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Friendship and Fantasy in a Brazilian slum

This paper focuses on friendship in a context of economic hardship and social marginalisation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in slums in Salvador, Bahia, the ex-slave capital of Brazil, it looks at the informal survival mechanisms of unemployed Afro-Brazilian women. The literature on slums and informal settlements tends to focus on economic survival strategies, particularly those of men. How do women, as the most marginalized and excluded slum-dwellers survive in the face of poverty and gender oppression? What are the emotional rather than material costs of poverty?

The paper shows how female friendship and popular culture play a crucial part in women's psychological survival strategies. In particular it looks at how these friendships revolve around the viewing and constant discussion of one of the most popular forms of media entertainment in Brazil: *telenovelas* (soap operas). The glamorous world of the *telenovelas* is a constant accompaniment to the women's arduous physical labour in the slum household. Viewing is fragmented, and shared, and conversations constantly blur reality and fiction – who has become a gangster in the *favela*, and who is sleeping with whom in the *telenovela*. An exploration of the daily integration of real life suffering with fictional glamour and wealth reveals disturbing valuations of women's bodies and female sexuality that traverse reality, fiction, race and class; it also shows how a combination of fantasy and social exclusion consolidate the women's friendships, and enable them to convert suffering into pleasure.