Olívia Maria Gomes da Cunha

The Sensitive Territory of the Favelas: Place, History, and Representation

The appearance of the first *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro's urban landscape at the end of the 19th century was accompanied by reports in the pages of the national capital's newspapers. Three years after the Ministry of War dispatched soldiers returning from the Canudos War to be posted at the top of the hill in the center of the city – shortly dubbed the "Morro da Favela" (Favela hill) – the first public outcries began appearing in the press. In November 1900, the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper published warnings by public authorities that the precarious and unsanitary shacks located on the hillsides could become a haven for criminals (Alvito/Zaluar 1998). Motivated by fear, an array of initiatives sought to alter the dangerous conditions endured by migrants, ex-slaves and other poor people unable to follow the rules of appropriate behavior established by public health officials and other agents of the civilizing marvels of the turn of the century (Valladares 2006). From then on, poverty, origin, color and the social class of favela residents would be inevitably associated to a way of living in, occupying and interpreting the city.

In the 20th century, ambitious plans for urbanization and remodeling were used by public health institutions as a justification for the destruction of boarding houses, shacks, and small settlements in semi-rural areas that failed to meet the criteria for introducing modernity into the tropics. Together with public health officials, legislators and city administrators focused on standardizing the new construction codes in the name of hygiene and the eradication of epidemics that scourged tropical cities. Urban plans and moral panic, followed by violent incursions, intensified in the communities that resisted these new measures. By mid-century, the favelas were no longer limited to a few "concentrations of unhealthy settlements" and had transformed the profile of the city, proliferating in form, size, population density, styles, and physiognomy. The favela became the symbol of a disor-

derly, dangerous and unhealthy city (Meade/Walker 1991; Lima 1989; Valladares 2006; Fischer 2007; 2008).

However, the expansion, penetration, and rooting of favelas in the disorganized fabric of the city from the late 19th and early 20th centuries were not exclusively the result of the resistance of its residents. Favela residents were regularly forced to negotiate the terms by which their presence would be tolerated, so as to avoid invasion and removal. Daily violence and other forms of "social suffering" (Das 1997) did not exclude forms of communication between the favela and the 'others' – dialogues and deals involving questionable authorities, corrupt public employees, sympathetic politicians, police 'from the area', and other personalities who from the early 20th century began to populate the chronicle of the city, which grew despite differences naturalized and turned 'cultural'. From the beginning of the century, these arrangements steered the growth of the city. The political ploys that mediated forms of communication between the favela and its intermediaries would transform its codes of visibility (Perlman 1976; Pandolfi 2002; Silva 2002; 2004; Alvito 2004).

The favela of the poor but decent worker featured in the sambas that chronicled Rio de Janeiro's social life in the 1940's, for example, combined with older images of moral panic that by the 20th century, were used to represent favelas in various genres of Brazilian music. The favela became a visible index of estrangement, an image of the city and its codes of conduct. As such, it transcended its reference points and occupied other territories, influencing other discourses. Favelas were already present in radio and print journalism, and by the end of the 1950's began to appear in film. It is at this moment that Brazilian film director Nelson Pereira dos Santos translated post-war Italian realism, reinterpreting its scenes, figures and text based on the popular imagination of the favela: the lyricism of the *malandro* and his musicality.[1]

Following the movies *Rio Zona Norte* (The Northern Zone of Rio) and *Rio 40 Graus* (Rio 40 Degrees), the favela became the backdrop of a more radical representation of the differences that socially struc-

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1   See, for instance, Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Rio Zona Norte* (1957) and *Rio 40°* (1955), and the 1960 Academy Award Winner and winner of the Palme d'Or at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheu.*

ture and culturally express Brazilian society. As in *Casa Grande e Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves) – the model which Gilberto Freyre conceived in the 1930's to portray Brazil through a kind of structuralizing dualism – the favela was transformed into a symbolic reference of dualities and antagonisms, as well as of passages and dialogues between different concepts of Nation (Freyre [1933] 1997). The favela becomes the Nation of the "other", averse to order, transformed into an emblem, the utopia of new generations.

If on one hand the nascent *Cinema Novo* and, later, the tropicalist *parangoles* of Hélio Oticica during the 1960s were to transform disorder, misfortune, fear, and barbarity into an inventory of cultural diversity in Brazil under the military regime, on the other, the favelas would be irreversibly transformed through daily urban violence into city-states, festering territories, and virtual democratized territories. In the beginning of the 21st century, in the movie based on Paulo Lins' book *City of God* (1997), film directors Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund present a romanticized portrait of a middle class seduced by the magical possibilities of an encounter that transgresses social and geographical limits of the "legal city" and the favelas (Fischer 2007). Impossible love, community-based heroes and native Robin-Hoods hyper-realistically invaded the screen. The urban utopia that describes the city as a metaphor of the country is thus revealed (Cunha/Gomes 1996; 2002; Bentes 2002; 2003; Freire Medeiros/Santanna 2006).[2]

The representations manufactured by the media, in literature, and those that populated the imagination of politicians, administrators, urban planners, policy makers, and social reformers, however, did not always reproduce the experiences lived by members of these communities and their neighbors. As with any form of representation, a large part of the mediated images of the favela reflect the unease of those who observed them. They composed a body of knowledge that saw the favela as averse to order, a place of absence of citizenship. These are stubborn and difficult images to overcome at the dawn of the 21st century. The simplified way in which I have tried to contextualize

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2   For a different vision of the association of favelas and violence in Fernando Meirelles' and Katia Lund's movie, *City of God*, see, for instance, the debate between two intellectuals, ex-resident of Cidade de Deus, rapper, and composer, MV Bill, and Paulo Lins, author of the book *The City of God*, on which the movie was based. See <http://www.vivafavela.com.br> (26.04.2006).

historically the daily array of speeches, or, better put, "discursive interventions" of the favela and its settlers, which are permeated with all kinds of symbolic violence, has a justification. It is to situate the discursive field which shapes both public policies and the subjectivity of the residents of the favela who populate the imaginary of Cariocas [Rio de Janeiro residents in general] – through which other forms of representation are insinuated.

My purpose in this text is not to conduct an analyses of different forms of virtual organization of social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). My desire is only to note the emergence of new and renewed discourses on favelas and their residents in a new territory – the Internet. To do so, I focus on one of many concepts and objects given priority by NGOs and social movements that represent or collaborate in partnership with favela communities: the uses and meanings of the notion of history as a focus and strategy for political legitimation. They are discursive and visual structures that are built in the programs of non-governmental organizations, the government and social movements. Even though the Internet is not an unoccupied, rocky or flooded terrain without an owner, or under legal litigation, it is here that the favela is virtualized and given sensitivity. This chapter will explore different forms of occupation of virtual territories by tracing the questions and practices that situate the production of *new*, and the reinterpretation of *old* local histories.

1. Who speaks about the Favelas?

The use of mediating resources such as the Internet by social movements in different arenas of political debate became more visible in the 1990's. In order to reflect upon and analyze the construction, forms of circulation, and uses of categories that spatially and temporally situate the contexts in which images and texts are aimed at a variety of readers and surfers, various studies have noted the use of cyberspace as a field for diverse forms of social activism. Arturo Escobar and other authors have mapped the epistemological implications for anthropological research, as well as the political dilemmas that involve activism in virtual spaces (Escobar 1994; Ribeiro 1998; Wilson/Peterson 2002; Aranha 1996; Kolko et al. 2000). The virtual dimension of these new fields and spaces have required social move-

ments, NGOs and new actors that adopt the Internet as their territory of existence to use and reinterpret written and visual languages.

In favelas and "favela communities" – as some prefer to call them – such as the Complexo da Maré (a group of communities), Rocinha, Cantagalo, Borel, Prazeres, Complexo do Alemão, Cidade de Deus, and Serrinha, local groups arose that began to work with churches and schools in meetings organized by older community members, as in the case of Centers for Memory, Historical Centers and local "networks" (Pandolfi 2004).[3] In addition to these initiatives and, at times in conjunction with them, the construction of websites as spaces for dissemination and networking stimulated new forms of creation, language, and mobilization (Briggs/McBride 2002).[4] In this context, interpretations of the history of conflict involving the State, social movements, NGO's and private institutions that act in favela communities involve a series of images and ideas that concern the meaning of favelas and principally how they should be represented (Leite 2004; Novaes 2004; Pandolfi 2004). The question of representation – but mainly, the legitimacy of the 'voice' and 'image' which comes from favelas – have a central importance in the texts that circulate in these sites.

It is not by chance that the website of an NGO born out of social movements in the form of a network – networking with groups and institutions in and outside of the favela – the *Observatório das Favelas* (OF) – refers directly to representation as a field of activism and political transformation. Defining its objectives, OF identifies communication as political practice, in that

> it produces and gives visibility to new representations of favelas, breaking away from the paternalistic and criminalizing language traditionally used in this context. For this purpose, OF supports the creation of a communication network that involves the media, especially community-based media; produces books, films and images that promote a new per-

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3   Among others, are projects directed to the production of local memory and history in communities such as Rocinha ("Varal de Lembranças), Mangueira ("Museu do Samba"), Complexo da Maré ("Maré de Histórias"), and Borel/Casa Branca ("Condutores de Memória").

4   The presence of computers network in 'community centers' inside favelas is a reality since 1994 when an NGO called Centro de Democratização da Informação (CDI) – *Committee for the Democratization of Information* – opened its first branch in in the Santa Marta favela <http://www.cdi.org.br> (26.04.2006).

spective of favelas, and organizes and disseminates publications pro-
duced by young students in the favelas.[5]

For this purpose the OF disseminates and commercializes images on
its website. With these "images of the people", in which the favelas
and their residents are represented, the website seeks to produce a
vision from the point of view of the community, those who live the
daily experience of belonging to the favela. In addition to the OF, two
other non-governmental organizations have sought to create a political
and social practice of intervention in representation, the websites Viva
Favela (VF) and Favela News Agency (ANF). ANF, created in 2000,
disseminates images called the "eyes of the favela" and defines itself
as:

> […] an agency that simultaneously links the favelas, and serves as a
> bridge to the pavement [as neighborhoods with urban infrastructure and
> services are known]. It is a humble site which is created and maintained
> by the volunteer labor of our small team – just like a community work
> project. We gather our content through casual meetings and contacts, and
> put together Favela News Agency little by little, just as the *favelado*
> builds and improves upon his house. In modest terms, this reflects a great
> ambition: to offer true information on the sensitive territory of the
> favelas. To give voice to community members on the Internet, including
> youth and community leaders, always so absent from the media. Every-
> one is invited to participate, make their voice heard, their diversities, pro-
> jects, and struggles. The Favela News Agency is a virtual structure that is
> never completely finished, always interactive, and ready to grow and
> deepen its roots in the real city.[6]

Viva Favela, created in 2000 by journalists and community leaders
under the sponsorship of the non-governmental organization Viva Rio,
is one of the best known initiatives and inspires an intense reflection
on ways of "talking about", "representing" and "giving voice" to those
in the favela. It represents a kind of network created among journal-
ists, social scientists, NGO's activists, and favela residents (Valladares
1977; Grynszpan/Pandolfi 2003). As a member of this network, the
group *Central Única das Favelas* (CUFA), for example, coordinates
cultural, Hip-Hop and black movements through a network that con-
siders the favela as an emblematic territory:

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5   According to Observatório de Favelas, in <http://www.iets.org.br> (26.04.2006).
6   *Agência de Notícias das Favelas*, "Favela na Internet" in <http://anf.org.br/>
     (26.04.2006).

> Youth from the Hip-Hop movement, presidents of residents' associations, community leaders, *sambistas*, artists and workers in general from diverse communities in Rio de Janeiro organized themselves around an idea: to transform the favelas, or better, the unrecognized talents and potential, due to social, racial prejudice. […]. CUFA (Central Única de Favelas) emerged as a direct result of this idea, acting in different areas, embracing diverse communities that come together around a primary 'body' – that is CUFA itself, bringing together these communities for the joint development of a great diversity of projects in an attempt to value not only the communities, but each individual found within.[7]

Rather than exclusively disseminating local interventions, their website coordinates the field of cultural production of youth who produce and consume Hip Hop in the city. CUFA insists on its legitimacy for expressing the voice of marginalized groups without mediation. Explaining the choice of Hip Hop, its organizers have affirmed that:

> […] the periphery is a figure that should speak for itself, have its own voice, and participate in cultural, political and social dialogue one-on-one with other social groups. The periphery is a majority treated by a minority. To dominate the discourse is part of our project of situating things in their true place.[8]

2. Putting Favela in its Place

In some of the initiatives mentioned the construction of representation of favelas implies diverse forms of negotiation concerning what favelas were in the past. In other words, in the elaboration of narratives of their histories, they discuss different projects that aim at construct, "research", "recuperate" and produce local history in order to transform the stigmatization of favela residents and their place of residence.

An idea common to the many different projects initiated in Rio de Janeiro in the past five years is that all favelas have a history in which residents are both subjects of their formation and participants in their

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7   "Porque Hip Hop", Central Única das Favelas, <http://www.cufa.com.br> (26.04. 2006). For a discussion on the implications of race and skin color in the everyday practices of discriminations of Favelas' residentes, see Sherriff (2001) and Goldstein (2003). For a estimulating analysis of transnational Black politics involving Favelas/ Slums in Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles, see Vargas (2003; 2006).

8   "Porque Hip Hop", Central Única das Favelas <http://www.cufa.com.br> (26.04. 2006).

reproduction.[9] The semantic uses and feelings that support these prac-
tices suggest that this is a complex terrain that involves forms of pro-
duction and transformation of subjectivities. A significant number of
initiatives for the production and recuperation of the memory and
history of favelas began in 2000, based on networks of local organiza-
tions – community associations, community centers, and schools –
and external partners, local mediators, municipal, state and federal
government institutions, international agencies, and academic "volun-
teers"(primarily anthropologists, and to a lesser extent, historians).
This foundation, reflected in the diversity of partners, raises a series of
questions: under what circumstances did history become a focus of
relevant and transformative actions that would be able to bring to-
gether such a diverse group of partners and participants? It is difficult
to specify an exact chronology that would allow us to trace the forma-
tion of a network, and more or less systematic forms of connection,
given the diversification and multiplication of partnerships over the
past years. However, it is worth trying to understand how "producing
histories" and examining forms of representation are linked as an in-
flection in the same discourse and political practice carried out on the
Internet. Histories retold and recorded – from different kind of sources
– can be interpreted as unstable instruments in the production of urban
and local subjectivities.

The sophistication of the resources used in the production of
favela histories cannot prevent a questioning of whether these instru-
ments – favela websites – are 'representative' of the voices of their
residents. There are many disagreements and criticisms about the au-
thenticity of these representations and the legitimacy of their produc-
ers in "speaking" in name of the residents of favela communities. Sev-
eral should be noted here. Created within the website Viva Favela, the
homepage *Favela Tem Memória* [Favela has a Memory] is an attempt
to create a virtual and real community of producers of histories of
favelas (Ramalho 2004; ISER 2004). Combining the work of univer-
sity students who live in the communities, they use techniques of
journalism, photo-journalism, history, oral history and ethnography to

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9   See, for instance a project called "Condutores de Memória" which aimed at
     recontruct the local histories of favelas' communities of Tijuca (Condutores de
     Memória 2006).

document the memory of community members. Despite the fact that the site is an initiative actually created outside of the favela, its content represents 'homemade' historiographical and journalistic materials about favelas. The website is divided into various sections; the "Gramaphone", the "Favelario", "Speaking in Favela", "Cloud Soup", "Photo Gallery", and "Time Line". It seeks to make history "from a narrative perspective", while using stylistic and technical support that intervenes not only in the text but also in the training of those who act as collectors and producers, the "community correspondents".

The project has been recognized as a unique experience that sought, above all, to overcome symbolic, special and political barriers that implicitly or explicitly differentiated the various actors involved in the project – individuals and institutions "from the pavement" and the favelas. This project began when participants launched a series of experiments aimed at confronting images of stigmatization while giving voice to favela residents. Cited as a singular experience that sought, above all, to overcome symbolic and political barriers that implicitly or explicitly differentiated the various actors involved in its activities, the project was the initiative of producers who trained residents in the production of news, images, and local histories. One of the roles of these 'correspondents' was seeking news in a medium little known on the part of mass media and state institutions. For residents and those familiar with the social and symbolic space of the favela communities, these 'correspondents' would be able to reproduce the voice of its residents on their own terms (Sant'Ana 2004). At the same time, in taking the term 'correspondents' from the language of journalism, the project was based on the idea that residents were mediators authorized to enter as members rather than strangers in a feared territory. Even while edited by a team of professionals and specialists responsible for the training of 'correspondents', other local histories of the favela were constructed from the perspective of its residents.

The texts, interviews and data collected by the 'correspondents' were combined with other materials – information about favelas found principally in the newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s. This kind of source also has an enormous importance in other projects and provides a visual memory of the historical construction of the marginalization of residents of the favelas. An example includes the *Centro de Estudos*

e Ações Solidárias da Maré (CEASM), in the Maré favela complex, in sponsoring the collection of local histories and production of newspapers. A relevant part of the archives of images is the result of a process of collection by university students resident in these communities, with supervision of professors in the social sciences. In the photos, perceptions on the part of the press and the elites, shocked at the growth and proximity of the favelas, lead to the gradual stigmatization of the favela as something that should be removed from the city. In contrast to this perspective, students were trained to photograph the contemporary day-to-day of the favelas.[10] The photographs of houses built on sticks *(palafitas)*, materials used in construction, as well as the use of metal, the remains of *tapume* (pieces of wood used in the construction of public buildings reutilized in the building of houses), and other left-overs from city construction sites are intermingled with personal stories about the daily experience of transformation of the physical space beyond its migrant origins (CEASM 2004). The resident of the favela radically and continuously transforms the physical space where they live. Still, 'residence in the favela' is a continuation of other forms of organization and policies of deterritorialization carried out through removal – a form of violence that is constantly present. Thus, if the history of struggle allows for the recognition over time of the legitimacy of living in the favela, even if under precarious conditions, the history of removal gives authority to versions recreated around local ownership, based on spatial references. Thus, in trying to implode the negative signals of these historically produced strategies of subjectivity, some of the actors and their projects, contradictorily, would be preserving and even giving force to their boundaries and features of difference based on a supposed common experience. In the current era of urban transformation of Rio, in which the favela and its members have become the focus and scene of publications, presentations, actions, symbolic forms of violence, and policies of all kinds, the recognition of their history makes explicit a series of questions that should be objects of reflection.

Beyond the unique character and the stylistic, aesthetic and above all rhetorical experimentation initiated by Viva Favela (VF) and the website Favela Has Memory (FTM), other forms of occupation have

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10   See <www.imagensdopovo.org.br> (26.04.2006).

proliferated on the web. The websites Central Unica de Favelas –
CUFA – and the Favela News Agency (ANF), for example, emphasize
other forms of representation. Directly linked to community organiza-
tions and, in particular to black and cultural movements and other
cultural expressions, such as the Hip-Hop movement – they establish
ties with other networks, mediators and forms of participation in the
public debate, including projects of sports (street basketball), music,
and cinema.[11]

But these differences are not only stylistic, nor are they limited to
institutional arrangements. The 'authority' of their producers – resi-
dents of the favela – is highlighted to give legitimacy to the purpose-
fully chaotic aspects of the site. Due to their specificities, these pro-
jects cannot be compared entirely on the same terms. I prefer to see
them in their complementary dimension and in their possibility of
suggesting a particular moment for the transformation of strategies for
political mobilization in favela-based communities of Rio de Janeiro.
By virtue of their importance in the realm of actions involving social
movements, nongovernmental organizations, and the State, these com-
munities have attained significant visibility, which implies a measur-
able expansion in the networks of interaction which exist under, be-
tween and in between the lines of the discourses that promote a polar-
ized view of, literally, the *favela* versus the *asphalt* – that is, the paved
areas of the city. These networks promote different ways of semanti-
cizing the categories "favelado" and "favela resident". By defending
common memories, histories and pasts, these agents call for their
rights to power and authority of the word, even if mediated, and at
times "handled" by able writers. One of the objectives observed is
specifically to produce dialogue, and the coming together through
symbolic leveling of citizenship in which a certain notion of history –
that of the citizen who is aware, engaged and active, is a part.

Among other initiatives, these projects capitalize on one of the
possibilities created by NGOs and social movements – the idea that
histories lived in favelas need to be told. However we need to differ-
entiate the forms of collection, production, and reproduction of knowl-
edge conceived of as history, and the way in which they circulate

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11 See, for instance <http//:www.cufa.org.br> and <http//:www.cufaviaduto.org.br>
    (26.04.2006).

within and outside of the community. The initiatives briefly described here reveal a tension, also present in the tales, testimonies, and conversations about forms of engagement of members with these projects and their various "communities". Who speaks, for what, and for whom are these stories on the favelas and their members told? By invading the virtual sphere of the internet, favela communities and their mediators produce a kind of exhumation of ghosts present in the popular and violent imaginary of the city, or reinterpret and recycle its leftovers, fragments, and whatever else can still be reinterpreted. In this form, banners and pop-ups implode our capacity to read the images of the internet as if it were simply words, "the sensitive territory of the favelas" – an phrase coined by the creators of CUFA *(Central Única das Favelas)* – populated by different actors and multiple interventions, in transforming itself into a text that invades the web as a territory of expression.

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