood may be subjected to public scrutiny. Strategic disclosures thus mirror truthful concealments, and this tension regulates the local dynamics of intimate relations. For that reason, for instance, conventions marking social encounters in a *motel* turn on enforcing anonymity at all costs: if you see someone at reception you must wait outside until they disappear, and if someone familiar enters the

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they constantly shift between gravity and frivolity and this constitutes a porous boundary between figure and ground, which come to implicate each other.

motel you simply ignore them.[40] Some of the motels in São Luís are even equipped with special curtains in the car park so that customers could cover the number plates of their cars. Engagement in a plurality of close relations in the context of neighbourhood sociability necessarily entails, as Ramón Sarró forcefully argues, 'the relationship between visible and invisible realities'.[41] In other words, the production of invisibility is always relational to, and its ethical justification is derived from, the visible performances of moral propriety. Take Carla's story as a prominent example:

Some years ago my husband Josimar had to travel to Brasília for work. He remained there for two months and during that time I had a fling with a neighbour. At that time I used to hang out with a group of women who lived in the street. All of them were betraying [*sic*] their husbands, so sex and betrayal were common issues. They always had really juicy stories to tell. One of these women was my neighbour's mother and she aroused my curiosity because she used to declare that her son had a big penis. The problem was that this guy's wife was extremely suspicious and jealous so his mother mediated: she transferred notes between us so no one would suspect. I knew that if this were to come out (through gossip) the word would certainly get to Josimar and that would be the end of our marriage. So I hid this affair from everybody, including the women living in our street.[42]

Carla's story enables thinking about invisibility as a form of play that people use primarily in order to negotiate conjugal intimacy. On one hand, intimacy is here defined *negatively* by those others that are excluded from the forms of continuity that mark concrete social alliances.[43] Yet on the other hand, Carla also defines intimacy *positively* as the stable emotional connection that binds persons together as family, which ultimately overlaps with economic and affective exchange patterns in everyday life. Within this matrix Carla acted *ethically* both in the concealed world of betrayal she shared with her lover and the visible world of familial responsibilities. In order to do that

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[40] Motel in Brazil is a short-term room let most commonly used for sexual encounters.

[41] Ramon Sarró, *The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast Iconoclasm Done and Undone* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 144. Sarró convincingly demonstrates that despite rigorous Islamic iconoclasm in the 1950s and 1960s, traditional sacred sites and religious objects of the Baga on the upper Guinea coast are merely 'removed from the senses' (*ibid.*, 6–7). In other words, deep-seated cultural inscription still stands 'behind' the overt visibility of things so that knowledge of absence is as powerful as the ethical projections of the present icons.

[42] Carla told me that she became pregnant due to the affair, and consequently induced an abortion using folk medicine. In Brazil state-funded abortions are legal only in cases of rape or life-threatening pregnancy complications. For a comparison with other Latin American contexts see Mala Htun, *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family Under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[43] I here adopt Simmel's approach to secrecy, which focuses on the reciprocity between the person who protects a secret and the person who attempts to reveal it. See Georg Simmel 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 11: 4 (2006), pp. 441–98.

she had to produce invisibility, which interconnects these negative and positive readings as it sustains both the binary contradictions of a moralistic social order and its provisional cancellation. Invisibility sustains a space for ethical action, which constitutes an ontological boundary between a serious breach of core social values and non-serious reproduction of cultural intimacy (which here also bears a significant erotic load).[44]

About half way through my fieldwork in 2010 I had a dream that might elucidate the practical scope of this claim. At the time I was dating someone, but I also got involved in a brief affair. One day, when mutual friends saw me walking hand in hand with the other woman, I rang my girlfriend to confess my 'betrayal'. This provoked a week-long feud, which haunted me at various cognitive and emotional levels. At some stage during that period I dreamt of a red creature with horns rebuking me in a creepy voice: 'You see, we told you this would happen! You should have done what we told you!' I woke up astonished, thinking of the mythological trickster Exú.[45] Now, without delving deeply into psychoanalytic waters, it is reasonable to claim that Exú was a proxy of my guilt and the symbol of shame. My dream vividly exhibited the moral conundrum in which I was entangled: how would my 'betrayal' impinge on my commitments to significant others? I thought that by being unfaithful I publicly presented myself as unreliable and assumed that by 'taking responsibility' I could at least partially clear myself from these implications. I soon discovered, however, that from the point of view of my local friends and interlocutors the problem was not 'betrayal' itself, nor did the performance of repentance could make things better. My friend Regina articulated this very bluntly:

You had a right to assume your guilt as long as you didn't hurt anyone. But nobody will remember that you were honest. People will simply remember that you went out and caused a scandal in front of her door. This is unforgivable. One thing is you being caught and shamed; another is you walking around with your carnival costume on … As my grandmother used to say: 'horns (chifres) is the notification, not the act.'

Invisibility of certain actions thus entails a sense of impunity characterising 'deviant' trajectories precisely because persons discursively condemn transgressive actions as marginal, risky or infamous. The secrets that spaces of invisibility contain allow my research interlocutors in Maranhão to contextually switch between a frame of relatedness based on collective indebtedness, which turns on the public performance of virtuous personhood, and a frame defined by autonomous agency, which turns on the realisation of personal desires. Under these terms conjugal intimacy can be seen to *depend* on the regular production of invisibility, which thus becomes an ethical action in its own right. Provisional invisibility does not negate idealised social values (such as love,

[44] Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005[1997]), p. 52.
[45] Exú is the spiritual entity in Afro-Brazilian spiritual doctrines who links divine and mundane realities.

care, honesty, trust, or respect), but rather the contrary. Persons constitute invisibility in order to replicate, even venerate, such values, while they simultaneously and constantly subvert them.[46] Through concealment persons *become* good spouses in a profoundly ontological sense. Ciúmes, seduction, gossip and other prevalent forms of play that include invisibility thus encourage prudence, which enables ethical reflection on the consequences of affective events in the unfolding of mundane sociality.

The crux of my argument can therefore be summarised in three statements: (1) the body and its affective capacities are essential axes for the generation of intimacy in Maranhão, as they are taken to be the loci for the extension of meaningful relatedness within and across co-residential groups; (2) at the same time, categorisations of family structure and morality restrict the scope of bodily performance and affective reciprocity; and thus, (3) in order to incorporate both these realms of practice, persons invest considerable efforts in concealment, secrecy, mystic, cover-up stories or otherwise what I referred to as 'spaces of invisibility'. Yet, precisely because invisibility often protects transgression, it sometimes collapses into itself. Jackson and Juliana's love story, to which I will now turn, is a prominent example for the calamitous results this may entail.

Visibility and its costs

Juliana and Jackson began dating when she was 17 and he was 22.[47] Several months later Juliana became pregnant and her father, Seu Ednilson, demanded that Jackson 'assumed responsibility' by inviting Juliana to live in his extended-family house. Jackson however tried to earn time by 'tricking' (*enrolar*) Seu Ednilson, as he put it. He said he was looking for a better job so he could buy a house, and asked that meanwhile Juliana remained with her father. This strategy worked until Seu Ednilson warned he would force Juliana to have an abortion. Juliana then called Jackson, crying, and threatened that should this happen it would be all over between them. Jackson contemplated the issue, consulted his parents and a close friend, and eventually decided against the abortion. That same day he invited Juliana into his family house. It was an act that symbolised his public responsibility for the pregnancy.

Yet, at that time Jackson has already been dating another 'serious' girlfriend, called Elãine, for two years. Jackson was thus drawn deeply into a 'cycle of lies', as he defined it. To Elãine he promised that once Juliana gave birth he would send her back to her father's house, whereas Jackson had

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[46] In the context of Caribbean ethnography Peter Wilson, *Crab Antics,* develops a similar argument, which turns on the tension between 'respectability' and 'reputation'. These idioms refer respectively to actors' adherence to prescriptive etiquette on the one hand and their 'good character' on the other.

[47] My analysis is based on Jackson's narrative. I could not interview Juliana because she no longer lives in São Luís.

promised Juliana they would soon move into their own house and start a family. This continued even after the birth of their son Emerson. Jackson kept enticing the wild life, going out at nights allegedly 'for work', and dating other women. Three months after she gave birth, Juliana had had enough and she returned to her father's house with the baby. Although this was allegedly everything he had hoped for, Jackson then began presenting ciúmes in order to bring Juliana back to him. He told me:

I realised that I was only dating women with no future; and all I could think was that I have my own wife who doesn't want to live with me anymore … [Therefore] I began chasing (*perseguir*) her. I called her on her mobile anytime, even in the middle of the night. I sent her messages. I tried to become the best friend of people who were close to her … In the end, from insisting so much, she came back to me and we decided to rent a flat of our own in Santo Amaro.

Shortly after they moved in together Jackson nonetheless began suspecting that Juliana was 'betraying' him. Once, for example, he saw Juliana during the day sitting in a bar with one of the teachers of a technical course she was taking, while she was supposed to be studying. In a different opportunity Jackson found a message on Juliana's mobile, which read: 'Yesterday night was wonderful.' Then there was a rumour that Juliana 'danced sensually' with men at a street party. The final evidence came in a surreal situation, when Jackson was having sex in a motel with the girlfriend of one of his work colleagues, who asked Jackson if he was aware that Juliana was 'betraying' him frequently. She personally knew someone who had had sex with Juliana. When Jackson confronted Juliana, she vigorously denied the accusation. The following week, after Juliana left the house angry in the course of an argument with Jackson, he claims he saw her dancing with another person at a *festa* in Santo Amaro. Enraged, Jackson went home, snatched his personal belongings and moved back into his family house together with Emerson. That same day Juliana publicly announced her relationship with another man by inviting him to sleep with her in the house she and Jackson were renting. Jackson recalled:

I became crazy because of this and I wanted to know of everything that had happened since the first day we started dating. I visited all the bars in the neighbourhood, where I thought I could find information. *I wanted certainty of what happened.* I ended up learning things I didn't know beforehand. For example, that she left Emerson with neighbours and people she hardly even knew in order to go to a *motel* with a guy. Once somebody found Emerson alone in the street, do you believe that?… and only then I realised the extent of *her* lies. Juliana could cry with real tears and begin a fight about nothing only so she could leave the house angry, as if it was because of me, but then meet someone in a *festa* or *motel* … She was the best liar I have ever encountered, even better than me, because I always left clues and she didn't.[48]

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[48] I assume that Juliana too must have heard (and inquired about) Jackson's betrayals, but I cannot verify that.

As long as their relationship focused on successful maintenance of invisibility, these lies at once legitimised and generated a model of ethical personhood that depended on securing opacity at all costs. Without ever speaking about it, both Jackson and Juliana shared a tacit understanding that some things must remain concealed while they continued to 'betray' one another on a regular basis. When spaces of invisibility eventually collapsed, interconnected emotional worlds collided, and this caused such a crisis that there was no reason to be ethical anymore. Jackson gloomily admitted:

So, part of my madness was that I followed her into all kinds of places and once even entered into our house in the middle of the night. We had sex and then she asked for money to pay the bills. I threw a 10 real note on the bed and told her: 'Take this for your scheme.'[49] After this, things became difficult for me, I could not really function. I was drinking too much, smoking, spending lots of money on people who took advantage of me … One night I had a nightmare and I woke up screaming. I dreamt that something was trying to strangle and kill me … I felt that my soul was leaving my body. I was trembling with fear. I felt empty inside. It was devastating.

Suffering from mental depression and feeling increasingly anguished, several months later Jackson decided that he would become Juliana's worst enemy (*inimigo*). Not only did he demand that Juliana leave Santo Amaro, he also insisted that she moved out of São Luís altogether. They negotiated the terms of her departure and eventually signed a legal agreement that regulated custody over Emerson along with a financial arrangement. Accordingly, Jackson transferred some money to Juliana's great-grandmother and gave her the furniture and kitchen equipment he had bought during the years. In return, Juliana agreed to leave and moved to live with relatives in São Paulo, where she still resides today. Emerson remained with Jackson and his family. He seldom sees his mother, when she visits São Luís.

Jarrett Zigon argues that persons lie when they face 'moral breakdowns', which 'occur when for one reason or another a range of possible moralities do not adequately fit the context.'[50] Zigon consequently claims that lies at times become the creative groundwork for an ethical process of self-transformation and the embodiment of new virtues, which ultimately takes the form of new types of social performances. Jackson and Juliana's lies indeed demarcated and legitimised the visible performance of virtuous personhood as spouses; but they were also about the desperate endeavour to sustain mutually-exclusive models of intimate engagements merged together. Their lies protected a tangible structure of conjugal intimacy centred on the family and the household, while at the same time they substantialised a phantom structure of relatedness centred on the continuous dispersal of affective investments in others. Jackson

[49] Jackson used the term *programa*, which in Brazil is a euphemism for prostitution schemes.
[50] Jarrett Zigon, 'Within a Range of Possibilities: Morality and Ethics in Social Life', *Ethnos*, 74: 2 (2009), p. 263.

and Juliana's lies generated the social ethics of invisibility, which allowed them to comply with the injunction for fidelity while continuously transgressing it.

Lies and provisional invisibility ultimately sustained a tension between these positive and negative experiences of conjugal intimacy, until full exposure reinstated rigid moral imperatives. The ethical threshold of invisibility, which effectively held Jackson and Juliana's marriage from within by instituting paradox and ambiguity into their relationship, thus had to become binary again: either dyadic intimacy was to be totalised or it had to be destroyed altogether. Crucially, according to Jackson, it was the revelation of infidelity that brought about public death to the relationship, not the breach of a moral order that ostensibly privileges masculine spaces of power. This assertion undermines the claim that in Brazil inherited patriarchal sexual codes always entail rigid ethical categorisations, which render their inevitable transgression from within. I now turn to discuss the methodological and theoretical implications of this analysis for the study of relatedness in Latin America and beyond.

Methodological and Theoretical Implications

Play and invisibility in the making of relatedness

The energy my friends and interlocutors in Maranhão invest in play, subversion and uncertainty does not imply that they are somewhat professional con-artists. Being trustworthy, reliable and respectful are admired virtues that become an important aspect of close relations. However, complete disclosure in the sense Giddens calls 'pure relationship' does not necessarily follow.[51] Giddens claims that in late-modernity egalitarian gender roles in the public sphere also entail a democratisation of domestic relations. This requires transparency, which becomes an ethical precept in the mediation of conjugal intimacy. By contrast, rather than totalise a single 'pure' relationship, in low-income Maranhão, persons engage in maze-like networks of personal relations, some of them mutually exclusive. William James illustrates a scale that better describes this dynamic of intimacy than Giddens' either/or model.[52] For James 'intimacy, internality, and relative continuity go hand in hand, while foreignness, externality, and relative discontinuity appear to be at the other extreme of the relational continuum'.[53] In this framework all social relations include intimacy

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[51] Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992). For a well-crafted critique of this approach see Lauren Berlant, 'Intimacy: A Special Issue', *Critical Inquiry*, 24: 2 (1998), pp. 281–8.

[52] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1977 [1909]).

[53] David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 156.

and foreignness to *varying* degrees in ways that always combine continuity and discontinuity, connection and detachment, harmony and strife.

For example, above I mentioned Chico's relations with his 'as-if' cousins, wherein 'blood' relatedness is predicated simultaneously on genealogy, ritual kinship ties, commitments derived from deference *and* the solidarity associated with respect between peers. As a key cultural idiom, blood includes here various degrees of continuity and discontinuity interconnecting persons into distinguishable clusters of intimate linkages. At times this may signify a strong intimate connection associated with the hierarchies of the inner-circle family while in certain situations persons would invoke this idiom simply to conjure sympathy. Blood thus embeds varying degrees of intimate linkages that are accentuated with the changing strength of the trope. In Maranhão, and probably elsewhere on the Brazilian socio-economic margins, a sense of intimate connectivity is diffused in this way across a plurality of finely differentiated contractual and consanguine relations.[54] Generation of invisibility becomes intrinsic to this process of diffusion and proliferation because it enables greater flexibility in the accommodation of various types of social relations, which at times become mutually exclusive. Ethical personhood in low-income Maranhão is dependent on omitting or concealing certain facts while carefully revealing others. As my friend Gerson ironically exclaimed, 'truth doesn't stop being truthful once it is omitted'. Invisibility allows persons to consciously play with the moral conundrums of a 'pure' cosmogony of social relatedness premised on transparency and repeated negotiation.

Secrecy in Brazilian society has mainly been studied in relation to Afro-Brazilian religious practices. For example, Paul Johnson associates secretive practices in Candomblé with segregation between 'superficial' and 'deep' types of knowledge, which differentiates public from inner 'head' (*orí*).[55] Since Maranhão registers the second-highest number of black residents in Brazil (after Bahia), contemporary manifestations of secrecy and invisibility indeed impinge on a larger cosmological framework diachronically influenced by Afro-Brazilian cultural styles.[56] Here I

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[54] This assertion aligns with the notion of 'cordiality' in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: J. Olympio, 1936). See also Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); and in a Caribbean context Edith Clarke, *My Mother Who Fathered Me: A Study of the Families in Three Selected Communities of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1999[1959]).

[55] Paul C. Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 59–63. See also the seminal works by Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and Yvonne Alves Velho Maggie, *Guerra de Orixá: um estudo de ritual e conflito* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1977).

[56] Two peoples (or 'nations' as they are locally known in Maranhão) were brutally funnelled into slavery in Maranhão. These are the Yoruba-speaking Nagô people and Ewe-speaking

nonetheless chose to focus on the mundane production of secrecy as a *synchronic* phenomenon associated primarily with local forms of play. This allowed me to avoid the racialisation of my research interlocutors, for whom these notions of sociality were not at all isomorphic with the historicised marginality of blacks in post-slavery Brazil.[57] Regardless of racial or colour identification, and across local spiritual doctrines, my research interlocutors in Maranhão *choose* to generate invisibility precisely because it facilitates insurgent agency, or a recursive flow, within the confines of structured moral inhibitions. Both men and women consequently foster family-oriented careers that anchor affective investments onto fixed sets of relations (as care-takers and kin), while they persistently attenuate the foundations of these arrangements through intense forms of play that intrinsically include measures of secrecy, concealment and invisibility. Persons thus prescribe anew degrees of intimate familiarity in different situations and across sectorial segments of mundane reality as a factor of their involvement in it.[58]

Concretely to the cosmology of relatedness on the Brazilian socio-economic margins, it is thus important to note that the play dynamic I described here does not necessary subside under the burdening of domestic responsibilities. Rather the contrary, invisibility keeps informing the positioning of persons within kinship networks throughout the life-cycle because 'betrayal', as well as joking relations and other forms of play, by no means end in early adulthood.[59] For example, 70-year-old Seu Sansão once had to rework a familial crisis due to a rumour that he had been with another woman in Guanabara while his wife remained in their house in São Luís. The tension between a model of relatedness based on the moral propriety of familial responsibility and a model based on dispersal of affects may shift with changing obligations through life, dialectically reducing both the scope of sexual adventures and the tendency to jeopardise conformity as persons grow older, but the ethical power

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Jeje (or Fon) people. A significant number of slaves were captured in the Kingdom of Dahomey, which stretched across today's Benin and Western Nigeria (cf. Edurado, p. 47).

[57] Daniel Linger 'The Hegemony of Discontent', in Daniel Linger, *Anthropology through a Double Lens: Public and Personal Worlds in Human Theory* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 2005) pp. 79–110. For a similar argument in the context of municipality-level political systems in north-east Brazil see Aaron Ansell, 'Lula's Assault on Rural Patronage: Zero Hunger, Ethnic Mobilization and the Deployment of Pilgrimage, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42: 6 (2015), pp. 1263–82.

[58] For theoretical elaboration see Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London and Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 148–9; and Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, '"A Tolerated Margin of Mess": The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 11: 3 (1975), pp. 147–86.

[59] On life-cycle see the classic works of Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969); and Raymond Smith, *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism, and Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

of invisibility remains, as well as the assumption that it always-already shadows observed reality.[60] Invisibility then becomes the property of everyday manifestations of play such as ciúmes and betrayal, and, as Jackson and Juliana's case suggests, even a property of lies that 'protect' meaningful others from painful truths. Under these terms invisibility can be seen to organise the proliferation of intimate relations rather than being essentially opposed to it.[61]

The association of intimacy, ethics and play with the ethnographic manifestation of invisibility contributes in two meaningful ways to wider discussions in Latin Americanist scholarship on machismo, gender relations and house sociality in low-income contexts. First, my analysis challenges the tendency to think about forms of play merely as a resistance to the 'harsh realities' of clearly defined spaces of power and their consequent visible sanctions.[62] 'Betraying' men and women sustain at least the public appearance of fidelity precisely because elaborate networks of potential 'informers' always flutter around.[63] In most cases of infidelity I documented, invisibility was about creative 'bending' of rules, not about social coercion. Second and consequently, my analysis complements contemporary studies that explicate invisibility as a by-product of socio-economic exclusion. For example, Stephen Nugent convincingly described the economic invisibility of Brazilian riverine *caboclos* (creolised peasants in the Amazon basin) as a result of their socio-cultural marginalisation in 1980s Brazil.[64] Similarly, in the context of post-industrial mobility of the early 2000s, Donald Carter claims that statistical invisibility of African migrants in Italy is a 'corrosive social erasure insinuated into living memory that shapes the contours of social imagination and relegates the newcomer to the margins.'[65] The idea that invisibility can be seen as a property of play suggests that persons wilfully endorse trickery and subversion in everyday life. In this formulation invisibility is an elective phenomenon that enables emergence, not an imposed condition of social marginality. It thus adds another layer of signification to this debate.

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[60] See also Antonius Robben, *Sons of the Sea Goddess: Economic Practice and Discursive Conflict in Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
[61] See also Ben R. Penglas, *Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela: Urban Violence and Daily Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), chap. 3.
[62] Jessica Gregg, *Virtually Virgins: Sexual Strategies and Cervical Cancer in Recife, Brazil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
[63] For example, a friend once recounted how he refrained from talking to a woman who was staring at him on the bus, only to find out later that that woman was a 'colleague' of his wife who was 'testing' his fidelity.
[64] Stephen Nugent, *Amazonian Caboclo Society: An Essay on Invisibility and Peasant Economy* (London: Berg, 1993).
[65] Donald Martin Carter, *Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 5.

Conclusion

In this article I explored the playful ways by which low-income residents of the Brazilian state of Maranhão attempt to reconcile mutually-exclusive systems of value that turn on the tension between dispersal of affects and their moral containment. I argued that as they render invisible those actions that challenge conventional moral injunction, persons sustain an image of ethical personhood from the point of view of *both* these modalities of intimate reciprocity simultaneously. Within this prism intimacy in Maranhão is hardly an either/or situation, corresponding to unconditional trust and transparency on the one hand against distrust and deception on the other. As I argued above, much as a playful act of control reinstates moral order, it may also relativise that order. In Maranhão intimacy is then rooted in relational commitments to meaningful others, but it is also always situational, risky, and ultimately quite fragile given the power of desire and temptation. It is this fragility that entangles the imperative to conceal transgression. Precisely because they produce paradox, spaces of invisibility embed both conscious ethical work and non-conscious reproduction of core moral values.

It is now possible to go back to Seu Reginaldo's story and reframe it through the analytic relationship between visibility and invisibility. Under these terms, Seu Reginaldo married Isabel while in fact living with Dolores for several years. He later left when Dolores' own transgressions became publicly visible and married Dona Maria. It is nonetheless a known secret in Guanabara that Seu Reginaldo has fathered throughout his life at least 24 children with five or six other women. The apparent indifference towards whether actual marital conviviality was practised or not thus suggests that in 1950s and 1960s Maranhão, marital status was primarily related to social *respectability*. Marital exchange systems and duties were associated with co-residence rather than legal contracts. Strategies to account for pre- and extra-marital erotic alliances consisted in accepting their legitimacy side-by-side with an imperative for strict moral complaisance. Despite profound socio-economic, juridical and cultural change since the 1950s, both men and women in north-east Brazil still negotiate this tension between prevailing moral injunctions and the drift of affective interchange in mundane life.

And this leads to freedom. For, as James Laidlaw argues, 'the practice of freedom intrinsically entails the exercise of judgement … through the rituals that involve the optional adoption of compulsory orders and obligations'.[66] Degrees of intimate sharing in Maranhão, at least from the 1950s onwards, thus become *contingent* on the generation of invisibility as an ethical action in its own right. If there is one thing I hope I have achieved in this article, it follows from this realisation as it refers to the ethics of relatedness in

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[66] Laidlaw in Lambek (2010a), p. 27.

contemporary north-east Brazil: when my interlocutors acknowledge their commitments to others and yet continue to shift across antagonistic modalities of relatedness as they produce ever more subversive spaces of invisibility, they prescribe ethical judgements that designate their capacity to be free. As they strive to grade mutually-exclusive sets of intimate relations, sustain and cultivate them for as long as they can, they thus play with the affective vitality of freedom itself.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. En este artículo examino las prácticas éticas cotidianas que sostienen las relaciones íntimas en el estado brasileño de Maranhão. Me centro etnográficamente en los celos y la seducción como formas complementarias del juego íntimo, lo que simultáneamente afirman y desafían aspectos de una relación emocional como la confianza y el amor. Afirmo que ya que un grado de ocultamiento es inherente en ambas formas de tal juego, tales acciones se hacen invisibles y desafían prohibiciones morales convencionales, como la infidelidad sexual. Por lo tanto, ofrezco una teoría etnográfica de 'invisibilidad' por donde la opacidad, lo incierto y la paradoja se vuelven algo intrínseco al surgimiento de relaciones íntimas como prácticas éticas en si mismas.

Spanish keywords: juego íntimo, paradoja, Maranhão/Brasil, relación, invisibilidad, ética cotidiana, intimidad

Portuguese abstract. Neste artigo examino práticas morais comuns que sustentam relações íntimas no estado do Maranhão, Brasil. Foco etnograficamente no ciúme e na sedução como formas complementares de cortejo, os quais simultaneamente afirmam e desafiam aspectos de ligação emocional como confiança e amor. Considerando que certa medida de ocultação é inerente a ambas essas formas de cortejo, argumento que elas tornam invisíveis ações que desafiam restrições morais, como a infidelidade sexual. Ofereço, consequentemente, uma teoria etnográfica sobre 'invisibilidade' na qual opacidade, incerteza e paradoxos tornam-se intrínsecos à emergência de relações íntimas como práticas morais em si.

Portuguese keywords: cortejo, paradoxo, Maranhão/Brasil, conectividade, invisibilidade, ética (moralidade) comum, intimidade