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## Peace Profile: Rene Silva

JASON B. SCOTT

Few social media activists have had as large of an influence as Rene Silva, a 27-year-old from Rio de Janeiro's most notorious group of *favelas* (shantytowns) known as the Complexo do Alemão. At the age of 11, Silva founded a community newspaper called *Voz das Comunidade* (Voice of the Community). By 2020, the paper had a monthly circulation of 20,000 and Silva had hundreds of thousands of followers on social media. Silva has various accomplishments outside of journalism including partnering with multinational corporations to bring clean drinking water to his community and helping to organize thousands-strong protests against deadly police policies. For invested observers of Brazilian social movements, Rene Silva is the archetype of a millennial activist.

I met Rene Silva in 2014, as I began a long-term ethnographic dissertation project regarding the intersection of anti-gang policy and development policy in Rio's favelas. I conducted dozens of interviews with community members about the role of digital inclusion in their recently "pacified" community. On the ground, I heard near daily mention of Silva's work. For Afro-Brazilian youth and young adults, he was the favela's principal role model. For older activists, Silva represented the product of decades of grassroots mobilization.

Many of my interactions with Silva coincided with the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, a period that was frequently referred to by *cariocas* (residents of Rio de Janeiro) as "a época das olimpíadas" (the Olympic Epoch). Silva's celebrity status seemed to mature as media coverage of the World Cup and Olympics intensified.

The run up to these games were less than ideal. The administration of Brazil's then-president, Dilma Rousseff, was engulfed in a number of scandals that would eventually lead to her impeachment. The FBI opened up investigations against 18 FIFA officials for their roles selling World Cup contracts. Body parts washed ashore on Copacabana beach. Bicycle paths fell into the sea. Rio's Guanabara Bay was deemed too toxic for Olympic events. A favela named Vila Autódromo was torn down to make space for a television studio. Zika plagued the country. By 2016, most

Brazilians who I spoke with saw the games as the ultimate symbol of the nation's misplaced priorities.

The Olympic Epoch was uniquely tumultuous for the favela as well. The government's pacification forces lost their fragile grip on favela-based violence and Rio's police killed 74 people a month. Most victims were innocents, killed by "balas perdidas" (stray bullets). As international news outlets parachuted into Rio for the Olympics, Silva was often one of the first people they contacted regarding stories based in the favela. Silva offered an inspirational story, a sense of hope and resilience, and a grounded perspective amidst all of the Olympian chaos.

At the time, I read countless profiles in international publications that repeated Silva's story, the same story that I opened this essay with. Silva gave interviews with the hope that any added attention would force Brazilian society to address generations of inequality in the favela. While these hopes proved to be more optimism than prediction, Silva's consistent advocacy solidified his position as the first among equals in the favela's human rights movement.

Silva's career arch has been imbued with a millennial spirit that embraces digital technology and intersectional social critique as guiding logics. As a millennial, someone born roughly between 1981 and 1996, Silva and his peers are most often discussed for their unique behaviors, activities, and modes of consumption.

Silva's career arch has been imbued with a millennial spirit that embraces digital technology and intersectional social critique as guiding logics. As a millennial, someone born roughly between 1981 and 1996, Silva and his peers are most often discussed for their unique behaviors, activities, and modes of consumption. Millennials have been maligned for an obsession with social media. But these generational criticisms often ignore how millennial activists like Silva have used social media to cement themselves in more traditional democratic movements. For many, Silva represents a bridge between the morro (hill) where Rio's working class live and the asfalto (asphalt) where more privileged classes live in well-guarded high-rises.

His editorial direction at *Voz* does more than just highlights the day to day of favela life. Rather, the news-paper makes favela culture accessible and demonstrates that the more than 400 informal communities constructed around Rio have, to paraphrase Silva, stories other than drug trafficking and abstract suffering. Most importantly, Silva has used his newfound social capital to start new community newspapers in ten favelas throughout Brazil. Just as when he was 11 years old, printing the first edition of *Voz das Comunidades* on A4 paper, Silva's guiding strategy is to share his visibility with the community around him.

Silva's celebrity cemented itself overnight in 2010 when thousands of police "pacified" the Complexo do Alemão. The dense urban community of 60,000 residents, built outside of regulatory frameworks and government infrastructure, had been plagued by a decades-old war on drugs. The stalemate between police and traffickers had discouraged the investment of government institutions and civil society. The goal of pacification was to disrupt a powerful drug faction and usher in a new period of state-sponsored economic formalization. Many tied pacification directly to the Olympic Epoch but, there were also noteworthy economic and political currents, such as a decades long economic boom guided by Brazil's liberal socialist Workers Party, that sought to bring favela society into the mainstream.

As tanks rolled past his home and helicopters flew overhead on the day of pacification, Silva sat at his bedroom window and posted updates to his half dozen followers on Twitter. One of Silva's tweets read, "os traficantes jogaram uma granada nos policiais!!! tenso" ("the traffickers threw a grenade at the police!!! tense"). Silva's coverage of pacification diverged dramatically from television reporting which relied on news-helicopters and reporters donning bulletproof vests behind police blockades. Activists, politicians, and journalists took notice of Silva's tweets which later appeared in some of Brazil's most prominent news sources. In the days that followed the Complexo do Alemão's pacification, Silva gained tens of thousands of followers on social media. In the months and years that followed, he received international awards and corporate sponsorships. He gave TED Talks, lectured at Harvard, and acted as the face of campaigns for international charities. He sat down with governors and a president. He even inspired a character in Brazil's all-time highest rated telenovela. And, as non-governmental organizations arrived in the community after pacification, Silva was often seen as a central intermediary between activists inside and allies from abroad.

Following Silva's success, and in part from his direct assistance, dozens of young Afro-Brazilian social media activists from the Complexo had also risen to an international spotlight. Silva's tone on social media and in print maintained a journalistic neutrality while many of his allies took a more aggressive stance against specific police and politicians who they believed enforced a de facto apartheid in the favela. In the years since the Olympic Epoch, Silva has begun a gradual shift from a more journalistically neutral tone toward a conversation that is more overtly focused on racial and social inequality. In 2018, he was recognized as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by the UN-Sponsored organization, Most Influential People of African Descent (MIPAD). He

has also been supportive of the LGBTQ+ community and worked actively to promote women journalists within *Voz's* editorial team. Explaining his ability to bridge gaps and encapsulate a sometimes contradictory political position, Silva repeatedly describes his relationship with these activists with the term *solidariedade* (solidarity). Silva uses his story as a vehicle to tell the story of others and as his sense of solidarity grows, so does his alignment with an ever-growing list of social justice causes.

For even casual observers, it would be hard to untie Silva's digital activism from the political-economic philosophies of the digital age. Silva practices a disruptive challenge to long established standards of *favela* engagement, traditionally tied to political parties, neighborhood associations, and labor organizations. Much like his counterparts in Silicon Valley, Silva considers himself a social entrepreneur. In one conversation I had with Silva, he explained, "I believe you can use a journalistic career to be an entrepreneur ... community leadership is a form of entrepreneurship because it is a social business with the objective of helping the community, addressing the needs of the most vulnerable."

Silva's work inspired a new narrative in Brazilian journalism centered on the experiences of people affected by poverty, hunger, and police violence. As a 2020 profile in *GQ Brasil* argues, "In Brazil, there exists journalism pre and post Silva Silva." Traditional media outlets often promote violence in the *favela* by focusing almost exclusively on the ills of the drug trade and the need for violent police intervention. The Complexo do Alemão has been particularly maligned as a "terra de ninguém" (a no man's land) that decent Brazilians should not enter. Reinforcing this stereotype was the fact that *favela* drug factions frequently executed journalists.

From an early age, Silva understood how Brazil's most prominent newspapers propagated a crime talk about the *favela*. Even more sympathetic views of the *favela*, such as the 2001 film *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*), perpetuated an image of urban marginality linked to the esthetics of violence and oppression, while offering little sense of potential inclusion.

Silva's model for media activism seeks to subvert traditional media narratives and humanize everyday experiences. Embracing a mantra of the digital age, one of his colleagues explained, "Silva wants to move fast and break things. He tries everything that works and abandons everything else." This flexibility is much more of a necessity than a competitive logic. When the government and corporations defunded *favela*-based projects in the *favela* after the globally visible Olympics, Silva sought more unconventional collaborators such as celebrities and international artists.

Brazil's well documented 2016 economic and political crisis encouraged Silva to create smaller but more engaged partnerships that could

deliver direct benefits to the *favela*. For example, *Voz* organizes online campaigns multiple times a year to deliver *cesta basicas* (basic baskets) made up of essential needs to thousands of highly vulnerable neighbors. Silva, alongside a broader coalition of allies, also helps to promote a mobile app that tracked shootings in the *favela*. More recently, he helped adapt this app-based platform to address the Brazilian government's unwillingness to track COVID-19 in the *favela*.

Much like a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, Silva also sees his work in terms of logistical and institutional growth. With over ten agencies of *Voz das Comunidades* in *favelas* throughout Brazil, he expresses a desire for continual expansion to other *favelas* where there is a potential for community journalism. As an entrepreneur, he also suggests that his work is in direct conflict with politicians and businesspeople who fail to value the human potential on the urban margin. In this sense, Silva sees himself as part of an alternative cultural industry that exists outside or parallel to oppressive political-economic and governmental regimes.

While living in the Complexo in the Olympic Epoch, the few times I was able to meet with Silva produced less than ideal interviewing conditions. His demeanor can be best described as politely timid yet steadfast. He is far less bombastic than most public personalities that I have met and he may be the antithesis of the activist-orator often associated with democratic civil society. Walking alongside him, an interviewer can feel like an interloper, disrupting his complex and constantly shifting responsibilities as a liaison for *favela* causes. If you are on the street with him, neighbors often approach to discuss their concerns. At social events in the *favela*, he is often swarmed by activists, politicians, celebrities, and corporate sponsors, all with something to ask or offer. Particularly when engaging him one-on-one, his smartphone can rapidly appear and he may be sucked into his social media. He manages a national team of journalists, many of them still considered “*estagiarios*” (interns), who request near constant guidance.

It is impossible to understand Silva without acknowledging his style of social media engagement where a subdued personality is reflected in a stream of daily posts. The posts are mostly brief and concise and often little more than links to newspaper articles and other social media accounts. In an environment where emotions are frequently taxed, Silva rarely diverts from his role as an objective observer, recording, documenting and sharing, in unadorned images and words, the bare complexity of the community around him.

Silva's daily tweets reflect what James Holston calls “rights talk.” According to Silva, “We want to open spaces of validity for

community members. We live together and work together for our common benefit, because a lot of the time our rights are connected. A lot of people in the community still don't know that we have universal rights, the right to water, the right to basic sanitation, education, and healthcare." By exploring how his neighbors negotiate these rights via social media, Silva believes he can validate the *favela* resident's right to the city and safeguard against the injustices they may encounter on a daily basis.

Silva's celebrity often evaporates in everyday settings outside of the *favela*. For example, while traveling throughout Brazil and the world, Silva continues to be exposed the same types of prejudices every other *favela* resident faces. For example, the same year that he was designated one of the most influential people of African descent, Silva boarded a domestic Brazilian flight. The woman sitting next to him made a comment to another passenger, "in the old days, airplanes were something chic. Nowadays, anyone can travel by airplane. It's really cheap. This is why we must change Brazil." The implication was clear for anyone paying attention to Brazil's contemporary socio-political and racial climate. A New Middle Class, made up principally of black and brown *favela* residents recently incorporated into the formal economy, had been encroaching on traditionally elite spaces. With the rise of populism in Brazil, the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and intense austerity measures targeting New Middle Class communities, dozens of well circulated videos began to circulate online that showed members of Brazil's more privilege classes engaging in racist and classist tirades against unassuming victims. Silva, a young afro-Brazilian man from the *favela*, sought to tell a story of racism and classism via his own encounter with prejudice. Despite his millennial authority, Silva is keenly aware of the limits that more authoritative parts of society continue to place on historically marginalized communities.

### ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AS A SELF- TAUGHT ACTIVIST

Silva has found allies in all levels of Brazil's civil and political society, a fact that can lead to internal tensions and criticism from Silva's base within the *favela*. For example, Silva helped to organize a protest a few weeks before the 2016 Olympic Games. Recent shootouts between police and drug traffickers killed had several innocent bystanders in the previous months. Many in the community blamed the deaths on Rio's hosting of the games, claiming that the government sanctioned greater degrees of

violence only to appease the throngs of international spectators that would soon descend on the city. As protestors marched down the main avenue leading into the Complexo, they carried a fake coffin that housed a fake Olympic torch. Hoisting a torch above his head, Silva stood in solidarity with fellow protestors who felt the Brazilian state had abandoned the *favela* during the Olympic Epoch.

I attended the protest and paid close attention to how community members reacted to the event over social media. There was universal praise for Silva's participation and he was widely credited with drawing international news attention to the event. A few weeks later, I ran with the actual Olympic torch. Hundreds of Complexo residents went online and compared the image of Silva carrying a coffin and the image of Silva carrying the Olympic flame. Many in the community, particularly younger residents who claimed to be admirers of the activist, expressed outrage over his perceived opportunism. For these critics, Silva's participation in an idealized future, one based on a cosmopolitan celebration of sport, was incommensurable with the more just and inclusive future he promoted.

Many negative comments were quickly deleted and the scandal passed, a product of direct reconciliation between Silva and his followers. I asked him directly about the criticism he received during the Olympic Epoch. He replied,

it was never a question about the event. The majority of Brazil's and the World's talent are young black people, youth imprisoned in *favelas* and the poorest neighborhoods. I know many Olympic and Paralympics athletes and they dream of arriving at the Olympics ... This event was connected to the Olympic Epoch, when all of the big media vehicles were talking about Rio. This wasn't a protest against the Olympics, it was against the violence we live in Rio de Janeiro. We live in a state of genocide.

Referring specifically to the critiques he received during the Olympic Epoch, Silva followed, "the more you want to change the world, the more you want to help and are successful at achieving your goals, the more critiques you will have." It was clear, however, that the plurality of reactions to Silva's dual torches aligned with his overall mission of community journalism. While failing to express a message that appealed to all of his followers, he was able to amplify a plurality of *favela* voices and draw attention to the genocide that many live on a daily basis.



In June 2020, *Voz das Comunidades* moved to a seaside home that sat 1000 feet above Ipanema beach. The 26-year-old activist shared a subdued non-sequitur with his hundreds of thousands of followers on social media as he tweeted “nova casinha” (new little house) followed by a heart and praise emoji. His new home sat atop Vidigal, one of the more prosperous *favelas* in Brazil. His new neighbors included actors from the film *Cidade de Deus* and a charity founded by Vik Muniz, the artist/producer behind the critically acclaimed documentary *Wasteland*. One resident of the Complexo responded to Silva's news, “In this racist society, it gives me pride that I can scream that the *favela* won.” Another wrote, “From the Complexo do Alemão to the world.” Millennial activism, particularly that which is based on social media, cultivates solidarity, friendship, and discussions of a more inclusionary world.

I spoke with Silva shortly after his move and asked him what he would tell an 11-year-old living in a poor neighborhood in Beijing or Brooklyn who wanted to follow in his footsteps. He responded, alluding to his journalistic strategies and the balance of his professional life with his social media celebrity, “It doesn’t matter what your family, friends, or people you don’t know tell you to do. Start with yourself, believe in your dreams and your ideal, go forward and don’t wait for a sponsor. Do what you can with what you have in your hand.” Coincidentally, as Silva wrote to me via WhatsApp, he held an iPhone in hands, ready to communicate on social media, learn, interact, and share.

In a broader history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Silva Silva may be remembered as the quintessential millennial peace activist. At such a young age and with a diverse career of community engagement already on record, Silva's practical and long-term impact on the *favela* will most likely transform in unpredictable ways, aligned with his currents of his times. Silva has an unquestionable aura of potential and progress that adds weight to his work and that of other activists of his generation.

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