Natasha liked to talk to strangers. At random, she would approach people in the street and start a conversation. Her preference was for men. That’s how our friendship started way back in 2009. She came up and started talking to me. At the time, I was twenty-eight and had been living in Favela da Rocinha, one of the largest slums in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to conduct ethnographic research. “Eu adoro dar um it!” (I love to give an it!), she would tell me, laughing. It took me a while to understand what she meant by the expression “to give an it.” Another friend of mine in the favela volunteered to explain. “To ‘give an it’ is to take liberties with other people,” he told me. “In this case, to give actually means to take. You take the necessary freedom to do something you want to do.” I inattently wrote about the situation in my field notes. I did not realize at that moment how intricate the topic of “liberties” would prove to be in the favela. I scribbled: “Natasha likes to go around chatting and blowing kisses at men. She is ‘giving an it.’ She derives freedom from situations in which I imagined she had none, given all the oppression, prejudice, and challenges she faces as a travesti living in the slum.”

I still keep a picture of Natasha taken in 2010. Seven people—four women and three men—pose in front of a black-and-white tiled wall, like pieces in a game of chess. We were at the Bar & Mar, a decaying nightclub in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, and no one knew exactly how the night would end. Who would fuck whom? Who would kiss whom? Who would pay whom? In her black, pointy high heels, Natasha is the tallest one in the photo. Her strapless,
metallic dress is glued to her slender body, giving her a golden glow. She has no breasts, but she looks very feminine, with smooth hair and delicately applied makeup. Her black smoky eyes draw attention. In her right hand, she holds a glass of whiskey. Natasha didn’t like to drink, but that night, she’d made an exception. She’d accepted an invitation to share a fancy bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label with the young, muscular man standing behind her in the photograph. He wears a tight white T-shirt and blue jeans with white shoes. His bulging biceps wrap around her waist, and his knee peeks out from in between her legs. Natasha responds with a slight smile. She’s enjoying the manly arms wrapped around her. Those were glorious times for us.

When I started my research in Rocinha, I had minimal knowledge of daily life in favelas. I believe the same would be true for most middle-class Brazilians, like myself. I had never lived in Rio, either. My previous experiences with favelas had been mainly through the media, either watching the news or depictions through movies such as *City of God*, which uses a documentary-style language to portray extreme violence as the “real” face of favelas. During my years studying anthropology, I brought some nuance to this knowledge through readings on social justice, development, liberalism, and other important themes in urban studies. However, nothing quite prepared me for the situations I experienced when I moved to Favela da Rocinha.

While living in the favela, I had initially expected to witness and register contemporary processes of oppression using ethnographic methods. I assumed that the scarcity of freedom in the lives of the Brazilian urban poor would be an important topic for in-depth anthropological analysis. Above all, I hoped that an exposé on the lack of liberties in Brazilian favelas could help to bring change to the unfortunate situation I anticipated to encounter. However, it only took me a couple of weeks of fieldwork to start noticing that there was no scarcity of freedoms in the favela in an absolute sense. Instead, day after day, I began to notice different expressions and practices of freedom in the slum. The problem seemed to be that most of these favela freedoms were not the same freedoms that I already knew, and those which liberal supporters cherished. Some of them were very unfamiliar to me and probably unfamiliar to others who had never set foot in a favela. Contrary to what I had anticipated, the research process for this book allowed me to witness liberties where I least expected them to exist, and to understand their importance for those who lived by them.

In late 2012, unexpectedly, I lost contact with Natasha. It took me a couple of months to encounter Natasha again. In a sense, we only actually reconnected after I was able to understand more about my norma-
tive prejudices and about her liberalism; the pleasures and pain that a “liberated” (liberada) life in the favela implied for my friend. What are the multiple forms that liberalism assumes in Brazil? What are the relationships among different forms of power that create the conditions of possibility for people living in the slums of Rio—not only for the elites—to desire and experience freedom? What do the intersections between “neighborhoods of urban relegation” and “queer forms of life” tell us about contemporary operations of liberation? What happens when we take seriously the possibility that liberalism can be inflected by subjects considered deviant in terms of gender and sexuality, subaltern in terms of class, and marginal in terms of power?

The word liberalism derives from the Latin liber, with a deep history that can be traced back to the Greco-Roman empires. The normative definition of liberalism evoked in this book springs from events in European history, such as the Glorious Revolution (1688), the French Revolution (1789), and ideas derived from “contractualist” philosophy, mainly through the work of John Locke. The core argument of this mode of Eurocentric liberalism is that individual liberties should be protected against abuses of the sovereign, who should have enough power to avoid the potential chaos inherent to the “state of nature” (“the war of all against all”) but not enough power to become a tyrant. In normative liberalism, “society” should be organized to protect core values such as private property and individual autonomy. Formerly a European project, this mode of liberalism can now be found in most territories around the globe. It has aligned itself with both left and right political currents, and over the centuries it has ambiguously contributed to projects such as colonialism and slavery. Nowadays, liberalism finds its highest expression in the United States, where it is a fundamental value of the American Constitution.

This book presents a challenge to the stability of normative liberalism. It does so not through an aloof philosophical argument but through the use of grounded ethnographic theory. In practice, normative liberalism has promoted the freedom of privileged subjects, those entitled to “rights” (usually white, adult, heteronormative, and bourgeois people), at the expense of other minorities (such as children, travestis, Amerindians, Black people, and slum dwellers). A typical response to these inequalities has been to campaign for the “inclusion” of minorities into liberalism; in other words, the universalization of Eurocentric liberties. A queer anthropology of liberalism should take issue with such aspiration.

My fieldwork focused on questions of liberdade and how it was practiced in the life of favela dwellers. In Portuguese, the official language in Brazil, the word liberdade encompasses the meanings of both freedom
and liberty, without distinction. Meanwhile, *liberalismo* has acquired a much more “economic” dimension in Brazil, as a possible shorthand for *neoliberalismo*. As I was preparing this book, I was aware that “liberalism” has a complicated history in relation to questions of freedom, especially for marginalized subjects. It was a conscious decision to mobilize such a signifier as part of the analytical framework I propose. My use of the word is not meant to straightforwardly translate *liberalismo* into “liberalism,” nor simply to reaffirm the established Eurocentric connotations that the word expresses in English. I choose to translate a marginalized politics of freedom under the heading of “liberalism” as an effort to introduce difference to the established meanings of the word in English. As a move toward the decolonization of liberalism, I intend to make such a familiar concept strange. In doing so, I wish to express an appreciation for the minoritarian modes of *liberdade* (freedom and liberty) that I witnessed in Favela da Rocinha, postulating them on a par with one of the most cherished concepts of the Western philosophical tradition. As such, I argue for an understanding of liberalism much more aligned with a politics of liberation than has been the case otherwise.

Minorities are not excluded from the liberal project in an absolute sense. Liberalism presupposes the existence of the “unfree.” Nevertheless, subjects historically marginalized in normative liberalism also respond to their dislocated condition. One way they do so is through a process that queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz would call “disidentification,” creative strategies through which minoritarian populations engage with dominant forces to produce their own truths. What also happens is that some truths regarding liberalism tend to be rendered invisible because they do not conform to core (Eurocentric) liberal values. *Minoritarian liberalisms* are not necessarily individualistic and focused on private property, for example. Acts of disidentification offer the conditions of possibility for “a disempowered politics or positionality [of freedom, I would add] that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”

In my research for this book, long-term fieldwork and ethnographic methods have proven to be critical tools that allowed me not just to witness the existence of minoritarian modes of liberalism in a Brazilian favela but also to understand that these liberalisms operate according to their own theories. Rather than struggling to preserve Eurocentric meanings of liberalism so as to disqualify experiences of freedom in the life of minorities as something other than liberalism (as *libertinism*, for example), my proposal is that, in the company of Natasha Kellem and other queer friends from the favelas, the power and stability of normative liberalism should be challenged.