



The favela and its touristic transits

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the development of the *favela* into a tourist attraction. Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro, is the paradigmatic “tourist favela”, with tours taking place regularly since the early 1990s and with three thousand tourists visiting the site each month. The development of the *favela* into a tourist destination is seen as part of the so-called reality tours phenomenon and of the global circulation of the *favela* as a trademark. The methodology included different strategies: long interviews with qualified informants, field observation, and participant observation in different tours. The article concludes with some thoughts on tourism activities in impoverished areas.

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1. Introduction

In 1996, Michael Jackson came to Brazil to shoot his music video *They Don't Care About Us*, directed by Spike Lee. The Pelourinho in Salvador, and the Santa Marta hill in Rio de Janeiro's Zona Sul, were chosen as the settings for the video, which aimed to expose the indifference of public power and elites toward poverty.

While the Santa Marta population mostly celebrated – the megastar had a festive, samba-driven reception and was promised a Michael Jackson museum to commemorate his visit –, government authorities reacted with indignation. Ronaldo Cezar Coelho, then-Secretary of Commerce and Industry, argued the video would denigrate the city's image; Pelé claimed it would ruin Brazil's chances of hosting the 2004 Olympics. The political temperature rose when the key Rio papers published that the price of the locations had been negotiated with Dona Marta drug king. The district attorney demanded the shoot be halted, arguing serious damage to the tourism industry.

From that episode on, much has changed. Favelas have not only been acknowledged as a tourist destination by Rio's tourism office, but local government itself began to actively promote tourism in another favela, Morro da Providência (Freire-Medeiros, 2006). This certainly does not mean the negative image of the favelas and their inhabitants has vanished – quite the contrary, actually – but new politics of visibility are definitely at play, for good or bad. And it is these new visibility politics, which allow the elaboration and sale of the Rio favela as a tourist destination, that we shall deal with in this article.

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The reflections discussed here derive from an on-going research project, started in February 2005, which examines the conversion of poverty into a tourist commodity at a global scale.¹ My main empirical reference in Rio de Janeiro is Rocinha where a regular tourist market has been developed for over a decade now with an average of 3000 tourists visiting the site each month. Although the impressions of tourists and favela dwellers on tourism activities are also part of my research project, this article focuses on the dynamics of production of the touristic favela.² During the Summer of 2005, I and a team of young researchers conducted in-depth interviews with qualified informants, i.e. the owners of the seven agencies which organize trips to Rocinha and two representatives of one of the Neighborhood Associations. Starting off with a semi-structured questionnaire, I aimed to trace the process by which the agencies had entered the favela, the kind of service they offered, the relationship with ordinary dwellers and with the drug dealers who live in Rocinha, the level of commitment to social projects and their strategies for differentiation in an increasingly competitive market. Each agency's website was analyzed in terms of their discursive and visual aspects. Field observations have been carried out with some regularity for over three years now, including participation in different tours as well as long hours spent in a spot where souvenirs are sold by favelados to tourists.

¹ The research project is titled “Touring Poverty in Buenos Aires, Johannesburg and Rio de Janeiro” and is financed by the Foundation for Urban and Regional Studies (FURS) and by The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq/Brazil).

² For an analysis of the relationship between tourists and dwellers in Rocinha, see Freire-Medeiros et al. (2008).

In Section 2, I place the favelas within the geography and history of Rio de Janeiro. In Section 3, I suggest that the emergence of the favela as a tourist destination should be seen as part of the so-called reality tours phenomenon and of the global circulation of the *favela* as a trademark, a sign associated with ambivalent signifiers which place it as the extreme Other, capable of both seduction (for its authenticity and solidarity) and threat (for its violence and non-rationality). Section 4 will provide an in-depth view of how Rocinha has been positioned as a tourist attraction. I conclude by sharing a few broader reflections on my own position in the field and on tourism in poverty-stricken areas.

2. Placing the favelas

As geographers and urban sociologists have long observed, topography is a key-element contributing to the heterogeneity of residential segregation. Rio de Janeiro offers a particularly interesting case, with favelas populating the hills and mountains right next to the high income areas. It has been so since the early 1900s.

In 1897, soldiers returning from the Canudos War (a military campaign in the Northeastern Region of Brazil) received permission to settle temporarily on the Santo Antonio and Providência hills (“morros”), in Rio’s downtown area. Morro da Providência supposedly received the name of Morro da Favela in reference to a bush abundant in semi-arid areas. It is worth noticing that Morro da Providência has also been promoted – not as successfully as Rocinha, though – as a “touristic favela” since August 2005 when the Mayor’s Office turned it into an Open Air Museum (Freire-Medeiros, 2006, 2007, 2008; Freire-Medeiros et al., 2008).

By 1920, 26 favelas were identified in Rio de Janeiro (Abreu, 1987). Part of this increase was due to a major phase of renovation in Rio’s city center, involving the demolition of low-income rented tenement slum buildings – the so-called *cortiços*. With the poor population searching for alternatives to the lack of affordable housing, favelas spread to other hills, even reaching the suburbs of the city.

The 1930 Revolution, which brought populist Getulio Vargas to power, opened up a new phase as far as favelas were concerned. The 1937 Building Code was the first official document to openly address the existence of the favelas and also their elimination (Valladares, 2000). But what alternatives were given to those who lived on the hills? In the beginning of the 1940s, the government created *parques proletários* – working-class housing areas designed with the aim of imposing discipline on former favela residents, turning them into “adjusted” citizens (Medeiros, 2002). Ignoring the intentions and actions of the state, the favelas did not stop growing.

As the Estado Novo government (1937–1946) came to an end, official discourse began to treat the favela as a fundamental problem in Rio de Janeiro. Two factors explain the high visibility and political status of favelas during this period. The first was their rapid growth – by the 1950s, 7% of Rio de Janeiro’s total population were favela residents (Abreu, 1987). The second factor was the fear that favela residents would succumb to the communist “temptation”.

Government policies from the end of the Estado Novo until the beginning of the 1960s oscillated between intense repression and moments of greater tolerance which, not coincidentally, corresponded to election periods (Burgos, 2004). The political importance of favelas during this time is reflected in the number of studies (including government studies) dedicated to finding “solutions” to the problem, in media coverage, in legislative projects, and in parliamentary commissions.³

Although Rio was no longer the capital city of Brazil, it still received substantial attention and funds by virtue of its continuing economic and symbolic importance. It also received migrants from the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro, from neighboring states and the Northeast of Brazil attracted by job opportunities. Most of these new migrants settled in the suburbs, but nevertheless the favela population of the South and North Zones increased by 98% (Abreu, 1987). The 1960 Census recorded 147 favelas with a total population of 335,063 residents (Cavallieri, 1986).

After the 1964 military coup, conflicts intensified. Eighty favelas were removed from the South Zone of the city, occupied by the middle and high classes, to housing complexes subsidized by the public power. These complexes were considerably far from job opportunities and lacked basic infrastructure (including access to public transportation), leading many families, who were evicted from their favelas and sent to a housing complex, to leave the housing complex after a while and start again in a new favela (Valladares, 1978). Between 1968 and 1973, not only the number of small new favelas increased 74%, but also the number of favela residents grew 36.5% (Abreu, 1987; Cavallieri, 1986). Thus, the presence of the favela residents prevailed near the high-income neighborhoods like Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon.

In the later 1970s, Brazil began to experience a degree of political openness after 15 years of military dictatorship. As discussed by several authors, this created an environment within which new social rights began to be discussed if not always achieved (Pasternak, 2003; Burgos, 2004). Although at this stage there was never anything approaching a comprehensive policy for favela improvement, the removal policy lost momentum. By the end of the decade, favelas began to be partially urbanized, gaining access to electricity and piped water for instance, at a scale thereto unknown (Preteceille and Valladares, 2000).

The 1980s opened with a new form of relationship between the government and favelas in Rio de Janeiro State: arbitrary actions by the police against favela residents began to be repressed, several programs aimed at providing basic infrastructure to the favelas were created, and removal proposals were replaced with the “One Family One Plot” program, which legalized lots in several favelas.

From 1992 onwards, with the Master Plan of Rio de Janeiro, preservation and upgrading of favelas became the official policy with the Favela-Bairro (Squatter Settlement-Neighborhood). This highly acclaimed program not only includes sanitation systems and other basic infrastructure, but emphasizes the importance of integrating the favelas both spatially (through street connections with the surrounding neighborhoods) and socially (constructing buildings for the operation of social projects). With the financial support of the Inter-American Development Bank, it was launched in 1994 by the Housing Department of the municipal government of Rio de Janeiro. At first, it aimed at medium-sized favelas (which make up nearly one-third of all favelas in Rio),⁴ but has been also taken to both large and small favelas (Riley et al., 2001). Some critics pertinently point out that the program failed to face the issue of illegal drug trafficking within the favelas (Pasternak, 2003; Valladares, 2005).

By the turn of the millennium, favelas had become socially and economically more heterogeneous, to the extent that they now no longer constitute a generic settlement form (Valladares, 2005). If, on one hand, some have been targeted by formal plans aiming for their physical incorporation into the city, on the other their populations still suffer from a heavy social stigma and from police brutality. As a growing literature attests, there has been an acceler-

³ For an in-depth analysis of academic and non-academic studies concerned with favelas, see Valladares (2005).

⁴ In a 1980 survey of favelas, 156 of the 376 squatter settlements recorded in the municipality had under 500 residents, but a further 62 had between 1000 and 2000 dwellers, and 39 had over 5000 residents. Just one per cent of the favelas were attached to the public sewerage network, rubbish collection was adequate in only 17%, only 6% had a full water system, and 92% had no drainage (Cavallieri, 1986).

ated development of a powerful drug and crime culture in Rio de Janeiro that has fed the imaginary of violence associated with the favelas and the favelados (favela residents), allowing arbitrary measures within the favelas to be seen as legitimate (Machado da Silva, 1994; Soares, 1996; Zaluar, 2000; Leite, 2000; Burgos, 2004; Zaluar and Alvito, 2004).

Avoided by local elites, nevertheless favelas are turned into much valued attractions for international tourists, becoming sites of sophisticated commercial activities. In the following section, I attempt to shed light on how this peculiar tourist attraction came to be.

3. Reality tours and the favela as trademark

Nowadays the most diverse travel experiences are organized under the label “alternative tourism” (Holloway, 1995; Taylor, 2000; Richards, 2007). Here I focus on a specific segment of alternative tourism for which the term *reality tour* has been coined, the distinctive identity of which is based on the supposedly authentic, interactive and extreme character of the type of encounter it promotes. The possibility of vicariously living the emotions of the Other – an entity as potentially diverse as the South American Indians, the victims of Nazi holocaust and Rio de Janeiro’s *favelados* – is a firm promise made by the promoters (Charlesworth and Addis, 2002; Till, 2003). For analysis purposes, I have divided *reality tours* into two main types: “social tours” and “dark tours”. It is important to note, nevertheless, that the boundaries between the two kind of tours are often far from evident on the empirical ground.

“Social tours” sell participation and authenticity through trips that aim to be a counterpoint to the destructive vocation of mass tourism. Their privileged destinations are economically challenged places, forming a sub-field of reality tourism eloquently labeled as *pro-poor tourism* or *pity tourism*. *Global Exchange*, a non-governmental organization based in California, pioneered the commercialization of socially minded reality tours as early as the early 1990s. In July 2006, they announced on their website⁵:

“Global Exchange invites you to: Venezuela – Labor, Land Reform, and Agriculture (Price: \$ 1250 from Caracas). In this unique reality tour, participants will get *hands on experience* and *build people-to-people ties* from Caracas to the coffee campesinos in the Andes. Some of the activities are: to meet representatives of the Land Reform Institute, visit worker-owned factories and cooperatives, speak with labor leaders, visit organic farming cooperatives...” (italics added).

Today we see a growing, strategic involvement of organizations such as *Food First*, *The Center for Global Education* and *Where There Be Dragons*, among others. These promoting agents start from the premise that, if one cannot abolish tourism, one should transform it into a fairer industry. Predictability, control, comfort, and efficiency, deemed positive values in conventional tourism, give way to the values of awareness and self-realization.

But if many reality tours promoted by NGOs pretend to be more than “a kind of voyeurism”, is it possible to say the same of so many other experiences of contact which are equally commercialized as reality tours? I am especially concerned here with the segment within reality tourism called “dark tourism” – “the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley and Lennon, 1996, p. 198). Strolls through Sniper’s Alley in Sarajevo and the radioactive fields of Chernobyl are quite frequent. Souvenirs can be purchased at Ground Zero in New York, picnics eaten on the battlefields of northern France (Stone, 2006). In the EcoAlberto Park, in Hildago,

tourists pay US\$ 18.00 for the “!Burla a la Migra!” tour, a simulation of the illegal crossing made by thousands of Mexicans looking for a better life in the US. For something between US\$ 20.00 and US\$ 35.00, tourists may assess – and photograph – the damage cause by hurricane Katrina along route US-90.

As MacCannel (1992) and Stone (2006) among others have argued, travel to sites associated with suffering is not a new phenomenon and takes us as far back as to the first religious pilgrimages. But what seems to be unique about the contemporary experience is its diversity and popularity. Tourists are seeking, more and more, experiences that are off the beaten track, interactive, unique, adventurous and authentic. Often trading as remembrance, education and/or entertainment, these places have not only been attracting people eager to consume real and/or commodified death, disaster and misery, but also raising complex ethical dilemmas as far as the nature of gazing and the act of remembrance are concerned (Tarlow, 2005; Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

The complexity of reality tours – whether social or dark – is owed primarily to its object of consumption not being something obvious and tangible. Two chief domains are articulated within reality tours, money and emotions, the superposition of which Western morality usually defines as incongruent (Zelizer, 2004). Not by chance, the practice of this type of tourism is always accompanied by heated debates, mainly in regards to the ethical pertinence of turning other people’s misery and adverse conditions into a commodity. In general, detractors accuse practitioners of motivating voyeuristic sentiments and attitudes toward poverty and suffering.

The favela which is sold to the tourists seems to have it all: it allows the engagement with an altruistic sense of good citizenship (tourists would be contributing to the economic development of a poor area by paying for a visit to it) at the same time it motivates a sense of adventure and tourism-related pursuits. But not only that: as a complementary hypothesis, I suggest favela tours are equally indebted to the phenomenon of circulation and consumption, at a global level, of the favela as a trademark. Let us examine this point more carefully.

Different authors have mentioned the fact that tourism is not only a phenomenon of consumption, but simultaneously a phenomenon of production (Clifford, 1988; MacCannel, 1992; Hutnyk, 1996). The message used to promote the “touristic product” helps to construct it as it is presented to and bought by the consumer through a set of symbolic goods “fabricated” by producing agents and media language. Urry (1990) suggests that the very choice of a certain destination by the tourist/consumer is based on an “anticipation of the experience”, which consists of a dialogue with the images of a given locale carried by several media products, images which create an interpretative and behavioral frame for the tourist. Images of a place that circulate through news agencies, films – national or foreign, fictional or documental – photographs, magazines, travel guides, advertising campaigns and so on, help build expectations and desirabilities that are an intrinsic part of the so-called travel culture (Freire-Medeiros, 2002).

All tour operators with whom I talked pointed to the international success of *City of God* (Brazil, 2002) as largely responsible for the increased interest in the favela as a tourist destination. Directed by Fernando Meirelles, the film was promoted worldwide as a true story about life in “Rio’s ghettos”.⁶ The fact that it was based on the eponymous novel by Paulo Lins, who grew up in Cidade de Deus,⁷

⁶ It is worth noting that the US release of the *City of God* DVD featured Katia Lund and João Moreira Salles’s acclaimed *Notícias de uma Guerra Particular* (Brazil, 1999), a documentary about urban violence in Brazil, especially in Rio, as a bonus.

⁷ *City of God* is the translation of *Cidade de Deus*. As discussed above, in the late 1960s and during 1970s, insofar as favelas were considered a “blight on the city”, the federal and the state governments decided to remove them to public housing complexes in remote areas of the city. One of these was *Cidade de Deus*, which Lins (1997) calls a *neofavela* made out of bricks.

⁵ cf. <http://www.globalexchange.org>.

invested the film with an aura of testimony, which was reinforced by the fact that many of the young actors were themselves picked from favelas in Rio. As Schwarzbach (2003) said in her review for *Entertainment Weekly*, the movie managed to convey a paradoxically realistic and stylized image of a violent favela: “*City of God* moves in where even cops fear to tread, embracing the mess, misery, and violence with a matter-of-factness at once riveting and disconcertingly MTV-cool”.

City of God, however, is not alone in spreading this new, “sexy” image for the favela. Award-winning documentary *Favela Rising* (USA, 2005), directed by Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary, tells the story of Afro Reggae, a group from the Vigário Geral favela. The film seems to parallel many of Meirelles’s aesthetic choices and even features unexplained participation from *City of God* actors, Firmino da Hora and Jonathan Haagensen. In several shots, a different favela, one with a beautiful view to the ocean, stands in for Vigário Geral and provides international audiences with the desired image of the touristic favela. One should note that the link between this documentary and tourism lie well beyond the metaphorical: “US Favela Tour” was the moniker picked by the producers for the screening/debate sessions they have been holding in “stigmatized” neighborhoods in New York (Brooklyn, Bronx, and Harlem) and Los Angeles (South Central).

The Luxembourg train station in Paris served as the stage for the *Favelité* installation, as part of the celebration of “Brazil’s Year in France” in 2005. A collage of some 800 images by young photographers who live in favelas presented the Morro da Providência – a favela which has been, as mentioned before, actively promoted as a tourist attraction by the Rio de Janeiro Mayor’s Office (Freire-Medeiros, 2006) – along with its shacks and alleys and their inhabitants to a charmed public of Parisian commuters.

Leu (2004) describes and analyses the mediatic process by which Brazil in general, and the favela in particular, acquired cult status in England. The author describes unexpected dynamics between the local and the global, triggered by the imaginary geography of the favela and its peculiar culture. This culture of a mythical favela is used in advertising campaigns for the widest possible variety of products; Brazilian products, in their turn, also jump onto the favela bandwagon when seeking international commercialization.

In Paris, London, Glasgow, and Miami, *Favela Chic*, a club decorated in an over-the-top style with palm trees and several recycled materials, serves Brazilian food to the tune of an eclectic musical soundtrack. At the Paris entrance, a painting of an Indian woman reminiscent of goddess Iracema welcomes customers who will be able to taste caipirinhas made with genuine Minas Gerais cachaça. Answering our question, “why Favela Chic?”, the manager of the successful business told us: “All of our work aims to show that the favela is valuable, that the dignity we preach does indeed exist. It’s not shameful anymore to speak of the favela, favela is luxury, favela is chic!”.⁸

In Tokyo, the *Favela* restaurant follows the same logic, serving feijoada and caipirinha in a saloon which combines rustic and refined elements. Boasting a DJ and *movie lounge*, the restaurant’s patrons are those who seek the exoticism of Brazilian cuisine in a *world style*-type environment. Sydney’s *Favela Restaurant*, on the other hand, declines Brazilian delicacies and serves exclusively Asian food in an ambience defined by its managers as an “audio-visual experience”, not unlike what one might encounter in the best “alternative” places, whether in New York or Ibiza. The restaurant’s logo refers to a favela only by way of the stylized image of a boy hiding his face behind his hands. *Club Favela*, in Munster, Germany, plays techno minimal, house, psytrance, and reggae, but does not bother with any rhythm or style directly associated with

Brazil. The force of the favela brand has become, as we see, capable of transcending geographical and territorial referentials, promoting Brazil as well as anything wishing to present itself as “alternative”, “hip”, “recycled”.

In travel guides, the favela has not only been incorporated as an attraction, but also described as a must to those who wish to get to know the “true Rio de Janeiro” (Torres, 2007). The prestigious *Lonely Planet* guide criticizes what is perceived as the “glamorization of favelas” promoted by mass media, but still the tour is emphatically recommended, as long as it is done with specialized agencies capable of vouching for the tourist’s safety.

Apart from these products and businesses which use the repertoire of images associated with the favela, and which are incorporated into the marketplace in a more formal manner, there is a more dispersed corpus of images which contributes on the same level to format the touristic favela: photos taken by the visitors themselves. While analyzing 50 photologs which, combined, displayed on the web over 700 pictures taken by tourists on their Rocinha tours, Menezes (2007) argues, pertinently, that there has never been so much production, reproduction, and diffusion of images of favelas as there is today. And what sort of images do these photos propagate? According to Menezes, for the most part, the same repertoire of representation which “exoticize” the favela, its housing, and its inhabitants.

The international favela fixation is equally discussed by Williams (2003), who draws interesting parallels between the *City of God* craze and that surrounding Carolina Maria de Jesus’ memoirs, “Child in the dark”, published in English in 1962.⁹ But it is Valladares (2005) who identifies the political complexities of the phenomenon at hand, pointing out the responsibility of different actors – NGOs, public power, social scientists – in the conformation of a singular and exotic favela.

As Phillips (2003) summarized, “favela” became a tropical prefix capable of turning the most diverse localities and products into something “exotic”. Travel guides, movies, documentaries, novels, dissertations, photologs, souvenirs, etc. contribute to the formulation of a globe-trotting favela and fit it into the wider-ranging narratives of “alternative” tourism, which celebrates Otherness as a consumerism object. It is based on these pillars, which construct the favela as a territory of imagination and serve as a receptacle for various anxieties and desires, that the favela can be elaborated as a tourist destination.

4. Rocinha: tourism in “the largest favela in Latin America

In September 2006, Rocinha became an official tourist attraction of Rio de Janeiro. The law promulgating this status, proposed by City Counselor Lilian Sá and sanctioned by Mayor César Maia, justified the decision under the following terms:

“Versatile, multicolored, and with a soul of its own. Rocinha is like that (...) considered one of the most urbanized favelas in Rio de Janeiro,¹⁰ Rocinha has several peculiar points of

⁹ Carolina Maria de Jesus was a poor black woman who managed to become a famous author in the 1960s. Born in 1914 in a small town in Minas Gerais, she was able to attend school for 2 years due to the philanthropy of a landowner’s family. Carolina eventually migrated to the city of São Paulo where she worked as a domestic servant until she became pregnant and got fired. While collecting trash to sell in order to survive along with her three kids, Carolina began writing a diary of her existence on scraps of paper she found in the trash. Audelio Dantas, a newspaper reporter, stumbled upon Carolina and her diary and quickly arranged to have it published first in a newspaper and then as *Quarto de Despejo* (literally, The Garbage Room). The book became a best-seller both in Brazil and worldwide where it was often read as the testimony of life as an urban poor in the Third World. For an in-depth analysis of Carolina’s trajectory, see Levine and Bom Meihy (1995).

¹⁰ Officially, Rocinha is no longer a favela. It became a district on June 18, 1993, a fact ignored by the City Counselor in her law.

⁸ Interview recorded by Juliana Farias and Palloma Menezes in February 2006.

attractiveness, not to mention the privileged location: green forest, smooth-surfaced hills, the beach and a strong feeling of community. (...) Someone who knows Rio can attest that Rocinha is a privileged place (...) In this upbeat, positive atmosphere, Rocinha has scored yet another victory and definitively entered the Rio de Janeiro tourist circuit, (...) law no. 4405/06 will increase social integration between the city and the community, because it will help dissipate the myth that Rocinha is an exclusively violent place, and therefore allow bigger investments from the public as well as private sectors."¹¹

The initiative of incorporating Rocinha into Rio's official tourist guide was immediately supported by the president of Riotur (Rio's official tourism office), Rubem Medina: "Rocinha has been a tourist attraction for quite a while. It is important for it to be included in the Official Guide so that the tours, the craftsmanship and other attractions become better known" (*Globo Online*, 20/09/2006). In fact, RioTur's inclusion of the touristic Rocinha should be seen as a belated acknowledgement of a practice which had become regular since the early 1990s. There is no documentation supporting an effective date in which the tours began, but all of our informants point out the 1992 Earth Summit (Rio Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development), when a large number of international visitors gathered in the city, as the *myth of origin*, so to speak, of the favela as a tourist destination. Relating the origin of the favela as a tourist attraction to the 92 Earth Summit is in some ways ironic if one remembers that, throughout the event, government authorities invested specific efforts towards isolating favelas from foreign eyes, even enlisting the Army's aid to do so. The owner of Jeep Tour recalls the process and points out the spontaneity of the initiative:

"It was during the Earth Summit that the Jeep Tour started. We were doing the [Tijuca] forest tour and, on the way back we passed by São Conrado, where the tourists became curious to see the favela. At the time there was a big deal going on about security, military tanks everywhere, and the tourists videotaped and photographed it all. We went into the favela and there was this contrast between the jeep with the tourists in it and the guns pointing at the favelas. So that was cool, the agencies bought into the whole thing and it started to take shape. So this is the way the favela tour started, out of the curiosity of one group... People started buying the idea, the idea started to grow and get bigger, taking shape. The whole thing grew by itself, it wasn't anything planned, it just started gradually over the years..."

Today, at least seven agencies registered with RioTur do business in Rocinha but, during the research, we also observed a rather busy, but informal, circuit of tourists being show around by cab drivers and private guides, the precise number of which is impossible to assess. Each agency charges around US\$ 35.00 for a 3–4-h trip. The tours can be booked individually or in packages including, for instance, Tijuca Forest. Although the jeep tours have become iconic to Rocinha tourism – which quickly led to comparison between favela tourism and a "safari among the poor" – only three agencies actually use that form of transport (Jeep Tour, Indiana Jungle Tours, and Exotic Tours, the latter of which actually does a long stretch on foot). The agents' counter-argument is that the open vehicle allows the tourist a more accurate perception of the landscape, and they see no grounds for such criticism of the use of jeeps for transportation. Favela Tour advertizes on its brochure, "not made on jeeps!", and justifies the use of vans as a "humanist concern". Be a Local, Don't Be a Gringo innovated by renting out motorcycle taxis, which

are preferred by backpackers. All the agencies but Be a Local, which advertizes mostly at hostels and has young and low budget tourists as its customers have a similar clientele which is rather heterogeneous in terms of nationality (usually tourists from Europe and the United States), the country they live in, and age group (between 25 and 55 years of age).

At least four of the agencies claim to be the pioneer and there have been intense disputes around the use of the term "favela tour" among them. Although one of these agencies – Favela Tour – has officially registered the brand, today it is used as a generic for referring to any kind of tours made in favelas. Still, in order to maintain their spot in such a competitive market and guarantee their profits, all tour operators attempt to diversify their services, more often than not by attacking the contender's selling strategies.

There is a general agreement that Rocinha is such a disputed ground due to "physical and symbolic reasons", as one of my interviewees put it. Besides holding the title of "largest favela in Brazil", being close to numerous hotels and having two exits (which allows for quicker escapes in case of some violent conflict between drug dealers and police), Rocinha displays both "a breathtaking view" and "the contrast of the haves and have-nots which is so striking for the gringo" in a reference to its proximity with São Conrado and Gávea, two of the most prestigious neighborhoods in Rio. But this contrast also exists within Rocinha itself – in fact, its socio-economic heterogeneity demands that tourism promoters be rather creative in order to fit the place to the expectations of customers who come in search of the paradigmatic favela, the privileged locus of poverty:

"Rocinha grew a lot... People now have air-conditioners, they have a better life. In Rocinha you see the poor side as well as the more developed one. That commerce... So it's kind of disappointing for tourists when you only stick to the commercial area. They keep thinking that Rocinha isn't poor enough, that it's not as poor as those miserable cities in Africa. That's why it's so important to show everything, to walk through the alleys so that they can see there are all kinds of things going on there."

Originally, a rural land where small farmers raised crops to sell at the market in Gávea,¹² Rocinha boasts today a quite diverse commercial economy, which includes stores selling photographic equipment, electric appliances, wines, cell phones and services, not to mention several cyber-cafes. Usually, they accept debit and credit cards, which Valladares (2005, p. 112) correctly identifies as evidence of "the local population's power to buy and their participation in the Brazilian and international consumption market". In every tour, attention is drawn to the fact that the favela has a post-office, two banks, cable TV (with an exclusive channel, no less, called TV ROC), community radio stations and a concert venue.

Visits to day care centers, to which tourists are encouraged to contribute with some donations, are common practice, as is the rental of roofs ("lajes") which serve as observatories at the price of R\$ 1.00 "per gringo" (see Fig. 1). One of the agencies is responsible for a social project at Vila Canoas,¹³ a smaller favela close by, another contributes to a day care center at Roupas Suja ("dirty laundry", one of Rocinha's most underdeveloped area), and yet another has a training program for junior tour guides. As for the others, their presence in the favela seems unrelated to any kind of financial obligation towards the area. The owner of one of the agencies with whom I spoke summarized:

¹² One of its myths of origin tells that Rocinha gets its name from the word *roça*, which means farm or rural plot of land.

¹³ Vila Canoas is also host to the Receptive Favela Project, which aims to turn the more comfortable and better looking houses in the area into lodgings. Active since 2005, it has been visited by hundreds of tourists.

¹¹ cf. <http://www.camara.rj.gov.br/noticias/2006/10/04.htm>.



Fig. 1. Tourist captures the favela view with her cell phone. Summer, 2008. *Source:* Bianca Freire-Medeiros.

“I’m not in charge of any social action. I’m not a social agent of the favela. That’s not my job. My job is to show what the favela really is, in order to erase that eventual, negative image tourists might have and to promote the city as well. It’s a job I look at from a patriotic and economic viewpoint, because it improves the image of Brazil outside the country, and it is an attraction for people to come more often.”

The argument that tourism in Rocinha takes apart the logic associating favela and violence appears, as seen above, in City Counselor Lilian Sá’s law as well as in the tour agents’ discourses, as they proclaim in unison that the cordiality of its inhabitants is one of Rocinha’s great attractions. A tourist guide said: “We want to show that

the favela is not a place where only criminals live. Most people there are decent and work hard (. . .). And most important of all, they have this happiness, this warmth that enchants the tourist.” The agencies’ websites contribute to the creation of tourists’ expectations of happiness, good-will, and gratitude among favelados:

“The tour seeks to bring you into the root of the Favela community, to provide you with an insight into the vibrant spirit of its people, to allow you to interact freely with the local population. . . Following on from this is the Daycare Centre [where] adorable children are guaranteed to greet you with open arms.” (<http://www.bealocal.com.br>)



Fig. 2. Souvenirs especially produced for the tourists are found in Rocinha. *Source:* Bianca Freire-Medeiros.

“The tour changes their reputation of areas related to violence and poverty only. Don’t be shy, you are welcome there, and local people support your visit.” (<http://www.favelatour.com.br>)

One should remember that the cordiality of the Brazilian people is officially a key factor in the promotion of Brazil as a tourist destination. Walfrido Mares Guia, who was Minister of Tourism from 2003 to 2006, asserted that “the tourist who comes to Brazil is always impressed by the Brazilian people’s courtesy and happiness, and these are factors which fuel his satisfaction with the trip and his desire to come back” (quoted in *Serson, 2006, p. 21*). Thus, in promoting the favela as a tourist attraction, the same secular logic which attributes to Brazilian poverty an aesthetic dimension and inherent good mood, comes into play.

Another point of agreement amongst tour agents refers to their relationship with local drug dealers: no agency is forced to give any money to them. For understandable reasons, I cannot verify such information, but I should mention the agencies avoid streets where sale of drugs is obvious and they advise against taking pictures of armed people. Tourists are assured of their safety – even when walking through the poorest parts of the favela, riding open jeeps or motorcycles – and are encouraged to bring along their belongings: “The violence that takes part in the favelas is not directed at tourists. You’re always welcome here. You can bring your most expensive camera and you won’t be bothered.”, repeats a guide during all the tours he organizes. But to a lesser or greater extent, all agencies seem to play around the contemporary anxiety between freedom and security that *Bauman (2001)* and *Giddens (1991)* describe so well. In an apparent paradox, some guides tell tourists that safety is guaranteed by the drug traffickers, whose violent practices are often a topic. During one of the tours I took part in, the tour guide explained to the group:

“You guys don’t need to be afraid of robbers or pickpockets. While in Copacabana and other parts of Rio you have to be very careful, here the drug lords are in charge and they may be quite cruel when they need to be. Neither theft nor murder of tourists are tolerated simply because they want to make their sales and if something happens to one of you, the police might come. And of course it isn’t good for their business.”

Guides also recommend tourists ignore any teasing by locals, not to block the passage of any locals in narrow alleyways, and not to give alms to anyone, because, as explained the owner of Be a Local, Don’t be a Gringo, “we do not want to stimulate the professionalization of poverty as an instrument of labor.” One cannot help but feel it is somewhat ironic that those who turn poverty into a commodity should be the ones who denounce the perverse effects of alms-giving and straight charity.

There are at least four sale points of souvenirs where tourists can find a whole string of products “by Rocinha”: T-shirts, paintings, purses, picture frames, sculptures, CDs. One such product was particularly noteworthy: a sign that read “ROCINHA: A PEACEFUL AND BEAUTIFUL PLACE – COPACABANA – RIO DE JANEIRO” (Fig. 2). Rocinha is promoted as a peaceful and beautiful place, just like Copacabana, a long-standing postcard in the tourist imaginary. The colors – green and yellow – suggest yet another level of identification, one in which Rocinha is seen as part of the Brazilian nation in spite of hegemonic representations which normally exclude it. From a marginal presence, the favela is discursively transformed into a central part of Brazilian society. This same logic appears in the words chosen by one of the promoters:

“It’s a tour that uses the favela as a springboard to give a deeper understanding of Brazilian society. Rio’s society involves favelas, Brazilian society involves favelas (...) We

talk about politics, working conditions, public health, architecture, Carnival, soccer, education (we visit a school), arts and crafts (we show the work of local artists). It examines a lot of things. It’s a very sociological tour.”

Sociological or not, whether socially engaged or opposed to such activism, the fact is that the tours do not offer Rocinha the chance to benefit on the same level from the economic advantages of tourism. Tourists spend very little during their visits (*Carter, 2005*) and, as there is no distribution of profits, the capital generated is only marginally re-invested in the favela, and always by way of charity.

In the Summer of 2006, a few members of the Rocinha Inhabitants Improvement Union decided to reverse the picture by partnering with an agency interested in maximizing and exploring Rocinha’s potential for tourism. One of the local community leaders, who had been involved in the process, told me an alternative route was devised in order to guarantee a “true tourism”: young locals would guide visits to the houses of older inhabitants, to a local day care, and to the poorest areas of Rocinha. “True tourism”, he argued, “is the one where you don’t mess with the community’s history. You have to tell the real story, how Rocinha came to be, in what year the first Neighborhood Association was founded, the number of inhabitants... But it’s not enough to tell the story. You have to have the participation of the community.” At the end of the tour, at the Samba School, the tourist would receive an “honorary Rocinha citizen diploma” next to samba dancers and young people practicing capoeira. Verbally supported by the Ministry of Culture, this “insider’s route” – which would ironically be much more “staged” than the tours being provided by external agencies – has not become a reality so far. According to our informant, external agents, despite showing some early signs they would support the initiative, became uncomfortable in negotiating with the locals and were unsure of their capacity for management. Perhaps the external agents’ anxiety towards having favelados as equal partners and active participants in the tourism business was due to the perception that such participation would certainly challenge stereotypes and unbalanced power relations which have been established so far.

5. Conclusion

In his much-cited piece on the theory of commodity fetishism, *Marx (1984)* states that, although under capitalism every single thing may be turned into a commodity, there is one thing which can never be bought or sold: poverty, for it has no use or exchange value. The fact is that, at the turn of the millennium, poverty has been framed as a product for consumption through tourism at a global scale. If the curiosity to gaze at the poor is not new – “slumming” was a widespread activity amongst the Victorian elite (*Koven, 2004*) – new social arrangements have been called into the picture. Poverty is being consumed as a tourist commodity with a monetary value agreed upon by promoters and consumers – this is something unheard of. More often than not, such tourist practices have at least two arguments in their favor: their potential to enhance the local economy and the inhabitants’s self-esteem; the opportunity they provide to the tourist to combine solidarity and leisure in one package.¹⁴ But, on one hand, the market – seen as the territory of impersonal bonds and instrumental logic par excellence – is not naturally conceived as the right place to express

¹⁴ Sometimes, those who support tourism in the favela do so based on some misinterpretations. For example, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), chief financial supporter of the “Favela-Bairro” project, is in favor of the commercialization of the favela as a tourist attraction under the argument that the agencies carry out ethnic tourism in a way described as quite competent. As *Serson (2006)* pertinently remarks, IDB seems to ignore the fact that those who live in the favelas do not belong to a different ethnic group than Brazilian society.

solidarity and commiseration (Illouz, 1997; Zelizer, 2004). On the other, human misery and suffering are not straightforwardly associated with recreation. It does not come as a surprise that turning poverty into a commodity, a tourist attraction with an established market price, would provoke moral anxiety, as the following episode attests.

As soon as he became the governor of Rio de Janeiro state, Sérgio Cabral made an agreement with the federal government for Rocinha's urban renovation. With a budget of R\$ 72 million, the project includes paving new streets, building 450 new houses, creating a technical school and sports facilities, not to mention a basic hygiene infrastructure. But that is not all: there are plans to turn some houses into bed-and-breakfast types lodgings. Due to Cabral's project, most media outlets in Brazil gave extensive coverage to tourism in Rocinha. The newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* carried out a survey in February 2007 under the title "should tourism in favelas be encouraged?". Nearly, 80% of readers who responded did so in order to criticize the initiative: the idea of promoting Rocinha along with more traditional destinations such as the Corcovado or the Sugar Loaf was seen as preposterous and revolting, an aberration to say the least.

Outrageous to local elites, the practice of tourism in Rocinha has, over the course of a decade, proved to be a lucrative to Brazilian promoters and spawned similar initiatives on a global level. In an interview recorded in March 2008, Christopher Way told me it was after taking the Rocinha tour that he decided to invest in the conversion of Dharavi, Mumbai's (and possibly all Asia's) largest informal housing area, into one of the newest attractions in India. Since January 2006, Way and his associate, young Indian entrepreneur Krishna Poojari, have been promoting tours for US\$ 7.00 per person through their Reality Tours company.

Tourism in favelas is therefore part of a global phenomenon which has been reaching unexpected proportions, and which can be used as the basis for wider discussions, such as the politics of commodization of places, cultures, and people in a context of globalization and inequality. Capable of instilling both fear and repulsion, poverty-stricken and segregated areas are transformed around the world into attractions highly regarded by the international tourist. Such is the case in Soweto and the Cape Flats, which have been promoted as tourist attractions in South Africa since the end of the Apartheid system in 1994 (Goudie et al., 1999; Ian, 1999; Ramchander, 2007), or in Cova da Moura, a stigmatized "African" neighborhood in Lisbon, which has been attracting international visitors since the Summer of 2007. In all cases, ethical debates abound.

However, I ought to reflect not only on the ethical reach of tourist enterprising in favelas, but also on my own identity in the field. When I go up Rocinha on board a green jeep with my young team of researchers, what place do I intend to occupy? How can I not pre-judge tourists and guides, how can I establish a sympathetic relationship, without yielding to the voyeuristic urge that seems to animate them? Why accuse them of exploiting the favela when we, social scientists, have long used it as a field of experimentation for our intellect? Maybe the best contribution I can give, through my accounts and theoretical speculations, is to provide a sense of realism on assessments of the potential role of such tourist practices as a vehicle for empowerment and development. If tourism may work towards building a new politics of visibility for the favela and its inhabitants, one that challenges the prevailing stigmas, this does not mean that economic development, for instance, is really occurring.

Quicker and more superficial analyses have associated favela tourism to a "poor people zoo" of sorts. According to all the issues discussed here, we are dealing with a rather intricate social practice which transcends labels and demands serious investigation. As I have attempted to demonstrate, the favela as a tourist destina-

tion should be taken as a physical and symbolic territory wherein discursive layers accommodate multiple representations: of the favela and its inhabitants, as formulated by tourists; of tourists, as formulated by local inhabitants; of the favela, as formulated by local inhabitants for the tourists – in a continuous spiral of representations.

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