

Favela Studies: Disrupting Higher Education and Research on Brazil's Urban Periphery

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ABSTRACT

Brazilian favelas have been referred to as the most studied urban margins in the world. Noteworthy “favela studies” describe a porous urban entity that contests official definitions and popular prejudice. However, research about the favela consistently omits the work of local scholars and reflects an academic model akin to intellectual extraction. This article explores the potentials to center the favela through a critical reflection on the author’s long-term research carried out in the presence of university-educated resident-researchers who sought to build a university in the favela. Rather than simply adding to the number of “favela studies,” this article hopes to provoke greater support for a favela that studies both itself and a broader world. [subaltern urbanism, critical pedagogy, reflexivity, institutional analysis, postcolonial epistemology]

RESUMO

As favelas brasileiras têm sido referidas como as margens urbanas mais estudadas do mundo. “Estudos de favela” descrevem uma entidade urbana porosa que contesta as definições oficiais e o preconceito popular. No entanto, a pesquisa sobre a favela frequentemente omite o trabalho de acadêmicos locais e reflete um modelo acadêmico semelhante à extração intelectual. Este artigo explora as potencialidades de se centrar na favela por meio de uma reflexão crítica sobre a pesquisa de longo prazo do autor, realizada na presença de pesquisadores residentes com formação universitária que buscavam construir uma universidade na favela. Em vez de simplesmente aumentar o número de “estudos de favela”, este artigo espera provocar um apoio maior para uma favela que estuda a si mesma e um mundo mais amplo. [urbanismo subalterno, pedagogia crítica, reflexividade, análise institucional, epistemologia pós-colonial]

Introduction

Four years before Rio de Janeiro councilperson Marielle Franco was assassinated by two former military police, she submitted a master's thesis to the Fluminense Federal University. The title of Franco's thesis, "UPP—The Reduction of the Favela to Three Letters" (2014), refers to the logics used to police life on Rio's stigmatized working-class periphery.¹ The Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP, or Pacification Police Unit) recently installed in Maré—the group of favelas where Franco grew up—shared an epistemological history with the highways, concrete sound barriers, and "eco limits" that physically separated the "abnormal" community from the rest of Rio de Janeiro (Franco 2014, 63). Shedding light on how epistemological boundaries are made concrete, Franco declares: "The marks left by homicide are not present just in studies, in numbers, and indicators. They are present above all in the chest of each mother of a favela resident or mother of a police officer that has lost a life" (77). Far more than simply etching out alternative epistemological paradigms, Franco's scholarship presents the favela's affective realities to demand policy and institutional changes that center the voices of the *periferia* (periphery).

What can Franco's work as a scholar and policymaker tell us about the permeable nature of twenty-first-century "favela studies"? Or, put more broadly, how has research concerning the urban periphery evolved into a simultaneous epistemological and institutional intervention that breaks down barriers between the favela and the city? Franco's words come on the heels of decades of social science research that argues one cannot understand the favela without thinking of the city, the Brazilian state, and the world as a whole (see Collins 2015; Holston 1991; McCann 2014). Successive generations of scholarship—from both "inside" and "outside"—have resulted in a broader legitimacy for theories from Brazil's periphery and made epistemological boundaries increasingly porous. These epistemological discussions are embodied by a growing number of *universitários da favela* (university students from the favela). Franco, for example, described herself as part of a *bonde de intelectuais da favela* (a clique of intellectuals from the favela) that had recently earned *graduação* (undergraduate) and *pós-graduação* (graduate) degrees. Research sponsored by major universities had also helped to establish an interface between elite and popular knowledge in her neighborhood of Maré. Nonetheless, the growing prominence of university-educated scholars born in the favela has not translated into a clear institutional or theoretical reset for Brazil's periphery. The unequal delegation of institutional resources for favela-born scholars is possibly the clearest reflection of how academia has helped to maintain the boundary between the favela and beyond.

Despite the broader academic inclusion of peripheral voices made by successive generations of scholars, there are no four-year universities based within the official boundaries of a Brazilian favela. The same can be said for other “informal” and “gray areas” across the globe, commonly referred to as shantytowns, slums, and ghettos. An abundance of resources directed toward favela-based research, in the form of grants and university appointments, continues to be funneled to researchers from middle-class Brazil and the Global North. The work of resident-researchers is often pigeonholed and underfunded within an unequal paradigm of academic authority that even well-intentioned and collaborative outsiders continue to unintentionally wield over the periphery. A close reading of global research depicting favela life continues to imply a uniform category of “insider” that, through omission or informant anonymity, pools the well-traveled, educated, and middle-class *bonde de intelectuais* with an ethnographic character resembling a lumpenproletariat bound to menial labor. The same set of favela studies often conflate life in the relatively privileged and gentrified favelas adjacent to Rio’s elite seaside neighborhoods with life in the far more isolated, impoverished, and violent communities in the city’s north and west zones. This academic inequality has led some residents to imagine how a university built by, for, and within the favela could upset this history of institutional and theoretical distinction.

Exploring this dynamic, I present a set of favela-based ethnographic observations among residents, students, educators, and researchers carried out between 2010 and 2020. After first contextualizing my problematic ethnographic position in the field, I discuss the porous epistemological boundaries that favela residents made visible to me. I describe how modes of knowledge production such as the *sarau* (poetry slam) and the *lage* (rooftop patio) have facilitated collaborative theorizations and paralleled a global scholarly movement toward “subaltern urbanism” (Roy 2011) that frames the slum as theory and practice, not just as a site of knowledge extraction. I then focus on conversations I had with *universitários da favela* and community-based researchers who were central to the production, policymaking, activism, and art in communities where I lived. I conclude by recounting a failed effort to build a university in the favela.

This article ultimately argues for a paradigmatic shift from studying *a favela na universidade* (the favela in the university) to building *a universidade na favela* (the university in the favela). Much like the favela is a porous and interdependent epistemological space, a hypothetical university on the periphery can be imagined as a permeable institution that disrupts legacies of academic authority and includes more types of individuals, institutions, and collaborations (see Preece 2017). This “porous university” of the favela would respect the knowledge traditions of Brazil’s margins while also recognizing the need for global institutions to center the peripheries where knowledge is extracted.

An Ethnographer's Position in the Field

Lucas Amaral de Oliveira (2020) argues that ethnographers learn as much from documenting and reporting as they do from entering zones of encounter where epistemologies are challenged and the roles of researcher and interlocutor are obscured. As an ethnographer, I encountered a similar sense of epistemological encounter related to my role as an outsider in the favela. Over the course of ten years (2010–20), I was a tourist and a tour guide, a hostel doorman, a volunteer English teacher to school children, a gentrifier paying rent in dollars, and a university researcher supported by a grant from the US Department of State. At the beginning of my research, I was, in Derrick Pardue's words, a "clueless gringo wanderer" (2018, 6). I had only a library knowledge of Brazil and I transited in many of the epistemological realities regarding knowledge production in the favela that I now critique. While I was not always sanctioned through institutional grants or permissions, I looked at my life in the favela through a lens of ethnographic practice. I had daily conversations with residents. I observed and journaled, networked, and sought solitude.

My doctoral research (2014–16) began with an interest in digital inclusion NGOs and social media influencers from the favela. The project required me to negotiate classed and racial encounters where the salaries of relatively privileged and cosmopolitan middle-class NGO workers depended on a narrative of empowering favela voices. I eventually spent two years carrying out research in the Complexo do Alemão, a group of thirteen favelas in Rio de Janeiro's Zona Norte (North Zone), which is home to nearly 100,000 residents and one of the city's principal drug factions, Comando Vermelho. I hung out in numerous local NGOs, waiting to speak with anyone who walked in their doors, and I often found myself invited to meetings organized to protest police violence.

In the last thirty years, there have been at least three twenty-four-hour periods where more than ten residents from the Complexo do Alemão were killed by police. During my research, the community witnessed sustained shoot-outs between drug dealers and police, street life shut down, and schools were shuttered for months at a time. The high school closest to my home in the Complexo do Alemão was riddled with dozens of bullet holes after one noontime shoot-out. During sustained periods of violence, I spent much of my time locked in a bedroom built on the *lage* (rooftop patio) of an NGO at the center of the community. I obsessed over social media and tracked how resident-researchers and activists circumvented street-level violence and documented life without the filter of academic and journalistic review. Even when locked in my bedroom, I found myself writing about the affective reality of solitude in the favela and a type of knowledge production shaped by social media and violent quarantine.

My research overlapped with the 2014 World Cup and the 2018 Rio Olympics. I lived in three favelas and met dozens of foreign researchers and journalists who developed short-term projects. Reacting to the flux of outside researchers into their communities, resident-researchers often questioned me about my place in the favela's social milieu.

About three years into my doctoral research and in the hours following a meeting among local activists, I interviewed one resident-researcher named Romina. The twenty-one-year-old woman from the Complexo do Alemão was enrolled in a master's program in the social sciences at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. At one point in our conversation, Romina asked me, "OK. *Fez pesquisa . . . e aí galera? Pega seu canudo e vai embora* [Okay. You did research . . . and now what's up? You grabbed your diploma and left]." Romina accepted the thematic and academic relevancy of my work, but my role in the community after research was ambiguous. While Romina drew a motivating line in the sand, her question of how my knowledge might shape her community remained a fundamentally fraught one. Amid research, it felt impossible to determine in advance exactly how my doctoral research about digital inclusion in the favela may be mobilized in the future. Romina also commented on the potential I had to shape knowledge about the favela and the multiplicity of research experiences taking place around me. Knowledge production in the Complexo do Alemão was entwined in all other forms of violence, and criticizing ill-intentioned researchers resembled a strategy to mitigate potential traumas for Romina's community.

In addition to dozens of resident-researchers in the Complexo do Alemão, I also associated with countless outside researchers who reflected my own privileges: "gringo," white, middle class, and funded by foreign entities. I received help and contacts from these outsiders. Residents alerted me to other outsiders who occupied different social circles or carried out research at different times. I noticed an ironic effort of outsiders who were gregarious with favela residents and Brazilian researcher but who avoided fraternizing with foreigners at public events. I came to see my ethnographic experience as inseparable from even those antisocial "gringos" who hoped to carve out artificial zones of encounter that appeared distinct from all other research going on around them.

I continue to carry out a close reading of published scholarship produced during or about the same time as my dissertation research. I estimate that most outside researchers who wrote about the Complexo do Alemão spent no more than a few days, if not hours, in the community and never took up long-term residence. Many ethnographic accounts of the Complexo do Alemão from this time appear to be little more than elaborate tours staged by police or government agents and completely omit the voice of local scholars. Local researchers who helped to curate experiences for researchers from the outside transformed into anonymized ethnographic characters through the writing process.

Many researchers—intentionally or coincidentally—avoid the everyday consequences of life on Brazil’s margins, such as shoot-outs, diminished material life, and socio-racial prejudice. Drug dealing, violence, and securitization are frequently described as permeating morality, status, race, gender, and class (Savell 2015). Alongside shoot-outs, drug factions maintain a “law of the hillside” that silences most of their critics (or possible police informants) through the threat of violence (Leeds 1996). These conditions create a daily and unresolvable sense of precarity that leaves even the most militant of researchers hesitant to stay in the community overnight.

Outside researchers described to me additional reasons for limiting their time in the favela: the practical difficulty of financing sustained academic work in Brazil; a substandard quality of housing, health care, and public security; and the lack of access to Rio’s famed beaches and more posh neighborhoods while writing. Over four years, I moved in and out of communities several times for similar reasons and did not fault others for making a personal choice. Nonetheless, as someone invested in professional and personal relationships in the community, I came to see this scholarly exodus as a source of epistemological divergence and a detriment to the broader scholarly project of a favela-centric research network.

For outsiders who eventually establish long-term residence in a favela, violence is random, happens at all times of day, and cannot be avoided. One quickly learns of corridors where drugs are sold in the open on plastic tables, where teenage drug dealers carry automatic rifles, and where police conduct violent sweeps. For example, one day, while I ate ice cream on a main street in the Complexo do Alemão, police opened fire down a nearby alleyway. Dozens of people on the street scattered for cover, sending a handful into the parlor. One man continued to order ice cream as others cowered behind the counter-height freezers. When the dust settled, it became immediately apparent that the police were shooting at their own shadows. Everyone laughed and went along their way. I learned quickly that living in the favela required a painful habit of normalizing violence and trauma.

Of the forty-five people who died in shoot-outs during my research in the Complexo do Alemão, one, a ten-year-old boy named Eduardo, was shot by a daytime police patrol while he played with a cell phone in front of his home. The ubiquity of violence was overwhelming for me—particularly with the realization that most residents had become apathetic to these events—and I left the community soon afterward. After two years, I left the community for the same reason that many researchers choose to never reside in a favela in the first place.

Considering the scholarly weight carried by the favela and Brazil’s *povo* (people) as symbols of the global periphery, I found the scripted and sometimes timid intrusions into the favela by outside researchers to be undertheorized. Where the ethnographer sleeps at night is often omitted, particularly when they choose

high-rise apartments on the asphalt instead of rooftops in the favela. Similarly, while there are countless ethnographic arrival stories, discussions of why researchers physically “leave” the favela rarely move beyond implications that a dissertation must be written.

A concern over reproducing epistemologically uneven favela studies led me to consider community efforts made to develop local forms of research capacity. I then sought intentional conversations with university-educated favela residents about the role of research in their communities. I realized from these conversations that access to financial resources created the most insurmountable divide between myself and resident-researchers. For example, the \$41,800 Fulbright grant that funded my doctoral research, when divided over twelve months, placed me in the top percentile of all income earners in Complexo do Alemão. I was aware of a half dozen other researchers—based at institutions in the Global North—who amassed significantly more funding to carry out very similar research to my own. Many of these researchers lived in high-rise apartments in Rio’s wealthy neighborhoods. In contrast, I was unaware of a doctoral student from a favela that was funded as well as me or my foreign colleagues. After significant reflection, I did not believe that a trickle-down research economy—where outside researchers determine the resources that could be allocated to resident-researchers—was a healthy epistemological practice. I ended my doctoral research questioning what a resident-researcher would have done with the same resources that I had.

As the logistics of my research may suggest, outside scholars (like me) can translate knowledge of the favela into material privilege. This parallels what Erica Robb Larkins (2015) describes as a “Favela, Inc.” that promotes a “violent-favela-as-brand” (81) to be readily consumed by global audiences. Hollywood films, such as *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and *Fast Five* (2011), have transformed the favela into an aesthetic commodity exploited by outsiders with limited benefit to residents. Indeed, the politics and problems of international research bounded to “a favela” may be as problematic as international film production that exploits the “Favela, Inc.”

Porous Epistemological Boundaries

Bryan McCann (2006, 364) aptly writes, “Rio’s squatter settlements have been amongst the most studied low-income communities in the world.” The hundreds of books and thousands of articles concerning Brazil’s urban peripheries reflect how the academic significance of the favela transcends both local and global meanings (Valladares and Medeiros 2003). These porous epistemological boundaries reflect a history of “a favela” defined by contentious ideological politics and interdependence with a broader society.

The emergence of the term *favela* is most often associated with a group of unpaid soldiers that returned from the 1897 War of Canudos in Brazil's drought-stricken northeast (see G. Silva 2011). In protest, the rank-and-file soldiers appropriated Providência Hill located behind Brazil's Ministry of Defense in downtown Rio. The occupiers dotted the urban hill like a red favela flower that grew on the hills of the recently decimated insurgent community of Canudos. Providência, commonly referred to as the first favela, occupies a historic memory as a symbol of the insurgent life of Brazil's contemporary urban periphery. This history frames the favela as the antithesis of the city and implies a dispute over the definitions of urban space (see Burgos 1998). Since the 1950s, the explosion of auto-construction (Holston 1991), sometimes referred to as *favelização* (favelization), strained urban infrastructure and became a major object of institutional analysis. By 2010, over 11 million residents (or 6% of Brazil's population) lived across 6329 favelas.

The official definition from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics attempts (and arguably fails) to eschew the pejoratives found in dictionaries by describing a "subnormal agglomeration consisting of at least 51 housing units (shacks, houses, etc.), with a majority needy of essential public services, occupying or having occupied, until recently, land owned by others [public or private], generally arranged in a disorderly and dense manner."² In contrast to these technical categories, the terms *favela* and *favelado* (of the favela) are commonly used as a slur to refer to a diminished quality of life, *vagabundagem* (vagrancy), and *pobres coitados* (poor souls). Most *moradores* (residents)—and their allies—reject these technical and pejorative terms in favor of a more nuanced phrasing of *comunidade* (community) or *morro* (hill) (see Motta 2014). There are also efforts to reclaim the term *favelado* as a point of pride (D'Andrea 2013), based in a belief that pejorative legal and popular definitions of the favela are incapable of drawing out the complexity and intensity of life on the periphery (Franco 2014, 14; Valladares 2005; Zaluar and Alvito 1998, 22). These vernacular politics concerning definitions of the periphery demonstrate complex political projects that take place in academia, in the favela, and beyond.

By relying on long-term observation and unstructured conversations as a principal means of empirical data analysis, ethnographers are well positioned to encounter slippages in popular, legal, and academic concepts relating to the periphery. In one of the most recognized favela studies by a non-Brazilian ethnographer, Janice Perlman (1979) dissects the "myth of marginality" and challenges the idea that a peripheral favela is disconnected from the rhythms of the dominant city. Similarly, the most effective favela-based ethnographies produced by outsiders give voice to the tragedies that happen on the urban periphery by describing the marvel, beauty, and humor that remains (Goldstein 2003). Referring to the contradictions found in favelas, Robin Sheriff (2007, 311) asks: "How can we practice a truly critical anthropology that seeks to expose for our readerships the ravages of economic

injustice while at the same time doing justice to the persistent generosity of spirit that animates even the most oppressed communities?”

The favela is also enveloped in the porousness of racial paradigms and racialized institutions on Brazil's periphery. In scholarship, favela residents are often categorized as Afro-Brazilian (*pardos* [Brown] and *pretos* [Black], among many more fluid definitions). Intersecting these categorizations, the earliest anthropologically allusions to Brazil's racial periphery, such as Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933), often attempted to show the formation of a racial democracy where domestic space and other intimacies were permeable phenomena that encouraged miscegenation. Recent scholars have critiqued these early historiographies for revising the brutality of colonial rule and allowing plausible deniability for current racial injustices (Bastos 2003; Goldstein 2003; Roth-Gordon 2013; Skidmore 1972; Twine 1998). By writing against a more polite form of racialization, Brazilianists interrogate the formative ideological practices found at a brutal cusp of inclusion, exclusion, and resistance (see Guimarães 2017). For example, Lourdes Carril (2006) compares the favela with the *quilombo* (escaped slave settlement) because both are sources of peripheral knowledge that confronts the academic, formal, and stigmatized ideology of a Brazilian state.

Following this ethnographic tradition, contemporary social scientists rarely celebrate Brazil's racialized favela naively, nor do they completely cut off the periphery from the formal city. For example, John Collins (2015) describes how bureaucratic efforts surrounding Brazil's Pelourinho World Heritage Site conceptualize a historic city center as part of a cultural periphery. There is a ragged back and forth between fidelity to Afro-Brazilian roots and the immorality of state agents who capitalize on a symbolic yet racialized notion of “the people of Brazil,” causing many Brazilians to decouple race and nationality and delegitimize political movements mobilized around Blackness (see Sasone 2003). Collins suggests that this epistemological ambiguity separates Afro-Brazilians from their history in attempts to reframe Brazil as a racial democracy.

Residents increasingly learn about the porous epistemological boundaries of the favela in everyday life and through school curricula. Favela educators often embrace aspects of essentialism while abandoning others in efforts to sculpt insurgent subjectivities (Baran 2007). The deconstruction of “a favela” in epistemological and historical terms makes possible institutional mobilization that disrupt the objectification of Brazil's margins.

Cultivating the Favela as Theory

Local knowledge traditions about the favela are often provincialized through the same academic, ethnographic, and anthropological studies that, paradoxically,

set out to center the periphery. Even some Brazilian researchers from outside of the favela—many of whom are white, middle or upper class, and with elite educations—cite disproportionately European and North American authors and share knowledge principally in English (Ribeiro 1999). Brazil’s academic community has principally focused on national questions of theoretical representation when discussing their work on a global stage in a way that overshadows internal debates about race and class in local settings (Ortiz 2006).

In response to this dynamic, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Carmen Rial presented a motion at the 2020 Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia that critiqued scholarly “extractivism.” This motion, later adopted by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, called for funding research that uses local language scholarship and considers local academics as partners—that is, not just interlocutors buried within publications. Extending or enveloping this motion within a broader epistemological debate about the periphery, resident-researchers often complain that knowledge is often extracted from the favela with little institutional buy-in on the part of global extractors.

An ethical goal, then, of favela studies is to recognize the porousness and interdependence of urban space without provincializing the noteworthy ideas that emerge from its margins. Ananya Roy (2011, 235) calls this type of epistemological disruption “subaltern urbanism,” where researchers view “the slum as theory . . . the periphery as theory.” Referring to Gayatri Spivak (1999), Roy asks: “How can we understand the inevitable heterogeneity of Southern Urbanism, that which cannot be contained within the familiar metonymic categories of megacity or slum and that which cannot be worlded through the ‘colonial wound’” (2011, 231)? Euphemistic terms such as *informality*, *zones of exception*, and *gray spaces* echo of neocolonial developmentalist logics that infantilize local intellectual tradition (Patel 2014) and devalue the space, place, and social status of those who imagine the city (Roy 2016).

Ethnography in Brazil has sometimes embraced collaborative action that challenges uneven epistemological paradigms regarding the periphery (Lozano 2015, 64). The most well-known example of ethnographic collaboration may be Paulo Lins’s collaboration with the ethnographer Alba Zaluar. After assisting Zaluar with an ethnographic study of a favela named Cidade de Deus, Lins wrote an autobiographic book (1997) and inspired a world-renowned movie (2002) of the same name. Both the book and the film are now essential references for the popular representation of the favela and demonstrate how members of the urban periphery—often relegated to obscure and anonymous informants by outside researchers—can be valued as scholars in their own right.

Lins has been tied to the *comunicação comunitária* (community communication) movement that focuses on communicating local questions of human rights, sustainability, and political enfranchisement (Rocha 2004). Researchers act as

community spokespeople by bringing peripheral knowledge to the center and forcing outside activists to view residents as “their equals (or other constituents of the field)” (Dalcastagné et al. 2016, 297). Community communication disrupts the academic gatekeeping of Brazil’s periphery and demonstrates a broader interrogation of self-knowledge, social position, and authority through artistic expression (see Angelini 2016; Pardue 2010). The praxis of community communication is articulated at the same point of permeability that is often ignored by official discourse about the favela.

There are numerous artistic and cultural traditions in the favela that fall outside of dominant modes of academic knowledge creation but nonetheless have influenced how the periphery is communicated. The favela’s modern resident-researcher is heir to movements like *literatura periférica* (peripheral literature)—typified in part by the *sarau* (poetry slam)—that gained prominence at the turn of the twenty-first century (see Nascimento 2009; Oliveira 2016; Tennina 2017). The *sarau*—a poetry slam or open mic that takes place in the street—is one of the more visible efforts to develop alternative practices that reappropriate urban space through the accents of the periphery. Participants suspend monolithic notions of the other (da Silva 2012, 38) by providing space for a peripheral youth culture alienated by schools and other institutional spaces (Pereira 2010, 11). The *sarau* embraces *antropofagia periférica* (peripheral cannibalism) (Almeida 2011), “an imaginary interlocution with the ‘culture of the center,’ a mode of production that emphasizes difference” (Nascimento 2011, 24; Fontoura et al. 2016, 154). Ethnographers have been invited to use the *sarau* to collaborate with social movements and embrace nonhierarchical knowledge production (Pardue and Oliveira 2018). These ethnographies suggest a goal of communicative models, where favela residents are presented in their own words and have greater authority over how their communities are presented on the global stage.

In addition to the *sarau*, there are countless other encounters where favela-based knowledge is generated, shared, and valued. Bianca Freire-Medeiros and Leo Name (2019) apply Roy’s subaltern urbanism to the *laje* (favela rooftop patio), a uniquely favela-based cultural site that destabilizes the boundaries between the favela and the formal city. On the cavernous hillsides of most favelas, *lajes* are both private spaces and exposed to the public for neighbors to see. The *laje* brings prestige and visibility to owners but also provides storage space, hosts social gatherings, operates as a tourist transit, or sets the scene for popular films. Much like the interdependent epistemologies of Brazil’s racialized center and periphery, the favela-based *laje* provides a porous sociocultural space for knowledge production that does not conform to the bounded logics of urban planning and the Brazilian state.

Seeing the *sarau* and the *laje* as benchmarks for a periphery-as-theory, *favela* residents have well-defined practices of incorporating their community’s history

into broader social and epistemological struggles over formality and informality, survival, and resistance (Farfán-Santos 2015). When centered on empowering subaltern voices, studies of the favela have the potential to act as a global reference for urban alterity as well as the overcoming of oppressive social contradictions. An entity like a university in the favela would provide an institutional inversion or parallel call to the antiextractivism that Ribeiro and Rial propose. Rather than earning concessions from dominant academic institutions, outside scholars could be institutionally indebted to the theories and institutions of favela residents such as the *lage* and the *sarau*.

A favela na universidade

During my doctoral research, I spoke to countless residents about their experiences with favela-based researchers and their desires for university education. Many were first-generation high school graduates. One sixteen-year-old resident named Isys—who taught basic Portuguese literacy and English at the NGO where I lived in the Complexo do Alemão—asked me for a letter of recommendation to a university program in the United States. Isys shared with me her cover letter to the university program. She wrote about her experience as an unpaid *estagiário* (intern) in a microbiology lab at a local university. The lab measured deadly protozoa on Rio’s beaches in the run up to the 2016 Olympics. She wrote in English, “I am the only slum girl in the lab. Everyone talked about visiting athletes getting sick. I was the only one talking about the deadly water in my community.” Alongside recognizing the porous epistemological and biological boundaries between the favela and the city, Isys argued that, as a *universitária da favela*, she could harness university research to help her community.

In the early 2000s—under the presidential administrations of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff—the political and cultural franchise of Brazil’s urban poor was at a zenith, and education became a central symbol of political, social, and cultural enfranchisement. In 2012, a controversial *cota* system reserved 50 percent of all federal university enrollment for low-income students and a proportion percentage to represent the ratio of *pretos*, *pardos*, and Indigenous in each state. This transformation was felt in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, where only 1.6 percent of the population had attended or graduated from a *faculdade* (college), compared with 14.7 percent in the rest of the city.³ The *cota* system increased the number of university students identified as *negro* (Black) by 400 percent, to 38.15 percent of total enrollment (Silva 2020). As a result, the favela and favela perspectives became central to the research and teaching found within many of Brazil’s leading universities.

Referring to the initial movement to increase representation of students from the periphery, Cecília Mariz, Sílvia Regina Alves Fernandes, and Roberto Batista write: “The appearance of *universitários* reflects a process of change in the *favela*

and knowing the profile of these individuals and their worldview can help to understand what this change is, what factors contribute to it, and what direction it is going” (1998, 324). There is an underlying hope that the focus of research in the *favela* would shift from talking about criminality and poverty to discussions about reshaping educational and political institutions (Miguel 2011; Zago 2006).

Several favela residents have achieved positions of leadership at elite universities and have worked to contextualize the importance of community voices within university settings. Jailson de Souza e Silva, professor of geography at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro and lifelong resident of Maré, has led a reshaping of university pedagogy by inviting university students to construct, “new networks, new worlds, weaving themselves within continuously, with each choice, with each action, along the long path that they take for/through life.” (Souza e Silva 2003, 141).

Jaime Alves—an assistant professor at the City University of New York and self-identified *favelado*—mirrors this sentiment on the global stage. Alves has produced research that ranges from investigations of race in contemporary Brazil (Alves 2018) to policing in Colombia (Alves 2019) and has discussed his theoretical contribution as a former resident of São Paulo’s urban periphery. Alves describes “a mixture of fear and anger [that] provides me the insight to reflect on the systematic police practice of shoot-to-kill. The familiar experience of having one’s home subject to raids, the constant fear of being arrested, or the everyday behavior of the white women who panic at my site and cross the street making us believe that we are criminals” (2008, 8). In this sense, Alves embraces his affective reality as a tool to critique institutions and phenomena that have historically traumatized Brazil’s periphery. By doing this in a university setting, Alves realizes a broader hope of changing the role of favela residents inside global institutions of higher education.

The Interface between the University and Favela

In addition to including favela residents in more traditional university settings, grassroots movements have sought to develop higher education infrastructure within the favela itself. Since Brazil’s 1984 return to democracy, there has been a steady enfranchisement of favela voices through a rapidly expanding *terceiro setor* (third sector) made up of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Early work by the Catholic Church in the 1990s established autonomous research *núcleos* (nuclei) that attended to local problems through the articulation of a small, focused network of activists (Gay 1991). *Núcleos* reflect a broader movement in Brazilian politics that sees an “active citizenship,” which translates the needs of the oppressed into a discourse of human rights activism (Hartikainen 2018). The pedagogical strategies of these *núcleos* range from workshops concerning

Consciência Negra (Black Consciousness) to providing university-oriented resources such as *pre-vestibular* (college entrance exam) courses. NGOs have been essential resources for favela residents to receive advanced training in the lexicon of university professors, foreign researchers, and political parties. These organizations also act as the interface between “native” and “foreign” viewpoints concerning the favela (McCann 2006).

For example, a recent university graduate named Patricia (whom I had gotten to know after I observed one of her precollege programs in Maré) told me: “The fight is not only to enter the university but also the valuation of other types of wisdom. Here [the favela], we don’t need an official seal to be successful. People that play important parts of social movements do not have access to the university, but our nuclei give access to a discourse equal to the best postgraduate programs.” Leaving this conversation with Patricia, I gained an appreciation for the alternative values favela residents gave to university education or the lack thereof. Residents leverage their access to nontraditional institutions of education—such as *núcleos*—in order to interface with outsiders and address local problems.

Rio de Janeiro’s Complexo da Maré is, perhaps, the favela with the highest quantity and quality of university and university-adjacent institutions in the world. Resting across the waters from the artificial island that houses the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Maré has a relatively privileged position among favelas. Led by Dr. Eliana Sousa Silva, a university professor and lifelong favela resident, the NGO Redes da Maré organizes researchers from across the world as well as provides supporting programs for community residents who hope to attend university. Dr. Silva has numerous manuscripts—as well as an auto-ethnographic book (2015)—concerning Maré and has partnered with hundreds of foreign researchers since founding Redes in 1997, including a partnership with Queen Mary University of London Professor Paul Heritage (Krenzinger et al. 2018). Redes, alongside the University of Dundee, the University of Coimbra, and several other nonprofit institutions, also supports the Instituto Maria e João Aleixo (Uniperiferias, Universidade Internacional Das Periferias [The International University of the Peripheries]). Uniperiferias publishes a *Revista Periferias* (the *Peripheries Journal*) and features research from people of *origem popular* (popular origin), women, and Afro-Brazilians who have experience in research and who have master’s or doctoral degrees. Uniperiferias seeks to build a heterodox and, arguably, utopic project that unites various urban peripheries across the globe in order to produce new academic methodologies, content, and collective action.

While Redes is internally focused and looks to build educational opportunities for individuals within the favela, O Observatório da Favela (The Favela Observatory), another prominent NGO in Maré, has published more than twenty-four professional research projects that explore topics ranging from education to community security and media activism. O Observatório reframes favelas as

territories without guarantees of social rights that are predominantly informal, auto-constructed, and operating under normative regimes outside of the state. With this outward facing lens, O Observatório seeks to “contribute to a concept of the *favela* that captures the complexity and diversity” of contemporary urban space (Souza et al. 2009, 96–97).

I have had extended conversations with resident-researcher Andreza da Silva Jorge, a frequent collaborator with Redes, O Observatório, and several international scholars, regarding the state of academic production in the favela. Jorge grew up in Maré and was part of a generation of community activists, some with undergraduate educations but rarely with the graduate degrees needed to teach and publish in the academia, who were trained to use sociological terms related to race and community by organizations, such as Redes da Maré. Jorge’s master’s thesis (2019), submitted to the Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica Celso Suckow da Fonseca, discusses the corporeal experiences of Black women from the favela. Her writing is self-reflective and inspired by the methodological and cultural potentials of participatory Black feminism. Jorge’s work is inspired by feelings that *feminismo negro faveleado* (Black feminism from the favela) has not yet found a prominent institutional space.

Addressing the potential to gain knowledge by examining the porous epistemological boundaries of the favela, Jorge asks what it means to academically produce within her own community. She writes: “Other than a reflection about the lack of neutrality, it is needed, in order to develop our academic and professional potential, that we are always attentive to the legacy of the fights that came before and of those that are producing contemporary knowledge and expertise (academic or not)” (2019, 15). Jorge looks beyond a presentism of her achievements and understands that her goals are an extension of epistemological inroads made by previous generations of resident-researchers, organizers of public events like the *sarau*, and the vernacular knowledge that emerges from the *lage*.

Reflecting on my own relationship with her community, I asked Jorge what she thought about the “*gringos que chegaram de paraquedas*” (foreigners who arrive by parachutes) that arrive in Maré for days or weeks at a time and never return. Jorge responded that she encouraged a “debate with outside researchers who wanted to appropriate a vocabulary of resistance.” Referring to academic extractivism, she told me: “It is always problematic to discuss the relationship of objects and subjects of analysis. I believe that there are various ways to help, various ways for foreign researchers to return to the favela. To stay [*ficar*] can also mean to divulge.” Jorge’s imagined forms of “staying” are ultimately epistemological and embrace the multiplicity of research roles and experiences on the urban periphery.

Rather than simply appearing as an anonymous informant of another researcher’s work, Jorge practices collaborative interlocution structured around the sharing of theoretical perspectives cultivated from within favela communities.

Jorge often refers to her collaboration with Desirée Poets and Nicolas Barnes (see Barnes, Poets, and Stephenson 2021), among other foreign-born and -based researchers who have conducted a multiyear ethnographic project in Maré concerning and supporting the work of local researchers. Barnes, Poets, and Max Stephenson support favela-based scholars by funding their travel and studies in the United States, organizing panels for them at academic conferences in the United States, and, in Jorge's words, "*criando um modelo*" (creating a model) for ethical favela-based research. Jorge's outlook on university education in the favela suggests that there is no singular path to achieve an ethnical favela studies within existing institutional paradigms. Rather, future work will be predicated on more porous, collaborative, and communicative practices that institutionally support favela-based researcher relationships.

A universidade da favela

While a number of university programs exist in the favela, they do not grant university credit or credentials. These programs rarely have permanent funding sources, campuses, curricula, faculty, or enrollments like Brazil's federal universities. In the global milieu of higher education, favela-based research institutions resemble think tanks focused on creative policy and theoretical discussion but lack the institutional benefits of an endowed or government-funded university.

In 2015, I attended a series of meetings that discussed the possibility of building a campus of the Federal Institute of Rio de Janeiro or IFRJ in the Complexo do Alemão. The meetings took place at the NGO Raizes em Movimento (Roots in Movement) on the Morro do Alemão (German Hill). Led by lifelong Alemão resident Alan Brum, Raizes had spent decades inviting outside scholars, activists, and journalists to participate in collaborative research about the community. Ironically, Raizes is consistently omitted by international scholars who have published ethnographic research about the Complexo, demonstrating how a porous university-oriented institution can fall victim to a "Favela, Inc." that manifests in academia.

As a relative newcomer to the community, I remained quiet at the meetings regarding the Favela University and saw the meetings as an opportunity to learn about grassroots activism. At the final meeting about the university, the proceedings felt more like a *sarau* than a formal business proceeding. Attendees spilled haphazardly onto a tight and steep favela street directly outside of Raizes. Hip-hop and baile funk blasted from loudspeakers. More than thirty community activists served barbeque and drank Coca-Cola or beer. Local artists painted graffiti. Many of the attendees were young residents who had risen to international notoriety by publicizing police violence on social media.

The group was forced to shift away when cars and motorcycles pattered past. Reflecting the community's street-level insecurity, the meeting drew eerily silent

when police patrols marched through. The Complexo do Alemão was in the midst of a 100-day period of daily shoot-outs between police and drug traffickers. Many at the meeting were concerned that this violence signified the window for use of government funds and the political path for development of the university was quickly closing.

Five years earlier, the government promised R\$8.5 million (~US\$3.5 million) for the construction of a new campus that could host hundreds of students through a traditional liberal arts education. In terms of long-term and local impact, the Alemão was an ideal candidate to host the world's first Favela University. The neighborhood ranked at the bottom of several citywide indicators, including literacy, years in school, and level of education. As of 2010, only 70 percent of the Alemão's residents were functionally literate, compared with over 92 percent for Brazil as a whole. The average resident had only five years of formal schooling, and less than 1 percent of residents had attended, much less graduated from, a four-year university.⁴ After the Alemão's 2010 pacification by police, a process that included billions of dollars in infrastructure, security, and social service investment, the government built two grade schools, a high school, and an adult-oriented technical school.

Over the course of my research, I had interviewed several community members in attendance who expressed concerns that the government prioritized the *maquiagem* (cosmetics) of pacification over more practical educational investments in the lead-up to the 2016 Olympics. This sentiment was supported by the fact that the government dedicated R\$1.5 million (US\$500,000) more per day toward security programs than to public education (Rezende 2015; Werneck 2014). Pacification policy also placed schools squarely in the crossfire from shoot-outs between police and drug dealers.

I visited two public and three private high schools within or adjacent to Complexo do Alemão during my research. Many classrooms had forty to sixty-five students. Most students were forced to share textbooks with two to four other students each, and books could not be taken home. Only two of the schools had a computer lab, and these labs had only eight computers for hundreds of students. All of the schools closed for weeks at a time because of shoot-outs. Students who missed a significant amount of time because of the shoot-outs were required to repeat grades. The Favela University was inspired in large part to confront these precarious academic conditions and provide greater local education capacity for the community.

Adriana Facina, a professor of anthropology at Brazil's National Museum, was an integral player in the early discussions concerning the Favela University. When writing about the Favela University, Facina (2016) refers to an alternative form of knowledge in the *favela* that manifests itself in everything from music to housing to the distribution of the internet. Building on subaltern scholar Homi Bhabha,

Facina describes a way of knowing the world based on a “culture of survival” that transmits noncanonical yet historical knowledge concerning subjugation, domination, and dislocation.

The hypothetical Favela University had an explicit appreciation of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Similar to Freire’s problem-posing education, proponents of the university wanted a field of study that remade the historically subaltern into conscious subjects capable of critically addressing their own oppression. For the organizers of the Favela University, traditional academic barriers—what Freire referred to as a teacher-student relationship—need to be abandoned outright for the sake of communication between an educator and an educated. Framing the Favela University in terms of Freire and Walter Benjamin (1993), Facina believes that the street and the classroom should be seen as equal sites of knowledge construction. The Favela University would give institutional credibility to the teaching of theories created in the *laga* and the *sarau* and respect the interdependent nature of knowledge production in the favela.

Much like Historically Black Colleges and Universities in both South Africa and the United States, the Favela University imagined a model for higher education that serves systematically and historically marginalized communities. Some institutions, such as the São Paulo–based university Faculdade Zumbi dos Palermas, draw clear parallels with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which envision historically marginalized communities as protagonists (Martins and Vicente 2011). In this sense, Facina argues that a Favela University was meant to do more than simply “correct” an epistemological problem; it would address long-standing institutional inequalities created by the lack of university investment on the periphery.

By 2016, the plan for a Favela University appeared dead, never moving past hypothetical funding numbers, campaign promises, and theoretical debate. There were no noteworthy political maneuverings that led to the end of the university project. Rather, Brazilian society appeared to move on. A nostalgia for dictatorship (Junge 2019) took hold and racist politics emerged to oppose issues such as the university *cota* system (da Silva and Larkins 2019). In 2019, the government of Jair Bolsonaro began to defund education and research opportunities for the urban poor and decried the work of Paulo Freire as leftist indoctrination. At the same time, Bolsonaro’s allies in government and law enforcement were emboldened to return to more violent and repressive tactics in the favela and abandoned any pretense of investment in Brazil’s periphery. This recent history of institutional abandonment suggests that the dominant paradigm of “favela studies” would continue to be epistemologically extractive and institutionally objectifying rather than focused on the sustainable development of resources within Brazil’s urban periphery.

The Future of Favela Studies

In 2018, Brazil's National Museum burned down and with it one of the oldest spaces for international academic collaboration and higher education in South America. One of the social media activists I followed closely, a twenty-something activist and *universitário* from Alemão named Thainã de Madeiros, lamented the loss of the museum on Facebook: "I am a museologist and a militant from the *favela*. . . . I see many professional museum friends presenting their feelings, but I also see a lot of favelados that aren't in this profession that are expressing regret." Following the path of Franco and generations of community leaders that have come before, Medeiros imagines a porous type of institutional presence and cultural knowledge that centers favela perspectives both inside and outside the community. When a cornerstone institution of higher education burns, like the National Museum burned, the ashes represent not just a loss but also an opportunity for the favela to imagine new ways to know and interface with the world.

Similarly, the ruins of an imagined favela university encourage a formative epistemological and institutional opportunity. A robust network of international collaborators can be fundamentally reorganized to grant greater legitimacy to local NGOs and more institutionally abstract phenomena such as the *lage* and the *sarau*. This more porous concept of the university would require a respect for not only what knowledge the favela makes about itself but also what knowledge the favela makes about the world.

The opportunities that twenty-first-century favela studies present go beyond the potential to "unveil" the ethnographic relationship through a coproduction of text (Lassiter 2005, 16). In a more radical sense, favela studies and subaltern urbanism based in the creation of institutions *of* and *for* the periphery could make "outside" researchers obsolete, their foreign institutions unqualified to be the sole sanction of research on the periphery, and their academic journals irrelevant venues for knowledge transmission.

And, by no means should the onus of developing spaces within the favela be placed on the shoulders of those who are already excluded from institutions of higher education. Rather, scholars who have historically earned privileges from the study of the urban margins—like me or outside researchers who omit local scholars in their depictions of the urban margins—should take scholarly and pedagogical cues from *universitários da favela*, cite their research, and support their institutional capacity.

One strategy that is most realistically and practically implemented is politicizing and problematizing our classrooms in the global North around the ideals and goals of researchers from the global South. We can promote among ourselves and our students a praxis of active citizenship and collaboration that disrupts the academic objectification of the margins. We can practice a "favela as theory" that

reconceptualizes the urban subaltern as protagonists and leaders of a more porous world. Rather than simply adding to the number of “favela studies,” we can support a favela that studies.

Notes

¹All Portuguese-language text is translated by the author.

²www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2010/.

³www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2010/.

⁴www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2010/.

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