The first time I entered a Brazilian *favela* (shantytown) was in Rio de Janeiro and the glare of structural violence nearly slapped me in the face. It was 2005 and a Brazilian friend who ran a non-governmental organization inside the favelas took me on a tour to see the work he was doing there. It was a splendid October day, tropically warm with clear skies. We were in his car with the windows rolled down and the sun shining brightly. We sped past beaches, down highways, and up narrows roads into shanty communities. Soon enough things began to change as the car slowed down and rolled toward a favela entrance. Roads were no longer well paved and homes began looking shoddy and poorly built. I could see off in the distance that there were two young men holding what looked like long sticks. We drove closer and I realized those long sticks were actually rifles.

My friend said in a commanding tone, “Roll down your window.” The car windows were tinted, no one could see inside from outside. I was warned that if someone drives through the *favela* with tinted windows rolled up they look suspicious and the “soldiers” could shoot. The “soldiers” needed to be able to see who was inside unfamiliar vehicles. I followed instructions. As we came to a stop the two young men walked to each side of the car, waving their rifles, and then stuck their heads clearly inside to see the occupants. These young men were very young. Perhaps they were about 16 years old, and they were black Brazilians. They knew my friend, smiled at him saying “oi, tudo bem” (hi, how you doing?) and chatted with him for a few minutes. My friend asked one of the boys if he was staying away from drugs. The boy grinned and hunched his shoulders, as if to say he wasn’t sure.

“I’m taking my American friend inside to see the place,” my friend said as the boys peeked inside the car window again to look me over. They smiled warmly. I was nervous. They let us enter, we drove inside slowly and I noticed another boy, about 15 years old tucking a handgun into the back of his shorts. One of the boys holding a rifle started talking to a girl who had a baby in her arms. The baby’s head was near the nose of the gun, as if danger was not eminent. She rocked her baby and talked to the boy soldier. Halfway up the block there was another boy sitting on the ground shooting himself up with a needle, in broad daylight. I asked my friend, “they all have guns but they look like nice boys, would they really shoot us?” His response, “you
better believe it!”

The images of those young people stayed with me for a while. I phoned another Brazilian friend and told her what I’d seen. Having lived in Rio all her life she said, “I understand your surprise when you saw the boys in the favela but really we are living with fear; war has been declared and these boys are our soldiers. We are in the middle of war.” War waged between the local police, the militias (vigilante street justice fighters), and the boy soldiers who police their own communities, the spaces where police do not serve and protect, and the spaces where police are known to be as corrupt as the worst offenders. The violence was not only imminent, it was endemic. Violence was a way of life for these young people.

In his work on two meanings of violence, Dustin Howes explores two contrasting types of violence, the first is associated with the manipulation and destruction of the body.\(^1\) The second type is associated with “profound fissures in our expectations as to how we ought to interact with one another.” He calls this “intersubjective violence” “which can consist of a word, a gesture or a look, either between individuals or as supported by institutions. Such violence can inspire fear, strike a core of one’s identity, or make a way of living and being impossible even without physical limitation or destruction.”\(^2\) Simply stated, violence is institutional. In ‘The Force of Law’ Derrida draws on Socrates and Benjamin suggesting that the law itself, and the police as an embodiment of the law, are indicative of violence. So while physical violence is an issue, Derrida suggests that simple existence of a particular set of government strictures can be violent. Law can be violent simply by embodying a way of being as opposed to physically punishing or harming citizens.

Alice McIntyre in her work with inner-city youth, highlights the multidimensionality of violence, naming four types: interpersonal, educational, structural, and environmental.\(^3\) Interpersonal is the one youth are consciously aware of and experience most immediately. Young people see and talk about physical fights, knives and guns daily. The other systemic violence results from direct or indirect decisions made by elite groups of people working within and through economic, political, and other societal systems. This violence expresses itself in underfunded schools, under resourced communi-

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2 Ibid., 3.