

## “THE ENERGY OF OTHERS”

### Narratives of Envy and Purification among Former Grassroots Community Leaders in Porto Alegre, Brazil

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*Abstract: This article examines the appearance of religious metaphors and imagery—related to the evil eye, envy, energy, and purification—in the narratives of former leaders from Porto Alegre’s internationally renowned initiative in direct democracy, the Participatory Budget. The data come from qualitative interviews conducted with female grassroots community leaders who for various reasons have withdrawn from active civic participation. While notions of envy and evil eye are commonplace in everyday life in Brazil, their appearance in discourse around citizen participation appears out of place. This article uses four ethnographic cases to examine how notions of envy and evil eye are drawn upon to explain discontinued civic participation. I argue that the apparent anachronism of religious imagery such as envy and evil eye reflects a widespread assumption among activists, politicians, and scholars that civic participation initiatives like the Participatory Budget are inherently secular. I also advance the broader argument that bringing scholarly attention to nonpolitical metaphors and tropes that shape grassroots political experience leads to a more complete account of citizenship practices and identities in Porto Alegre.*

#### “A LOT OF NEGATIVE ENERGY”

This was a day of novelties. Thais, a middle-aged woman and longtime community activist in Porto Alegre, was proudly showing me around her new house.<sup>1</sup> Until recently, she and her daughters had lived in a cramped, one-room hovel in an irregular housing settlement, or *vila*, across town.<sup>2</sup> Because the residence was within forty meters of a large open sewer, it qualified Thais to receive a “relocation bonus” of R\$40,000 (about US\$16,000) under a municipal initiative designed to improve the water quality of the estuary into which the river drained. The terms of the relocation bonuses had taken years to work out, and most of the negotiations had taken place in the local forum for a participatory budgeting initiative implemented by the leftist Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) in the early 1990s that transferred control over the municipal public works budget to volunteer neighborhood association leaders. In multiple accounts from across the social sciences, this initiative was celebrated as an example of direct citizen participation and possibly of a public sphere, along Habermasian lines, of trans-

1. In this article, I refer to all people, organizations, and locales using pseudonyms.

2. *Vila* is roughly synonymous with the word *favela*, used more frequently elsewhere in Brazil to refer to irregular housing settlements originating from illegal land occupations.

parent deliberation, in which citizens put down their status differences to arrive at consensus on the collective good.<sup>3</sup> The Participatory Budget (PB) and later the World Social Forum placed Porto Alegre at the forefront of leftist experimentation in Latin America. Thais was active in the Participatory Budget for over a decade and endeavored tirelessly over the years to represent her vila in negotiations over the relocation bonuses. But now, having taken her own bonus, she has opted to leave the district and move to an area where she knows virtually no one.

While she shows me around the two-story house—a fixer-upper to be sure, but a remarkable contrast with her former abode—I playfully ask Thais if she has given up community politics. “I’m not the least bit interested . . . No more!” (*Não tenho interesse nenhum . . . Chega!*), she tells me. I’m not sure how seriously to take her words, as her years of civic participation epitomized the active citizenship for which Porto Alegre has become internationally recognized. Moreover, her experiences as a community leader were central to how she viewed herself and was viewed by others. Thais pauses, looking out the kitchen window into the small patio at the back of the house, and then begins to explain her decision to remove herself from neighborhood politics and participatory budgeting. It is here that she moves into an expressive idiom that seems strange and out of place to me. “In the [Participatory Budget] meetings, you’re gonna expose yourself to a lot of people. There’s a lot of negative energy, which could even [cause] harm.” She tells me how, during her years of participation, she would sometimes become overwhelmed with bad energy and need to find ways to rid herself of its harmful influence. I ask Thais to tell me more about “bad energy” within the Participatory Budget and almost immediately she mentions envy (*inveja*). “If you manage to [be successful in your community work], someone’s gonna have envy. I have high sensitivity so I’m very vulnerable, Benjamin.”

Envy is everywhere, she tells me, and its harmful effects are “worse than a hex.” Her unfolding narrative leaves me dumbfounded; I have known Thais for more than a decade and this is the first time she has spoken to me of energy and envy in relation to neighborhood politics. As she tells me more, we stray even further from political matters.

#### ENVY, ENERGY, AND SCHOLARLY BLIND SPOTS IN THE POST-PT ERA

This article examines the appearance of notions of energy and envy in the narratives of four women from the Beira-Rio district of Porto Alegre, all longtime grassroots community leaders and delegates within the district’s budgeting forum. The narratives presented here emerged in informal conversations and semi-structured interviews I conducted in January 2012 as part of a larger, ongoing project to examine changing patterns of civic participation in Porto Alegre.<sup>4</sup> These four women are among the two dozen community leaders I came to know during

3. For historical background, organizational details, and outcomes evaluations of the Participatory Budget, see Abers 2000; Baiocchi 2005; Fedozzi 1999; Wampler 2007.

4. The protocol for this research was approved by the State University of New York–New Paltz Institutional Review Board.

my dissertation fieldwork in 2002 and 2003 (Junge 2007). In this research, I aimed to understand how grassroots leaders see themselves as citizens and how their civic participation relates to their senses of themselves as women and men, and to other, nonpolitical spheres of their lives. From the original group of leaders, the four considered in this article are a subset of women who, as of January 2012, had withdrawn from grassroots community politics generally and from the district's budgeting forum specifically.

These withdrawals took place during the post-PT era—the years since 2004, when the Workers Party lost control of city hall. As I have argued elsewhere (Junge 2012), the Participatory Budget's status as a deliberative, participatory public was undermined during these years due to receding government support and the rise of new institutions and groups—chiefly nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private business coalitions—that communicate directly with their communities and target populations rather than using the district budgeting forum as the central hub. At the same time, the PT was embroiled in a national corruption scandal, feeding cynicism among grassroots community leaders in Porto Alegre about the promises of progressive politics.

In recent years, I have come to recognize a blind spot in my studies of grassroots political leaders in Porto Alegre—namely, that I gave only scant attention to the possible significance of spirituality and religion in these people's political lives. This inattention turns out to be surprisingly common among Latin Americanist social-movement scholars, although Porto Alegre is perhaps an extreme case, since its citizen-participation initiatives were designed and have always been officially represented as secular in character. Indeed, initiatives like the Participatory Budget seem strong examples of what Daulatzai (2004, 567) has called the "sanitizing of religious sentiment" from civic participation initiatives, whereby "secularistic practices have come to be seen as the 'normal' expression of oppositional [and progressive] politics." This observation resonates with the nominally secular character of participatory initiatives in Porto Alegre, in terms of both official discourses and countless meetings I have observed over the years. Other than the occasional mention of a baptism or going to church on Sunday, my informants seldom spoke of religion or spirituality—theirs or anyone else's—in conversations about such "political" matters as civic participation, democracy, or community development.

During these early years of research, I was of course aware that participation in established religious institutions was a part of everyday life in Porto Alegre's vilas. From 2003 survey data that I collected from a representative sample of 270 adult residents of the Beira-Rio vila, where I resided during fieldwork, for example, I knew that approximately two-thirds claim some form of active religious participation and that among active practitioners, the most commonly reported forms were Catholicism (62.4 percent), Spiritism (20.1 percent), Afro- and indigenous-derived practices such as Candomblé or Umbanda (11.8 percent), and Evangelical Protestantism (8.7 percent). These affiliations were reflected in the geography of nearby religious institutions: Within a mile of my residence I could find a Catholic church, four Evangelical churches, a Seventh-Day Adventist church, a Jehovah's Witness church, a Mormon stake, two Spiritist *casas espíritas*,

and four Umbanda houses. Over the course of two years of fieldwork, I had direct exposure to all of these institutions, making the acquaintance of pastors and priests and attending several baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Looking back at my field notes and interview transcripts, I see that religious metaphors would pop up from time to time in my conversations with community leaders—for example, narratives of awakening citizen consciousness reminiscent of Christian conversion narratives (Junge 2011). These appearances were rare, however, and I was prone to discount them as “noise” that did not properly belong in a conversation about (or analysis of) politics.

I have come to appreciate more fully the constraints this inattention imposed on my understanding of citizen identities among grassroots leaders. In scholarly accounts, religion has often been characterized as a catalyst for civic participation for its capacity to promote motivation, recruitment, and ability (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; see also Oxhorn 1995; Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard 2003); to provide templates for participation and social justice (López Maya, this volume; Bruneau and Hewitt 1989); to provide sources of political information, opportunities, and incentives to engage in politics (Greenberg 2000); and to stimulate networks of civic engagement (Putnam 2000). Since grassroots leaders are often motivated by religious values and gain strength through religious beliefs as they seek to interpret the world and achieve political voice, ignoring religion and spirituality not only sidesteps an important topic but leads to an impoverished account of civic participation and citizenship, and therefore of the broader implications of Porto Alegre’s experimentations in participatory democracy.

#### ANTHROPOLOGIES OF ENVY, WITCHCRAFT, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

The presence of a discourse on envy and purification among community leaders like Thais will not surprise any student of Brazilian—or for that matter Latin American—society and culture. Variations of an “evil eye” folk belief complex are remarkably common in Latin America and have been heavily studied by anthropologists, folklorists, historians, and psychologists (Elworthy [1895] 2003; Pitt-Rivers 1970; Dundes 1992; Smith and Kim 2007). According to the logic of the complex, when one person looks on another with envy, harm can ensue in the form of bad luck, illness, or other physiological symptoms. In contrast to jealousy, which is typically focused on objects and possessions, envy is directed to the person possessing the coveted object. Among nonindigenous Brazilians, the complex is widely recognized and is commonly known as *olho gordo* (fat eye) or *olho grande* (big eye). To protect oneself from the negative force of envy (typically understood to be a drying force), a variety of plants and objects are used, including the placement of a pepper plant (*pimenteira*), snake plant (*espada de São Jorge*), a garlic wreath, or statuette (such as a cow horn) around the house, or wearing a protective amulet (Reily 2002; Ansell 2009). Treatments for the negative energy brought on by envy include taking a saltwater bath, taking an herbed foot bath, placing an herb (*arruda de galinha*) behind the ears, or visiting a healer (*benzedeira*).

In anthropological studies of contemporary urban and rural settings in Brazil, concerns over the envy of others have been linked to broader social, political,

and economic factors. In Roberto Silva's (2007, 66) studies of Porto Alegre vilas, for example, neighborhood residents may spend savings to renovate the interiors of their houses while leaving the exteriors more or less in disrepair—all to avoid suspicions that they might have too much, which would in turn make them vulnerable to robbery. Aaron Ansell's (2009) ethnographic study of participatory development projects in the backland small towns of Brazil's northeastern *sertão* region illustrate how development resources can trigger concerns about evil eye, which in turn influence the parameters of allowable speech in village association meetings. The intrusion of concerns about envy, moreover, can disrupt prospects for the "transparent deliberation" envisioned in development discourse.<sup>5</sup>

Given the widespread distribution of evil eye variants in Brazil, familiarity with a discourse of envy among my Porto Alegre informants is no real surprise. What is interesting here, rather, is the seeming "out-of-place-ness" of this discourse in relation to Porto Alegre citizen-participation initiatives like the Participatory Budget—the sense that talk of energy and envy does not fit with talk of participatory citizenship and democracy. Indeed, to date no published research on Porto Alegre's grassroots political landscape considers the significance of religious meaning in the formation of citizen subjectivity.

The emergence of ritual and magic under political conditions of democratization and economic conditions of neoliberalism has received sustained anthropological attention in recent years in the context of postapartheid South Africa (Ashforth 2005; Niehaus 2013). Against the backdrop of intensified market production and class division, the attribution of malevolent powers driven by jealousy and envy has congealed in the form of witchcraft accusation.<sup>6</sup> These authors show how idioms of magic and witchcraft, rather than vestiges of past tradition, are inherent to modernity itself insofar as they express long-standing frustrations over unequal access to wealth, work, housing, and land, now in response to a project of political and economic transformation that is fundamentally unreliable—fundamentally "magical"—and has failed to deliver a better life (see also Geschiere 1997; Taussig 1997; and Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000). While narratives of envy and energy in this article do not explicitly reference witches—that is, a category of person who aims to bring harm upon others through the use of preternatural power (Austen 1993, 90)—the existing scholarship on witchcraft in other world areas nonetheless raises important questions about the presumed secularity of leftist political experimentation in Brazil in recent years, as well as the putative rationality of contemporary Latin American modernities.<sup>7</sup>

With these scholarly and disciplinary critiques in mind, during my 2012 follow-up visit to Porto Alegre, I incorporated the question, "Do you have a spiri-

5. These studies fit into a broader body of anthropological research emphasizing economic dimensions to concerns about envy (Foster 1965, 1972; Dionisopoulos-Mass 1976; Lykiardopoulos 1981; Maloney 1976; Rebhun 1994; Spooner 1976; Stephenson 1979) and tending to focus on how the discourse of envy serves to help manage excess in contexts of limited resources.

6. For classic anthropological studies of witchcraft in Africa see, for example, Evans-Pritchard 1937; Foster 1965; Peel 1968.

7. For historical perspectives on women, envy, and witchcraft in other Latin American settings, see Osorio 1999 and Few 2002.

tual side?" (*Você tem um lado espiritual?*) into conversations with my network of grassroots leaders. The question is imperfect since its reference to "sides" presupposes a clear distinction between sacred and secular selves. Moreover, it does not account for a possible (indeed, likely) disconnect between what informant and anthropologist might understand this term to mean—or the possibility that neither possesses a singular, coherent understanding of the term. (I did not offer a definition.) At the same time, this seemed preferable to asking explicitly about "religion," a term that would almost certainly trigger associations with religious institutions and formal religious participation. In the end, the question effectively elicited a range of narratives, including about formal religious belief and practice but also about religious meaning surrounding past experiences of civic participation and grassroots community politics. The four cases I consider in this article emphasize the latter variety of narrative, namely, how women who have removed themselves from grassroots community politics—known colloquially as *afastadas* (women who have distanced themselves)—make sense of their prior experiences of civic participation, and how religious tropes, metaphors, and images enter into this sense making.

#### CASE STUDIES

*Vera: "The fat eye boxes people in."*

Since the mid-1990s, Vera has occupied various leadership positions in the district budgeting forum and in the neighborhood association for the small vila where she and her husband have lived for more than twenty years. A proud Afro-Brazilian, Vera did not finish elementary school and has not pursued steady employment outside the house for some years, staying at home to look after the house and her one son. During her early years of participation in the budgeting forum, Vera fought hard for a health clinic (*posto de saúde*), which was eventually funded and constructed across the street from her house. To this day, the *posto* remains a source of pride and status for her. In recent years, however, Vera's participation in the budgeting forum has dwindled and, as of January 2012, ceased entirely. This stems in part from issues at home demanding her attention (illness and death in her extended family, among other things). She has confided in me, however, that as her vila has obtained basic infrastructure over the years, she has felt less inclined to participate.

On my most recent visit, Vera quickly reassured me, "We are well, thank God." Vera's husband, Paulo, is transitioning into retirement and her son, now in his mid-twenties, is working as a driver at a downtown health clinic. It was while she was updating me on her husband's retirement that the theme of *inveja* (envy) first came up. Paulo worked for over twenty years at a large downtown hospital painting furniture and doing other maintenance work. Concerned over possible changes to Brazil's social security system, Paulo, who is fifty-seven years old, decided to pursue an early-retirement option. To compensate for the lower pension, he continues to work on a no-benefits, contractual basis at the same job. Like many working-class Brazilians in recent years, Paulo has found the resources to



purchase a car. At one point while Vera catches me up on Paulo's retirement, I gleefully exclaim, "Uau, aposentado!" (Wow, retired!) at fairly high volume, and Vera asks me to lower my voice. "We haven't told everyone," she explains, and tells me she worries that the neighbors might have envy (*inveja*) of his pension and his car.

Despite her own withdrawal from active participation in district politics, Vera likes to keep tabs on the major projects being debated in and outside of the budgeting forum, and on the comings and goings of Beira-Rio's network of grassroots leaders. Vera knows about Thais's relocation to another part of the city, for example, and expresses admiration for her friend's courage but also seems incredulous that a single woman with three kids would uproot and move to a neighborhood where she knows no one. Vera has also closely followed the development of an NGO-funded community recycling center down the street, in which some other Beira-Rio leaders have become involved. In recent years, the center has elicited disdain and cynicism from some leaders who see it as undermining the budgeting forum's longtime status as the central hub for district development. Vera's update on the center is a story of unexpected inversions. Leaders who had in the past publicly and vociferously criticized the initiative now celebrate it (and in some cases take credit for its success). With no prompting from me, she reflects, "It's all envy" (*É tudo inveja*). Vera tells me how, with the fragmentation of community politics in Beira-Rio, grassroots leaders have become more divided, each looking out for their own interests. Like many other community leaders, she links this to a broader process of political polarization in the city: "Everyone's mind is made up," she tells me, explaining that partisan allegiances have become crystallized and that the budgeting forum itself has been the target of outside manipulation from political parties and religious institutions.

While I have long known that Vera identifies as Catholic, religion and spirituality have seldom come up in our numerous conversations about grassroots politics over the years. When I ask her whether she has a "spiritual side," however, her response comes forth with enthusiasm and detail. "I'm into any kind of religion," she tells me. She is quick to clarify, however, that she was baptized and that "God comes first." Still, she is frustrated with the Catholic Church's position on marriage, sexual orientation, and abortion, as well as with the pedophilia scandals.

Vera participates in a range of religious practices and institutions, although none of these neatly fit into the conventional category of worship. Instead, they are about solving personal problems, purification, and enjoying particular socio-cultural scenes. Every two months, she goes to the nearby Catholic Church, although not for mass but rather to the Wednesday night prayer group (*novena*), where a young and popular pastor leads prayers to the Virgin Mary, Untier of Knots, directed at the resolution of specific personal worries. (Vera tells me she thinks her visits to the *novena* helped her son get his downtown job.)

Vera also sometimes attends activities at nearby spirit houses (*casas espíritas*), which follow the ideas of nineteenth-century French educator Allan Kardec and emphasize the manifestations and teachings of spirits (Santos 1997; Hess 2010). Vera goes to the houses to deal with "negative energy" (*energia negativa*). "We pick up a lot of energy from others," she says. Even hugging someone, she explains,

can pass on bad energy to you. A couple of times per year, Vera frequents a nearby Afro-Brazilian temple (*casa de religião*), where what is sometimes pejoratively referred to as Batuque is practiced. Vera has attended with friends and with her son but never with her husband, who comes from an Evangelical family and disapproves of what he considers to be “black magic.” (Like most, Vera rarely speaks openly about frequenting these establishments.) She goes both to receive advice on specific problems (typically from a priestess who performs cowrie-shell divination) and to purify herself from negative energy. She tells me she attended a purification ritual recently, specifically to rid herself from the harmful effects that might ensue from neighborly interest and envy as knowledge of her husband’s retirement spreads.

Vera’s interest in “animatist” frameworks rooted in energy, and animist frameworks focused on spirits extends to some newer and less well-established religious institutions in Brazil. While visiting relatives in Florianópolis last year, for example, she was taken to the Johrei Center run by the Church of World Messianity, a “new religion” with Japanese roots focused on channeling divine and purifying light (*johrei*) into the body of another for the purposes of healing, purification, and solving life problems. Vera shows me a prayer she was given and is supposed to recite daily, which she says should remove “toxins” and “spiritual impurities” from her. I ask her if she feels the Johrei recitation has been helpful and she responds enthusiastically: “I get results.” One religious institution in which Vera hasn’t participated much is Evangelical Christianity, which she finds judgmental and discomfitingly ostentatious. She says the displays of wealth she’s seen at Evangelical services make her feel strange. (“Why them and not me?” she reflects.) Again, it seems we are talking about *inveja*, although now it is *her* *inveja*.

At a certain point in our conversation, I ask Vera why over the years she and other community leaders from around the district have seldom, if ever, mentioned religion, spirits, energy, or purification to me in any way related to grassroots politics. She thinks for a minute and responds: “I think . . . it’s politics, Benjamin. Because you go to the budgeting forum behind an objective for the community. And this religion thing is . . . it’s something personal for you.” She adds that mentioning religion in budgeting meeting these days is very risky, given circulating accusations about external manipulation by the Catholic and Evangelical churches. She also says that as a *negra* (Afro-Brazilian woman), mention of energy or spirits might lead people to associate her with casting spells and malevolent intent.

“I never went [to PB meetings] to get something [just for me],” she tells me. She contrasts herself with other leaders (several of whom are close friends) who got jobs through the community-development projects they successfully lobbied for in the budgeting forum (working at the health center and child care center, for example). As with the accusations surrounding the community recycling center down the street, there is a strong sense in Vera’s comments that community leaders should not make themselves vulnerable to being perceived as having put personal interests over the interests of the communities they represent. This tempts the “big eye” of envy, which can “box people in.”



*Sister Clara: "God is the energy, the force that moves everything."*

Sister Clara has run the Beira-Rio district's largest public community child care center since it opened in 1994. With more than seven hundred children to look after, the center is linked to more low-income households than any other institution in the district. A Catholic nun in the Franciscan order, Sister Clara is now in her mid-seventies. Despite being short and soft-spoken, Clara's tireless lobbying efforts on behalf of the center, in and out of the budgeting forum, have contributed to her reputation as a force to be reckoned with. When I saw her in early 2012, she expressed excitement about state funding she had helped secure to completely rebuild the center's main buildings, nestled into the edge of one of the district's largest and poorest vilas. Five years ago, Sister Clara ceased her participation in the budgeting meetings. She explains this publicly as due to her advanced age and the desire for more calm in her life, as well as her frustration with the non-PT mayor who took over city hall in 2004 and, in her view, has undermined the effectiveness of the Participatory Budget. Sister Clara feels that the PB has become increasingly subject to the manipulation of municipal politicians and parties, which has weakened it and left her disenchanted. Informed leaders in the district are also aware, however, that her discontinuation of PB participation coincided exactly with a shake-up between the two drug lords active in her vila. In the resultant turf delineation, Clara was forbidden from traversing the vila's central corridor, effectively blocking her access to the road leading to where PB meetings are held.

Asking a Franciscan nun if she has a spiritual side feels a bit ridiculous, but I do it nonetheless, and Sister Clara is happy to respond. "I have to believe in a greater force, the mystical aspect. The spirit of God illuminates all. [God is] energy, the force that moves everything." While it is beyond the purview of this inquiry to tease out the origins and subtle intricacies of Sister Clara's professed religious beliefs, it is important to highlight her choice, here and elsewhere in our conversation, to make use of a notion of "energy" to represent God. For Clara, the world is saturated with a singular, divine force that cannot be directly observed or manipulated by humans but that nonetheless animates all existence. Elsewhere in our conversation, she speaks of God in two other, overlapping senses relevant to her political convictions and history of civic participation: God as creator and God as principle. "God created man to be happy, not to go hungry," she tells me, now emphasizing God's agentive role in the creation of the world. Creation was driven by intention, and Clara summarizes God's intention for humanity as "happiness," presented in opposition to "hunger."

Later, she moves further in the direction of representing "God" as a principle rather than an agentive, omnipotent force. Here she describes God as synonymous with "justice" (*justiça*) and "truth" (*verdade*). Clara's mention of justice suggests to me a possible affinity with liberation theology. I ask her about this directly and she readily affirms the connection, explaining that Brazilian liberation theologians have strongly influenced her thinking and her perspective on civic participation over the years. To promote the well-being of a vila's residents, she tells me, "you have to insert yourself in politics, in education, in culture." Part

of this insertion is living within the community where one works. (Clara lives a short walk farther into the vila in which her child care center is located.) As she tells me, "Christ, after all, lived among the fishermen, got to know their culture." Her discourse stitches together images of pastoral insertion with a political stance against what she perceives to be the ravages of neoliberalism: "As a Franciscan nun, I have to participate. But not to make more prisons. Yes, to speak out against savage capitalism." In an era of "savage capitalism," Clara opines, the Catholic Church has lost its grounding with the erosion of the family as the foundational unit of society. "There's nothing left that's sacred," she tells me, and fewer and fewer experience their families as a source of "that happiness."

I ask Clara about the relationship between spirituality and citizenship, and she responds without hesitation: "Spirituality is what gives meaning to citizenship." Here, she uses "spirituality" in the same way that she elsewhere uses "faith." For Clara, all humans—even atheists—have a deep-seated predisposition to faith. "In the back of the mind is the desire to believe in a higher power," she tells me, and it is this natural inclination toward a transcendental realm and force that provides people with frames through which to see themselves as rights-bearing subjects. Hearing this, I ask Clara what she thinks of Afro-derived religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda since they seem to me to be founded on a similar appeal to the transcendental. Quite to my surprise, this Catholic nun responds, "I respect [them]. . . . The important thing is to have faith in a higher power. . . . This is what makes citizenship possible."

Toward the end of our conversation, I ask Sister Clara if she has any hope for the Participatory Budget as an effective instrument of direct citizen participation, and it is in this context that "envy" emerges. "It's all envy," she tells me. Her child care center is one of the few community-based institutions in the district that has done well by the PB in recent years, and this has triggered jealousy and suspicion among other community leaders. "It was in part because of this that I left!" she exclaims, telling me after a lengthy pause, "It can hurt you." We need a "reordering of the PB," she says and politely lets me know she needs to get back to work.

*Bethe: "No one needs me."*

When I call up Bethe late one morning, I'm pretty sure I've woken her up since she sounds drowsy and unfocused. She's happy to hear from me, though, and gives me directions to visit her a couple days later. I need those directions as she's moved since my last visit, two years earlier. For fifteen years she lived in the same vila as Sister Clara, raising five girls, mostly on her own. (She is now in her late forties.) In the 1990s, she began to participate in her vila's neighborhood association and later in the district's budgeting forum. In time, she occupied leadership positions in both. Her departure from the vila in 2010 was precipitated by two factors. The same shake-up among the vila's drug lords that prompted Sister Clara's withdrawal from PB participation left Bethe worrying for her life and the safety of her daughters. About this time, Bethe took advantage of the same initiative that had allowed Thais to move, using her relocation bonus to purchase a house in the Santo Amaro district, more than an hour's bus ride from the downtown area.

Bethe didn't graduate from high school and over the years has relied on a variety of informal and temporary jobs to make ends meet. Like many female community leaders from Porto Alegre's vilas, the knowledge and connections Bethe has gained through her civic participation have helped her find work, for example, campaign work during the election period, teaching literacy to other women in the community, or working part-time at the local health center. The last time I'd seen her, Bethe was on the directorate of the community recycling center down the street from Vera's house.

When I first met Bethe in 2002, she told me she possessed a "spirit of leadership," which seemed about right given her extroverted personality and her outspoken and sometimes aggressive manner of addressing others. Little of this spirit is on display when she meets me at my bus stop, however. As we make our way to her house, moving from a large *avenida* through bustling commercial side streets and ending up in a quiet working-class residential neighborhood, she catches me up. "I bought a nice house, Benjamin," she tells me, "but I've been super-depressed since I moved here. Clinically depressed!" As I soon see, the house she was able to purchase with her relocation bonus—a two-story, three-bedroom house with a separate unit to rent out—is quite a step up from the vila where she'd lived in Beira-Rio. But she knows hardly anyone in Santo Amaro, and the one-hour bus ride to the city's center (not to mention the bus fare) leaves her effectively stranded here. While she's proud of the house, living "on the grid"—that is, having to pay for water and electricity each month—has been a real struggle for her, especially in the absence of employment prospects. (In Beira-Rio, her electricity had come from an illegal hookup.) Since moving to Santo Amaro, Bethe has ceased civic participation of any sort and has become completely disconnected with the Beira-Rio budgeting forum. While she stays in touch with friends involved in the recycling center, she no longer participates in any of the center's activities. ("It's too far," she explains bluntly.)

Unreliable men are also an important theme in the story of Bethe's depression. Her oldest daughter had gotten pregnant soon after the move to Santo Amaro, but the daughter's current boyfriend (who is not the child's father) refused to let her move in with him if the baby was coming too—so the baby stayed with Bethe, who is in effect raising him. Her second oldest daughter, now fifteen, got pregnant as well but had an abortion. Bethe's own husband—to whom she remains legally married—lives in Santo Amaro but at a girlfriend's house. While he occasionally stops by to say hello, he hasn't contributed a penny to helping Bethe, who has four daughters and a grandson to look after.

After moving to Santo Amaro, Bethe became emotionally withdrawn and, after about a month, had a mental breakdown leading to hospitalization in one of the city's largest public psychiatric hospitals. (By coincidence, this hospital is just down the street from Thai's new house across town.) She spent several weeks there, and she recounts her experiences during this period alternately with appreciation for the care she received, with affection for some of the friends she made, and with horror and embarrassment at the state she was in. During her internment, Bethe's daughters came to visit several times and she slowly improved. Still, she explains to me that even when she was released, she was overwhelmed with

the sense that “no one needs me.” I ask her how she’s dealt with that feeling and she responds, “I still feel it, but now I treat it with medicine,” by which she means antidepressants.

Bethe’s story is jarring to me, since she’d always weathered both the tumult of Beira-Rio’s community politics and the challenges of economic survival with gusto and resilience. When I ask her what she thinks caused her breakdown, she responds: “I simply don’t feel useful. Not that everything was perfect in Beira-Rio. There’s positive force and negative force, you know? We can destroy each other’s lives with envy, with rage. Negative thinking can dry a pepper plant.”<sup>8</sup>

I ask Bethe if she is talking about the budgeting forum and she proceeds to list well-known PB leaders (some friends of Bethe’s) who exuded “bad energy.” The list includes both women and men; it even includes Thais. (“Sometimes if you just got near her, her energy could hurt you,” Bethe tells me.) In most cases, these individuals gave off bad energy in the form of envy because they were operating from personal interest rather than representing their communities, leading, for example, to a harmful jealousy of Bethe’s success in obtaining the relocation bonus.

At this point in the conversation, I ask Bethe if she has a spiritual side, to which she replies: “I believe in God. I talk with God, ask for things. You have to have faith in a higher power.” She explains to me that she didn’t used to believe in God (“I didn’t believe in anything”) but increasingly—especially since her breakdown—she finds faith comforting (even if she rarely goes to church). She says that praying, along with her medications, has helped her get better. She mentions a third factor as well—purification—and the importance of finding ways to neutralize the harmful influence of negative energies such as envy. To this end, she tells me she’s attended a *casa espírita* a couple of times, and an Evangelical church here in Santo Amaro, where she participated in rituals to “get the devil out.” As our conversation begins to wind down, I can’t help but ask Bethe why, in more than a decade of interviews about grassroots politics, she has never once mentioned energy, envy, or purification, and she responds, “It’s a personal aspect. It’s something really private.”

#### BEYOND PARTICIPATORY CITIZENSHIP: A VIEW TO PERSONHOOD

The narratives of Thais, Vera, Clara, and Bethe illustrate a trope used by many longtime community leaders from Porto Alegre’s Beira-Rio district to make sense of their withdrawal in recent years from the participatory budgeting forum and grassroots civic participation more generally. As I have shown, the invocation of a discourse about energy and envy allows these four women to make claims “about themselves and the actions and motives of those they blame for their condition” (Rebhun 1994, 375). While previous scholarship has focused on religion as a pathway into political participation (see, for example, Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard 2003), this study reveals religion on the other side of participation, as a discourse of demobilization.

8. This is a colloquial expression reflecting the understanding of envy as a “drying” force.

There are a range of reasons given by these women for having ceased participation, including doubt as to what to demand now that major infrastructural achievements have been made, a desire for more calm, and frustration with outside manipulation of participatory budgeting by political parties and the Church. Alongside these proximate reasons, however, have come explanations of a different sort entirely—explanations that evoke the image of a world saturated with forceful energy, including negative energies such as envy, which can be neutralized through forms of purification. I am not suggesting that familiarity with the "evil eye complex" has increased for these women or that they never before made use of notions of energy and envy in reference to civic participation. Rather, I am suggesting that at a mature moment in participatory budgeting's tenure in Porto Alegre, the interpretive frame of envy has become prominent, and that this prominence tells us something important about the status and long-term promise of participatory democracy in Porto Alegre. Given the small sample size of my analysis, I cannot make generalizations regarding how widespread the phenomena analyzed here are in broader populations of grassroots community leaders (in Beira-Rio, Porto Alegre, etc.). Further, there is no systematic comparison between former and still-active leaders, or between female and male leaders. A careful assessment of which discourses are used by each of these subgroups is a task for future research.

Without a systematic comparison with the narratives of men who have ceased PB participation, conclusions about gendered dimensions to the discourse of envy and energy are speculative. Nonetheless, findings from previous studies in Brazil suggest that the patterns from these four narratives convey something about how Thais, Vera, Clara, and Bethe understand themselves as women. An important thesis that emerges from these narratives—a thesis for systematic exploration in future research—is that the range of emotion women are allowed to feel and express through speech is different from that of men (Rebhun 1994, 360). Part of these differences almost certainly have economic roots, namely, the greater economic dependence women face in low-income communities here and throughout Brazil—and the anxiety this dependence can generate (Rebhun 1994, 367). This is perhaps most strongly illustrated in the narrative of Bethe, who has more or less given up on men (including her husband) for financial support, which has only increased her fear for survival (see Gregg 2003, 97). Thais's statements about having "high sensitivity" and Bethe's declarations about feeling vulnerable to negative energy may reflect the more general perception that women's bodies are more open and therefore more susceptible to evil eye, anger, and envy (Rebhun 1994, 370; Robben 1988, 115; see also Duarte 1988). It is also likely that images of women with Catholic origins are at play in these narratives. On the one hand, these include the veneration of suffering as a "key social value [that] is greater for women than for men" (Rebhun 1994, 364), which perhaps gives women like Thais, Vera, Clara, and Bethe greater cultural license to speak openly of their fears, struggles, and triumphs. On the other hand, a prevalent religious discourse asks women above all to be selfless and compassionate—dispositions that would be incompatible with feelings of anger, jealousy, and envy (Rebhun 1994, 365).

Withdrawal from civic participation by women like these four suggests a pos-

sible disconnect between the idealized images of participation associated with Porto Alegre's internationally praised experiment in participatory democracy and the realities of long-term grassroots participation. Each of these women was highly successful in her involvement, achieving substantive gains for her community over the course of years of participation. Understanding the reasons for the seemingly paradoxical cessation of participation is crucial for understanding the shared discourse these women have used to make sense of their demobilization. As I have stated earlier, the participatory budgeting forum's status as the central hub for district-level politics has been undermined in the post-PT era with the growing influence of NGOs and the private sector in local development projects. The national Workers Party scandal unfolding during these years, meanwhile, no doubt contributed to cynicism about the party's vision of democracy among Porto Alegre residents who had previously supported the Participatory Budget. Yet there were internal contradictions and exclusions within the PB's constitution and within its official vision of participation that also contributed to the demobilization of women like Thais, Vera, Clara, and Bethe.

As I have argued elsewhere, the Participatory Budget has rarely addressed the relationship between the "civil" spaces of participation and the "uncivilized" and parallel system of local authority, drug lords, and drug traffic (Junge 2012, 421n2). For women like Clara and Bethe, this was a major factor in ceasing grassroots participation. In recent years, the PB has continued to operate, but its authority has weakened due to the emergence of other centers of power, including the "pseudo-publics" of NGOs, and due to external influence by political parties and the Church. Further, the vision of citizenship that developed within the PB over the 1990s tended to assume that the zeal of the early years of participation (which led to countless improvements in public works infrastructure in Porto Alegre's vilas) would lead to long-term enthusiasm—that the participatory citizen envisioned by the PB's architects would endure and that the PB's deliberative, solidarity-oriented ethos would result in a lasting mechanism to democratically transform individual interest into collective consensus. While participatory budgeting has undoubtedly helped many in Porto Alegre (most famously women from low-income vilas) to find political voice and agency (Abers 2000; Baiocchi 2005; Wilkinson 2007), it has relied on a certain privileging of behavior and sentiment that takes place in public spaces of participation. The PB's inattention to life outside the public sphere, I argue—in the domestic world of home life and the professional world of work life—is part of the reason why grassroots leaders in Porto Alegre (even during the PT years) never fully inhabited the participatory citizen-subject positions from the PB's official discourses. Put another way, PB citizenship does not constitute a fully integrated form of personhood and as such remains bound to public spaces of participation.

Within the PB's official conception of citizenship, collective interests arrived at through deliberation take priority over what participants refer to as their "private interests" (*interesses particulares*). But whereas the official construct sees private interest as transformed into collective consensus through participation, a prevailing vernacular perspective understands private interests as real and intrinsic to everyday life. As grassroots leaders are exposed to these two divergent perspec-



tives, their personal interests become increasingly partitioned from normative, upstanding, and speakable citizenship. Somewhat ironically, then, the PB, rather than transforming *interesse particular*, has pushed it into a more "private" space.

It is against the backdrop of the PB's this-worldly orientation, its inattention to noncivic life, and its rendering of personal interests as unspeakable that the appearance of *inveja* can now be made sense of. Envy—understood as a force emanating from and directed toward individual people—has no official place in the PB. Moreover, the PB's emphasis on grassroots deliberation as the source for progressive social, political, and economic transformation leaves little room for appeals to transcendental sources of change (e.g., energy or God), whether positive or negative. And yet, I see now that envy was always present as a possible reading, interpretation, or framing of grassroots community leaders' motives and achievements, albeit usually in the peripheral zones of participation. The possible activation of envy as an interpretive frame was discouraged, of course, by the PB's this-worldly ontology, not to mention by its association with Afro-Brazilian religions, which, as Vera pointed out, are stigmatized for their possible linkage to harmful intent. Rather than becoming neutralized or erased, however, notions of envy and energy constantly disrupted the smooth constitution of participants as citizen-subjects, remaining a potent force on the margins of participation. This potency, I argue, in part explains both the withdrawal from participation of women like Thais, Vera, Clara, and Bethe—a withdrawal that cannot be accounted for by the official model—and the ways these women have made sense of their ceased participation now that they are no longer constrained by a discourse that relegates the otherworldly and personal interests to the unspeakable.

#### CITIZENSHIP DISENCHANTED AND RE-ENCHANTED

This analysis opens up a different understanding of civic participation and grassroots community leadership in Porto Alegre. Rather than viewing the Participatory Budget as the home for the consolidation of a coherent, singular citizen subjectivity, we now see it as a setting in which a particular normative vision of citizenship is performed in center-stage, public spaces of participation but is constantly destabilized by counterdiscourses backstage from participation—and indeed offstage entirely. As I have argued, it is the PB citizenship model's inability to perceive or engage noncivic activity and identity that constrains its illocutionary potential—its ability to bring into being the form of citizen it envisions. For the four women I have considered—though especially for Thais, Vera, and Bethe—"personal" interests do not disappear with participation. Instead, they become partitioned into an increasingly private space because the PB does not admit them as legitimate for discussion or deliberation. Similarly, appeals to the transcendental are "out of place" in the PB and yet are—and always have been—potent and meaningful in the lives of participants.

Can one display feelings of pride and personal accomplishment about an achievement for one's neighborhood to leaders from other neighborhoods without running the perceived risk of exposure to the negative energies of envy? The implications of this study—and they are preliminary to be sure—are that the

long-term prospects for Porto Alegre's signature variety of participatory citizenship will depend on its ability to come to terms with the real, lived desire for transcendence in everyday life (Vásquez 2011, 324); with noncivic, nonpublic life; and with the experience of personal and private emotions such as envy and anxiety. The Participatory Budget's inattention to these elements to date in part explains the disenchantment of participatory citizenship in the post-PT years—but also the reenchantments that take place in the face of civic cynicism and despair through a discourse about the "energy of others."

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