

Selling the favela: thoughts and polemics about a tourist destination¹

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the development of the favela into a tourist attraction, examining how promoters in four different favelas attempted to actually place them in the tourist market. 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 my own research experience on such a polemic field of investigation.

Keywords: Tourism; Favela; Globalization; Rio de Janeiro; Poverty.

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To Licia Valladares, the first sociologist to follow the paths of the touristic favela.

Introduction

Long before contemporary ecological consciousness turned the Brazilian Amazon into a meaningful region for the world, Rio de Janeiro was, in fact, Brazil itself — a chimerical city where the presence of elements from Europe, Africa, and America supposedly created a balance between tradition and modernity, nature and culture, materialized in the bronzed bodies sensuously displayed on the white sands of Ipanema Beach. A cityscape of imagination and desire, Rio has been framed for both visiting and enjoyment, represented through the common tropes of ‘earthly paradise’, ‘exotic land’, ‘luxurious city’. It would actually be no exaggeration to say that a large amount of Rio’s identity has been built on the real, as well as imaginary, interconnections between colonization, voyaging and tourism (Castro, 1999; Amancio, 2000; Freire-Medeiros, 2002).

But if Rio, the Wonderful City, is still Brazil’s most popular international tourist destination, nowadays its most traditional attractions, such as Copacabana Beach and the Christ the Redeemer statue – voted one of the New Seven Wonders of the World – have to contend for the tourist gaze with territories which are heavily stigmatized and systematically avoided by local elites: the favelas.

Favela² is the generic name given to the agglomerations of substandard housing that have emerged initially in Rio de Janeiro in the early 20th Century. The term was then widespread, with some regional variations, to define illegal squatter settlements, highly populated, with degraded properties, lacking essential public services. Throughout history, conventional wisdom placed favelas as a symbol of social and economic segregation, the main locus of poverty, a place where moral degradation mixes with poor sanitary conditions, a dark dystopia.

² Although different sources, from social scientists to the Oxford dictionary, translate favela as slum, such equivalence is not in fact acceptable (Valladares, 2008). It is interesting to note that, as Williams (2009) points out, “for the purposes of tourism, the word favela is used, and the tours and most of the guide books currently available explain its etymology and specific meaning in the Brazilian context”.

As the first decade of the new millennium comes to its end, most favelas are increasingly diverse both in social and economic terms, a few having their own middle-class of entrepreneurs and liberal professionals with college and post-graduate degrees³. After long years of mobilization and struggle, precarious shacks were transformed into brick homes, paved roads substituted muddy paths, and electricity and piped water became widespread benefits – at least on the so-called consolidated favelas (Valladares, 2005; Cavalcanti, 2007). Contradicting the commonsensical argument of the “absent state”, public power in its municipal, regional and federal levels, even though far from efficient, is a daily presence (Preteceille and Valladares, 2000).

A growing literature attests that concomitant to the overall infrastructural improvement came an accelerated development of a powerful crime culture in Rio de Janeiro, with a particular territorialization of the favelas by heavily armed drug factions – the so-called comandos – mainly devoted to the retail sale of cocaine (Machado da Silva, 1994; Soares et al., 1996; Zaluar, 2000; Leite, 2000; Burgos, 2004; Cavalcanti, 2007; Machado da Silva and Leite, 2008). The imaginary of marginality associated with these territories and their populations, if always present, grew to so far unseen proportions, allowing all sorts of arbitrary measures within the settlements to be evaluated by several segments of the Brazilian society not only as legitimate but also as most desirable (Leite, 2005; Farias, 2009).

Within this context, the paradoxical relationship that historically existed between the stigmatization of favelados and the broader exoticization and commodification of a mythic favela culture in what was perceived as its “positive” features – samba and Carnival being the most obvious examples – assumed different contours. “Negative” motifs associated with a supposed “favela lifestyle”, such as a narcoculture and violence, also started to be aestheticized and exploited in ways which further add to the allure of “Brazil” with significant impact in the construction of the favela as a tourist destination. As Williams (2008) summarizes it:

³ For an interesting reflection on the new generation of “universitários da favela”, see Valladares (2009).

“Favelas have not only become part of the stereotypical image of Brazil, along with Carnival, football and beaches, but they are also often seen as a microcosm of Brazilian society, a kind of ‘imagined community of the nation’ (Jaguaribe, 2004: 333). Visitors (tourists, writers and researchers) have the impression that they are learning the truth about racism, the class divide and social injustice in Brazil, discovering the roots of samba, hip hop and funk and exploring an exotic, dangerous, primitive location that does not exist in the developed world”.

Which are the conditions of possibility for the emergence of tourism activities on such stigmatized territory? How does the favela tourism activities relate to other practices of transnational engagement and cultural exoticization as well as to the commodification of poverty? With these main questions in mind, in the Summer of 2005 I began, with my research assistants⁴, an intensive socioethnographic investigation. Our main goal was to examine how diverse social actors and institutions were orchestrating, performing and consuming the touristic favela in four different settlements: Morro da Babilonia, Morro dos Prazeres, Morro da Providencia and Rocinha (Freire-Medeiros, 2007; 2008b).

For the purposes of this article I do not focus on tourist experiences or on the residents’s (favelados) opinions about the tourist presence in their communities as I have done elsewhere (Freire-Medeiros, 2009), but instead I examine the role of businessmen, local agents and government officials in attempting to develop tourism activities at those sites. In this sense, the research methodology involved interviews with qualified informants (owners of the seven tourist agencies regularly working in Rocinha, the tourism promoters in Morro da Babilônia and Morro dos Prazeres, public agents who established tourism in Morro da Providência) and participant observation in the different tours.

⁴ This project included a team of young and enthusiastic researchers: Alexandre A. de Magalhães, André Salata, Andréia C. Santos, Cesar Teixeira, Joni Magalhães and Juliana Farias. I would like to express my gratitude to all of them and especially to Palloma Menezes, Fernanda Nunes and Lívia Campello who have been “touring” the favela with me for all these years.

The hypothesis to be developed here is that one should situate the growing interest in favelas as tourist attractions, on one hand, within the context of expansion of the so-called reality tours and, on the other, within the phenomena of circulation and consumerism, on a global level, of the favela as a trademark, as a sign in which ambivalent meanings are associated.

II. The so-called reality tours

There are plenty of people saying "I must go to the Algarve", or "to Corfu", or "to Marbella", places to which every decent person [...] went at least once. But the tourist industry cant settle for that. New business must be created, and created daily. And the sky is the limit once wish takes over⁵.
Z. BAUMAN

Zigmunt Bauman (1998) brings into the picture the “tourist” and the “vagabond” as metaphors for locating the liquid character of modernity that turns ordinary life into a touristic one. Staying put for just a short period of time, walking the path of indifference, establishing no true commitments to neither territories nor to other individuals: contemporary subjects live, willing or not, the “tourist syndrome”. When not under such syndrome, they are bound to an even worse destiny: that of being a “vagabond”. Inverted images of the tourist, the exiled, the illegal immigrants, the homeless cannot and do not stay in the same place as much as they want to – only as much as they are wanted there.

If in our ordinary lives we behave like tourists, why do we still bother to travel after all? In the short quote above, Bauman suggests that we travel in order to differentiate ourselves. In the process, certain sites – slums of Calcutta, Viet Cong tunnels, the Ground Zero in New York – are rhetorically reinvented in their aesthetic, educational and leisure predicates and turned into tourist attractions. What such diverse destinations hold in common which allow them to attract dozens and dozens of tourists? I would suggest that the answer is to be found on their capacity to mobilize

⁵ Interview to Adrian Franklyn. Available www.intothepill.net

intense and extreme emotions that reside beyond contemplation and are linked to aspirations towards authenticity and self-fulfillment.

“Modern man has been condemned to look elsewhere, everywhere, for his authenticity, to see if he can catch a glimpse of it reflected in the simplicity, poverty, chastity or purity of others”, writes Dean MacCannell (1992 [1976]: 42). The author suggests that meanings and values that in the past were part and parcel of religious experiences – seen ultimately as encounters with the authentic –, are now submerged into the vocabulary of tourism. In the new millennium, such authenticity is no longer referred to a transcendental experience, but to a territory colonized by mediatic references. The emphasis, I would argue, relies no more on contemplation, but on interaction – this is what the tourist market advertises as *hands-on experiences*.

Generally, in the so-called alternative tourist practices, notions such as authenticity and interaction are invested with a symbolic capital that is absent in mass tourism (Carneiro and Freire-Medeiros, 2004). As far as reality tours are concerned, this premise is taken into even higher levels. The possibility of vicariously living the emotions of the Other – an entity as potentially diverse as the Australian aborigines, the victims of Nazi holocaust and Rio de Janeiro’s *favelados* – is a firm promise made by the promoters⁶. For analysis purposes, I have divided *reality tours* into two main ideal types: “social tours” and “dark tours”.

“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 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 website⁷: “Global Exchange invites you to: Venezuela -- Labor, Land Reform, and Agriculture (Price: \$1,250 from Caracas). In this unique reality tour, participants will get *hands on experience*

⁶ For an analysis on the so-called Holocaust tourism, see Charlesworth, A. and Addis, M., 2002; and Till, 2003.

⁷ Cf. www.globalexchange.org

and *build people-to-people ties* (...). 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.

Richard Sennett (1988) discusses how, in contemporary modernity, the public sphere came to be conceived as threatening and unfair, provoking on ordinary citizens the desire to be protect on an idealized intimate space – it is what the author calls the “ideology of intimacy”. Valuing intimate spaces and experiences, contemporary subjects are more concerned with “their single life histories and particular emotions as never before”(ibid.:32). In the process, authenticity becomes a most praised value, a true obsession to be highly encouraged by the 1960s and 70s mobilizations against repression and discrimination. These social movements, according to Sennett, highlighted the importance of public expressing one's sentiments in the name of authenticity. Parallel to this subjectivization of the public sphere emerged a nostalgic sentiment towards the authentic to be supposedly found on face-to-face interactions and on the non-Western cultures idealized as non-rational.

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 that 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: 198). Strolls through Sniper’s Alley in Sarajevo and the radioactive fields of Chernobyl are quite frequent. In the EcoAlberto Park, in Hildago, tourists pay U\$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.

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 path, interactive, unique, adventurous and authentic. Often trading as remembrance, education and/or entertainment, these places attract those eager to consume real and/or commodified death, disaster and misery.

But not many sites can offer “authenticity” and inner-city location, “joyful people” and “threatening criminals”, poverty and a breathtaking view at one and the same time⁸. The favela that is sold to the tourists seems to have it all: it allows the engagement with an altruistic sense of good citizenship, at the same time that it motivates a sense of adventure and tourism-related pursuits. In the following section, I examine how such imaginative territory came to be.

The circulation of the favela as a trademark

“...I went to the favelas during the day and at night and I only came by people who greeted me kindly.”
(Ambassador José Casais, 1940: 22)⁹

José Casais, Spanish ambassador to Brazil in the early 1940s, wrote the above note as part of his travelogue at a moment when the favelas were inspiring fear and aversion in the Brazilian elite. In the early 1930s, another ambassador to Brazil, North American Hugh Gibson, also registered in details his visit to a favela, where he had the chance to take part in a “voodoo ritual” and drink *cachaça* (Gibson, 1940: 97). Casais, Gibson, Marinetti, Le Corbusier, Blaise Cendrars, Albert Camus, Orson Wells: foreign visitors searching for the excitement of the “exotic world of the favela”, therefore, are not exactly a novelty (Jaguaribe and Hetherington, 2006: 156). But it was only in the early 1990s that this practice became widespread. Most of our informants point to the

⁸ Hutnyk (1996: 19) presents a similar argument for Calcutta: “Travelers come to Calcutta to experience, and hence to report on, something they expect to be extreme. Unusual and different from all other expectations and places ...”. But an important difference between Calcutta and the favela should be pointed out: poverty in the favela has an aesthetic dimension, linked both to natural (mountains and ocean) and cultural landscapes (carnival and “mulatas”). For a discussion on the aesthetic dimension of Rio’s poverty, see Freire-Medeiros, 2002.

⁹ Translated by me from the original in Spanish.

Rio Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development, which brought thousands of visitors to the city in 1992, as the year when agencies started to organize tours to favelas – mostly Rocinha, as discussed in the next section – in a systematic way. Since then, the favela has moved from the fringes of tourism culture to become a lucrative attraction, and tour operators have struggled to keep pace with a rising demand. This achievement, as I argued before, has to be understood as part, on one hand, of the overwhelming popularity of reality tours and, on the other, of the recent circulation worldwide of the “exotic world of the favela” through various cultural products.

Different authors have mentioned the fact that tourism is not only a phenomenon of consumption, but simultaneously a phenomenon of production (Clifford, 1989, 1997; Urry, 1990; 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 the media. In this sense, Urry (1990) argues the very choice of a certain destination by the tourist/consumer is based on an “anticipation of the experience”, which constitutes a dialogue with the images of a given place carried by several media products, images that create an interpretative and behavioral frame for the tourist.

All tour operators with whom I talked pointed to the international success of *City of God* (Brazil, 2002) as being largely responsible for the increased interest in the favela as a tourist destination. Fernando Meirelles’ film was promoted worldwide as a “native’s testimony” about life in “Rio’s ghettos” and the fact that it was based on the eponymous novel by Paulo Lins, who was raised in Cidade de Deus, invested the film with an aura of legitimacy, reinforced by the fact that many of the young actors were themselves picked from favelas in Rio. Shoot in grainy, high-contrast, garishly colourful film stock, and boasting a soundtrack that mixes samba, funk and rock hits, *City of God* produces, somewhat paradoxically with its realistic claims, an extremely “sexy” and “cool” image of a violent favela (Jaguaribe, 2004; Ribeiro, 2005).

Directly benefiting from the huge box-office success of Meirelles' film, a series of other cultural products were put into the market: from Globo TV's fiction series *City of Men* (Cidade dos Homens), to the telenovelas *Two Faces* (Duas Caras, Globo TV) and *Opposite Lives* (Vidas Opostas, Record TV), not to mention the award-winning documentary *Favela Rising* (USA, 2005).

As discussed by Leu (2004), the culture of a mythical favela is being used in advertising campaigns for the widest possible variety of products, from Citroën and Nissan cars to Ikea furniture. Brazilian products, on their turn, also jump onto to the favela bandwagon when seeking international commercialization, as happened with the Havaianas flip-flops: "Fashion columns of cultural supplements inform their readers that the Havaianas, popularized in England by model Kate Moss, are the shoes worn by Brazilian street children and can now be purchased at Selfridges for £19" (Leu, 2004: 8).

In Paris, London 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 a native Brazilian woman welcomes the customers. For the London branch, the website anticipates: "It's all about exotic flavours, bright colours, and a touch of the unusual, in short, a feast for the senses!". In the Summer of 2006, we had the opportunity to interview one of the owners of the highly successful business and ask him "why Favela Chic?". He could not have answered more clearly:

"When we started [the business], the place we had was so poor, so ran out – no tables, everything broken – that we ended up calling it favela. Because it was in Paris, however, it was a Favela Chic [laughs]. All of our work is about showing 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! [laughs]".

As it happened with the film *City of God*, the success of Favela Chic also inspired equivalent businesses around the world. In New York, two restaurants added "favela" to their brand: in

Brooklyn, Miss Favela Brazilian Botequim offers, along a few Brazilian dishes, “hot live Samba”; in Astoria, the Favela Restaurant promises a menu “based on simple ingredients found at the most modest homes, yet offering an incredible taste that’s sure to please every palate”. In Tokyo, another Favela restaurant serves feijoada and caipirinha in a space that combines rustic and refined elements. “Favela is a unique experience of food and music, dining and clubbing”, promises the advertisement for still another Favela Restaurant, this one set in Glasgow’s Italian Center. Sydney’s Favela Restaurant, on the other hand, refers to a theme also recurrently associated with favelas – abandoned children -- by way of the stylized image of a boy hiding his face behind his hands in its logo. Club Favela, in Munster, Germany, plays house, psytrance, and reggae, but does not bother with any rhythm or style directly associated with Brazil. Even the small Kennebunkport, in Maine, has its own Favela Chic – not a club, though, but an interior design store, which calls itself “a salvage boutique” and sells designer pieces featured in Vogue magazine and in the Oprah Winfrey show.

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). Prestigious Lonely Planet guide even criticizes what is perceived as the “glamourization 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 films, television programs, businesses and products 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 dispersed corpus of images which equally contributes to formatting and performing the travelling favela: photos taken by the visitors themselves. While analyzing 50 photologs that, combined, displayed on the web over 700 pictures taken by tourists on their Rocinha tours, Menezes (2007) pertinently argues that there has never been so much production, reproduction, and diffusion of images of favelas as there is today.

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. 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.

Four favelas, four experiences of tourism

Rocinha

At least seven agencies registered with RioTur do business in Rocinha but, along the research, we also observed a rather busy, but informal, circuit of tourists being show around by cab drivers and private guides, the number of which is impossible to precise. Each agency charges around U\$35,00 for a three-to-four-hour trip. The tours can be booked individually or in packages including, for instance, Tijuca Forest.

There is a general agreement that Rocinha is such a disputed ground due to "physical and symbolic reasons", as put by one of my interviewees. 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

breathhtaking view” and “the contrast of the have and have-nots which is so striking for the gringo” in a reference to the 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 accommodate the place to the expectations of customers who come in search of the paradigmatic favela, the privileged locus of poverty: “In Rocinha you see the poor side as well as the more developed one. 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”.

Visits to day care centers, to which tourists are encouraged to contribute with some donations, are common practice, just as the rental of roofs (“lajes”) which serve as observatories (at the price of US\$ 1,00 “per gringo”). One of the agencies is responsible for a social project at Vila Canoas, a smaller favela close by, another contributes to a day care center at 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: “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 in the tour agents’ discourses as well as in the law project that officially gave to Rocinha the status of an official tourist attraction of Rio de Janeiro in September 2006: “law n° 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 sectors¹⁰.”

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 recommend armed people should not be photographed. 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. 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) so well describe. In an apparent paradox, some guides tell tourists that safety is guaranteed by the drug traffickers, whose violent practices are often a topic.

Guides also recommend tourists not to react to any eventual teasing by the 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 to 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-shirt, paintings, purses, picture frames, sculptures, CDs. One such product was particularly noteworthy as seen in illustration 2: a sign that read “ROCINHA: A PEACEFUL AND BEAUTIFUL PLACE – COPACABANA – RIO DE JANEIRO”. 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.

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

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.

Morro da Babilonia

The breathtaking view of the Morro da Babilônia was presented to the world by director Marcel Camus through *Black Orpheus* (France, 1959), a film which “initiated millions of non-Brazilians into Brazilian culture, forging in international consciousness a powerful association between three related concepts: Brazilianness, blackness, and carnival” (Stam 1997: 167). Since then, the favela has been attracting tourists from various nationalities in search, perhaps, of the exuberant colors and graceful people that are displayed in the film. Some local residents, upon noticing the relatively frequent and spontaneous presence of tourists in the region, realized there might be profit in the favela’s potential for tourism.

At the time when the field work was conducted, Morro da Babilônia -- which has around 10,000 inhabitants and is located nearby Copacabana -- could be taken as the most differing case from the one examined above: while external agents are the sole responsible for selling Rocinha as

tourist destination, in Babilônia local residents, organized around the CoopBabilônia¹¹, were the ones organizing the tours in the favela. According to them, several guides and even tourism agencies have persistently tried to do business in the region, however they were held back due to what people from CoopBabilônia and other local leadership considered “an excessively commercial approach, with little regard for future consequences for the region”.

The tours followed a trail that supposedly dates back to Brazil’s colonial period. Throughout the trek, local youngsters who work as guides tell a little about the story of the favela. My research team and I were able to take part in a tour in the Spring of 2005 sponsored by the mayor’s office as well as by a private institution called BRASCAN which donated shirts, hats and water bottles handed out to those who showed up for the trek – mostly residents from Copacabana and from Babilônia itself. Once we reached the top of the hill, all of the almost 100 people were asked to hold hands in a huge circle to “hug the environment” and pray for peace in Rio. It is worth noticing that, differently from what happens in Rocinha, Babilônia managed to attract Brazilians who usually regard tourism in the favela to be either a dangerous fad or a practice that humiliates the favelados.

Tourism was seen by the Babilônia leadership as a possible form of sustainable development for the community. They expected tourism to bring in financial resources for the region but only as long as ecological resources and the landscape of the favela – which were indeed the main focus of the tour – were not depleted or destroyed. Besides, there were efforts towards turning the visit into a more fulfilling experience than one focused on the visual and voyeuristic aspects, by encouraging interaction between visitors and people from the community, group bonding and an “ecologically correct” encounter with nature. In this sense, they seemed to be on the right path, as recent research on tourist demands reveals individuals are much more concerned with a sensual experience than mere sightseeing (Franklin and Crang, 2001).

¹¹ Reforestation cooperative of residents of Morro da Babilônia.

Still, tourism in Morro da Babilônia did not come without problems. Countless meetings were held at the Associação de Moradores (Neighbors's Association) aiming to discuss proposals for the organization of tourism in the community and how it could be set up. One of the main objectives was to offer the tours on a frequent basis, in accordance with the great demand presented mostly by international tourists, but they refuse to accept, as said before, having tourist agencies working there. Being resistant to external agents signified being without financial resources that are crucial to developing a tourist attraction. Although youngsters had received basic training, as far as the local history was concerned, they did not have the opportunity to take a tourist course, which would accredit them as guides. Besides, they also faced the same challenges involved in other eco-tourism experiences that involve the desire to both exploit and preserve the natural resources of a given region.

Morro dos Prazeres

Morro dos Prazeres is a medium sized favela, with around 10 thousand inhabitants, located in Santa Teresa, a neighborhood in Central Rio with a distinctive identity derived from its buildings from the Colonial and Imperial periods. For decades, Santa Tereza has been known as the counterpoint to Copacabana, attracting the more “alternative” tourist in search of the “authentic” and “traditional” Rio.

The experience of tourism in Morro dos Prazeres represented an in-between case as local residents and external agents had run the tours together. Collaboration and disputes occur between internal and external agents with both having different expectations of tourism in the favela.

Initially, tours on the Morro dos Prazeres were commercialized via Rio Hiking, a tourism agency from Santa Teresa. According to the company owner, the tours began in 2003 after some favela residents sought out the agency asking for help in organizing the project. Aiming “to promote solidarity ties and professional qualification to the favelados”, he accepted it. Signs were posted

throughout the favela to describe the trek, which had as its main focus the artistic dimension of Morro dos Prazeres, and its distinction as a favela with historical landmarks. An “informal agreement” of sorts was established between the agency and the Associação de Moradores, which would advise of the times at which it was safe to take the tour.

Ideally, at each tour, a guide from Rio Hiking would be accompanied by a favela resident who would tell stories about his community, giving legitimacy to a tourist enterprise that aimed “to be as authentic as possible”. The concept of authenticity, as discussed above, is embedded in the very nature of travel and tourism, but it may assume different meanings depending on the social context. In Morro dos Prazeres, authenticity to a great extent signified tradition commodified for the tourist in romanticized narratives about the favela and Santa Tereza’s past and current artistic vocation. Tradition, thus, was strategically mobilized as a commodity.

However, problems began in 2004 when a drug dealer from the Morro dos Prazeres, who was in jail, sent out an order to stop the tours. Thus, the agency ceased to participate, claiming they no longer had the authorization to take tourists to the favela and therefore could not risk endangering anybody.

Tours to Morro dos Prazeres were suspended for over a year until a new enterprise was set. In the context of the project “Santa Teresa: Sustainable Tourist Territory”, the NGO Lunuz partnered with hospitality company Cama & Café to promote a contest among Santa Teresa youngsters to elect the best tours to be implemented in the region. The winning project, by the Gaia Tour group, originally did not include a visit to Prazeres. However, after some alterations, the favela became a central part of the tour which included a visit to Casarão dos Prazeres¹², the Vai pra Galera social

¹² Casarão dos Prazeres is a mansion built in the early 20th Century in an eclectic architectural style. After being closed for several years, it now functions as an art center.

project¹³, and the Morrinho project¹⁴, located at a nearby favela (where the hostel Pousada Favelinha is located).

When interviews were conducted, leadership at Morro dos Prazeres did not believe the external agents were really interested in letting the favelados have equal control over tourism in the region. They believed if the Lunuz really wanted to help, they could fund professional tourism guide courses for Prazeres residents who could work independently and have more freedom to plan and implement the tourism projects they deem best. Apart from the economic benefits of a locally operated enterprise, leadership in Morro dos Prazeres believed that, by engaging tourists on more personal and interactive levels, an appropriate forum will be provide through which to redress the proliferation of negative representations and stereotypes propagated by the media at large.

Morro da Providência

Morro da Providência presented a particularly interesting case for the tours were not organized either by external (as in Rocinha) or internal agents (as in Babilônia), but by the Mayor's Office which turned the favela into an "Open Air Museum".

Considered to be the city's oldest favela, Morro da Providência is located in Rio's Central area and is home to some 5,000 inhabitants. Selling Providência as a tourist attraction was idealized in the context of the development and revitalization of Rio's docklands region which included, besides the so-called Open Air Museum, a Cidade do Samba (City of Samba) inaugurated in February 2006. The main objective was to attract tourists who arrive in Rio in transatlantic ships, in the hope that they will get off at the docks, visit the downtown area and go up to the favela.

¹³ Active since May 2002, Vai pra Galera provides art, education, health and learning technology in Morro dos Prazeres.

¹⁴ Projeto Morrinho is a social program which helps a large group of teenagers from the favela by teaching them to administer and film a project of building a miniature favela inside the favela. The exhibition attracts occasional tourists to Favela Pereirão and has traveled to several different countries receiving prizes.

A cybercafe was built and some historic landmarks were restored: a 19th Century Catholic Church, a small chapel, a 19th Century stairway built by slaves, Dodô da Portela's house (Dodô is a 90-year-old sambista), and the old water tank. Built in 1913, the octagonal water tank will be converted into a "Tank of Memories", an audio-visual installation where the visitor will listen to testimonies from long-term residents and read some of the favela stories. Two belvederes have also been built so that tourists could enjoy the view that spans the downtown area as well as tourism landmarks such as Corcovado, Sugar Loaf, Maracanã stadium and the Rio-Niterói bridge. Houses in strategic spots, near the landmarks, were removed to make it easier for tourists to find their way to the favela; since those were not risk areas, the Mayor's Office agreed to pay compensation to each family who had their house demolished.

Improvements in Morro da Providência geared to preparing the Open Air Museum were part of the Favela-Bairro project. Special materials, which certainly would not fit in other favelas' budgets, such as metal plates identifying little streets and landmarks, as well as black marble strips between the concrete blocks on the ground, have been used to form a trail that marks the entire trek through the Open Air Museum. Unfortunately, signs placed in these spots do not tell the visitors much more than the name of the place and are inscribed in Portuguese. The Mayor's Office promised to offer training for some Providência dwellers to become local guides, but even before the training had been completed, several of these people were already been accompanying tourists, telling stories about the favela and showing them around key places.

Similar to the case of Morro dos Prazeres, what was being advertised and sold in Providência was supposed heritage, tradition and authenticity. "Within cultural tourism, and wherever else the production of authenticity is dependent on some act of (re)production", state Warren & Taylor (2001: 9) in reference to the Maori experience in New Zealand. "It is conventionally the past which is seen to hold the model of the original. Authenticity in the present must pay homage to a conception of origins". In Morro da Providência, what authorities attempted to do was to sell the

favela – its landscape, architecture, objects and people -- not so much as context dependent and complex entities in the present but as signifiers of past events. According to the favelados who were working as guides, however, many locals and even tourists did not grasp the “Open Air Museum” concept. Several visitors arrived at Providência asking where the museum was, expecting an actual building in a specific place.

Talking about their as yet informal experience as “guides”, some locals disclose that tensions and disputes with the authorities have already surfaced. On one hand, the Mayor’s Office is aiming at self-promotion through organizing the tours, on the other hand some locals stated they intended to use the presence of tourists precisely to criticize politicians in general and show the world how unconcerned about the favela the government has been.

Architect and urbanist Lu Petersen, who idealized the project, stated that one of her aims was to discourage criminal activities within the favela with tourism, as the presence of visitors in Providência could ideally inhibit the drug dealers’ actions. This expectation has failed, so far as the project has been confronted with violence on a daily basis. Dodô da Portela’s house and the centenary chapel were unintended targets of a shower of bullets after a fierce dispute between drug dealers and policemen soon after the Museum was opened.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that favelas are tourist destinations that can be advertised, sold and consumed in many ways: as a social and/or physical landscape, an ecological site, or an extreme tourist experience. 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. 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 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.

Tourism in favelas is 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. 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 politic 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.

Seeing tourism in the favela as being a “poverty zoo” has been contested by the author and the few others who have researched the phenomenon (Dwek, 2004; Carter, 2005). Although it was not my intention here to discuss favelados’ impressions about the tourists’ presence, I may say that, rather than being seen as a humiliation, the growing interest in the favela shown by tourists is often viewed as something positive. At all times when my research team and I took part in tours, residents were extremely receptive, waving good-bye and saying a few greetings in English. Of course I am not denying the unequal relationship that is established between First World tourists and local residents, but this does not mean that favelados are solely objects of the curious gaze; they also gaze at tourists, make humorous comments about them, and criticize what they perceive as an intrusive behavior.

If tourism is, as Franklin and Crang state (2001: 17), “a productive system that fuses discourse, materiality and practice”, the favela as a tourist destination should be seen as a *contact zone*, “a space of colonial encounters where peoples geographically and historically separated come

into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt, 1992: 6). It is a physical and symbolic territory wherein discursive layers accommodate each other in 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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