

ICWA LETTERS

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TLT-6
THE AMERICAS

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Favela Tour

RECIFE, Brazil

September 29, 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Peter,

The fact of a *favela's* existence is evidence of struggle, of localized mini-revolutions. They begin with land invasions, with acts of civil disobedience. The instinct of survival and sense of indignation, plus the bald fact that they have nothing to lose, drives people to create a desperate "something" for their lives. And from such places of depravity and injustice have sprung rich cultural icons that all Brazilians identify with and enjoy: samba, *Carnaval*, soccer stars, etc...

I look out over the largest *favela* in Brazil and daydream. I am flying over the jumbled houses of Rocinha, (Ho-SEEN-yah, "little farm"), through the narrow alleys, through the lives and loves of this immense village on a hill. What is life like? Like the movie *Orpheus*, with Samba, love, drugs and death at every corner? Or do people also get bored, flip on the TV, eat dinner and head to bed?

The *favelas* of Recife, Pernambuco, and São José dos Campos, São Paulo, pop into mind. I can not conceal myself. Everyone looks at me and the bag on my shoulder, but no one has ever questioned my interest (except the police). On the contrary, they respond with uncommon warmth and openness.

Some of these feelings have brought me here, to this rooftop in a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro. One may ask, how did I get here? The answer is simple — I am on a tour, a *favela* tour to be exact. I've come to see how someone makes their living showing foreigners the poor side of town.

FROM FIVE STARS TO FAVELA

My wife Susan and I waited in the lobby of the Inter-Continental Hotel in the an upscale Rio suburb of São Conrado, where we were staying. Perhaps this wasn't the ICWA economy lodging spot, but my dad and stepmother were in Brazil for the first time and we were enjoying their hospitality.

Flipping through the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, the entry about a *favela* tour jumped out at me. I knew eco-tourism to be big, as is historical tourism, but showing camera-laden foreigners through *favelas* seemed a bit absurd and elitist. "Step right up and see poor people in their very own environment!"

And yet, I also thought it was a great idea. Fear comes from ignorance.

Why not introduce the other Rio, up close. I started imagining tours in New Orleans of the St. Thomas and Desire projects. Or Los Angeles, dispelling the fears about South Central through hands-on experiences.

The last of eight tourists to be collected by a worn, brown Toyota van, Susan and I squeezed in. I was glad that the vehicle did not end up being the camouflaged safari Jeep-like vehicle that I had seen pictured in a hotel flier for another *favela* tour company: too many bad connotations.

Marcelo Washington, 30, a blond surfer-type *Carioca*¹ with Oakley sunglasses, was described in the guidebook as the “pioneer” of *favela* tourism. The idea came to him, he said, while he was still working for Club Med in Brazil as a golf instructor. Occasionally, people would ask him about the *favelas* and whether they could visit them. Since he started seven years ago, two other operators have followed his lead.

He greeted me in the accented English that makes Brazilians sound a little like Russians. As I found out later, Marcelo could do the tour in a couple of other languages thanks to his travels with Club Med.

“Are you ready to go to the *favela*?” he asked our group, composed of Americans and British. He said that the people taking his tour ranged from backpackers to five-star-hotel-ers. What he didn’t get too many of were Brazilians — less than one percent.

“Most people believe that if you go to a *favela*, it is risky, you will be killed or robbed. [However] most people in Brazil don’t know the *favelas*, have never been, are not interested, and are afraid of going. What they know of the *favelas* they hear through the press, and that is negative: police invasions, drug dealing, poverty. Don’t worry, I am sure that we will be absolutely safe. [I believe it will give you] a better understanding of the two sides of Rio.”

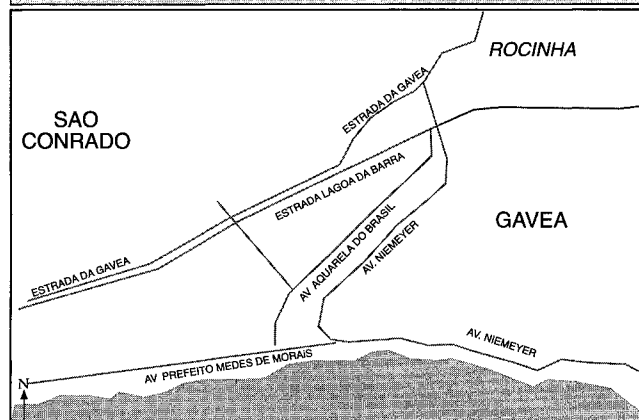
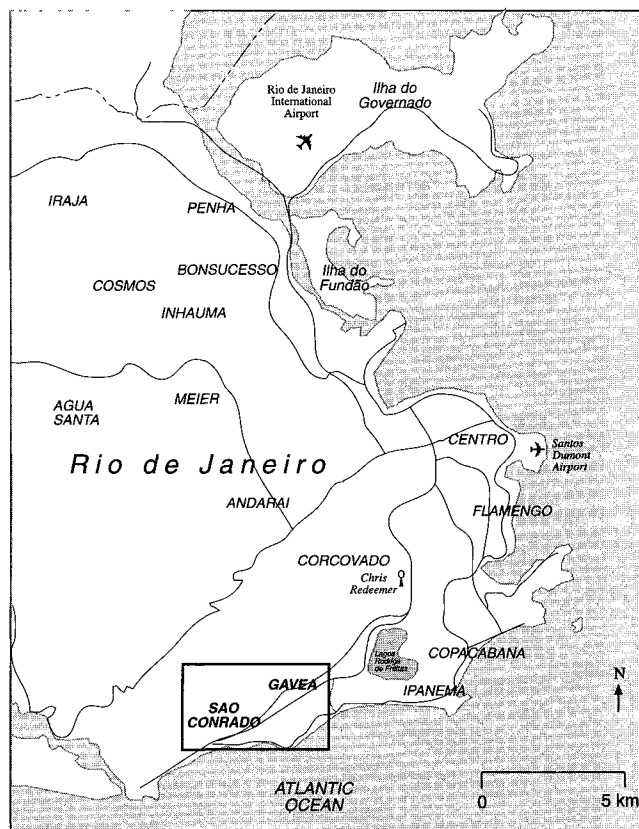
He explained the only two restrictions. No videotaping. And, with still cameras, don’t make any one person the focus of your pictures. Both of these were to keep local drug traffickers from getting nervous.

Marcelo’s head whipped around as he negotiated Friday afternoon traffic, all the while continuing his non-stop data flow about the *favelas*: “There are 550 *favelas* in Rio, with 22 percent of the population.” While Rio as a whole has a six percent unemployment rate, according to Marcelo, the *favelas* suffered from 18 percent. Rio’s population increases by one percent annually, in contrast to the four-percent rate in the *favelas*, the latter due

to the influx of migrants from the poorer Northeast of the country.

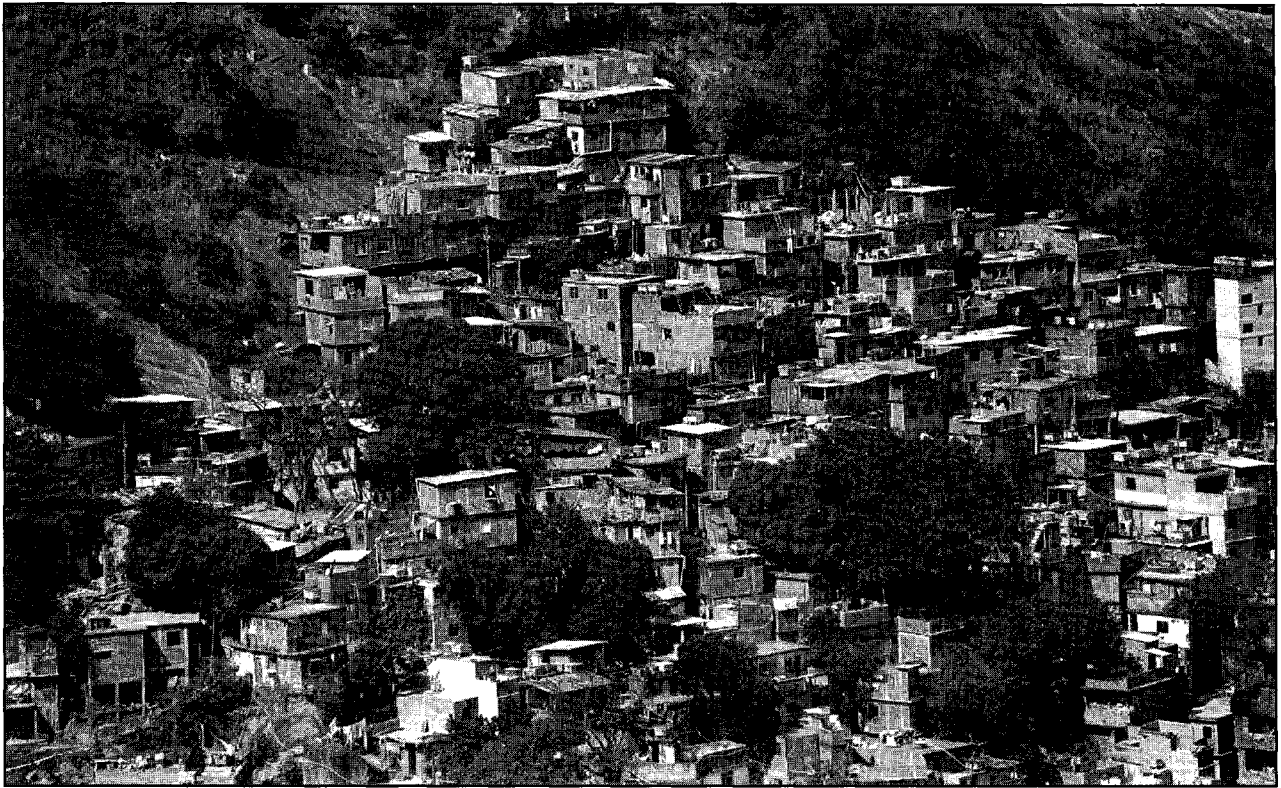
“The largest of the *favelas* in Brazil is Rocinha, with 160,000 people,² right next to the highest per-capita-income neighborhood in Rio — São Conrado. Poor above, rich below.”

It had felt awkward to be picked up for a *favela* tour at the five-star Inter-Continental. Later, though, I knew it to be the perfect place. This was the perspective from which tourists and many Brazilians see Rocinha, the lat-



¹ A *Carioca* is a resident of Rio de Janeiro.

² The *Washington Post* put the number between 150,000 and 200,000 people in an article entitled “A Slum Sweeps Away Despair,” by Stephen Buckley, 8/3/99. Joseph Page puts it at as many as 300,000 in his book, *The Brazilians*, p.177, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading Massachusetts, 1995.



The hillside of Rocinha, the largest favela in Brazil

ter as they commute along the avenue hugging the beach. Exquisite, well-policed apartment buildings, homes to ex-presidents and ex-ministers, spread from one end of Sao Conrado to the other. Right up the hill from this concentration of power and privilege lies the equally well-fortified community of Rocinha. I had thought before that a delicate balance separated the two, but that was not it at all. It was a separation made effective by guards and guns, on both sides.

Continuing the theme of the paradoxes, Marcelo pointed out, "The most famous tourist production in Rio is *Carnaval*. However, *Carnaval* is made from the *favela*. Samba schools have *favela* names. *Mangueira* is the most famous [and the 1998 Carnival champion]. They [the public] know the samba school but not the *favela*. Show the product but not the producer."

Marcelo fit in another example of paradox by throwing out some thoughts about racial differences. He started with Pele, claiming that "the great soccer star is the most famous Brazilian citizen ever. Soccer made him a very rich black man. However, he is the exception to the rule. Most blacks are poor. Blacks and mulattos make up 40 percent of the population, but make three times less than whites. And true, there are a lot of poor whites, but not many rich blacks. The three ways out of poverty for blacks are usually soccer, samba musician, or drug dealer."

Before hitting Rocinha, he wanted to swing by a nearby smaller *favela*, *Vila Canoas* (Canoe Village). The

road on the way reminded me of some areas of Beverly Hills, where the ivy-covered walls hint at unseen riches on the other side. Around a curve, the right side of the street changed drastically. A row of three-story buildings, a mix of more humble residences and businesses, appeared. I would not have recognized this as a *favela*, and was surprised when Marcelo pulled over and stopped the car.

He got out of the car explaining the difference between the two sides of the street. On one side are rich houses: they pay taxes, and have zoning. On the other side is the *favela*: no taxes, no zoning. The residents had squatted on public land for five years to get possession. To Marcelo, this underscored the policy of the Brazilian government of allowing invasions on public land to ease intense social pressure for housing.

Marcelo pointed out that in any *favela*, the buildings facing the street would be better and more expensive. They had easy access to transportation. Garbage was picked up and mail delivered. We had to go behind the front line to really see where the 2,500 people of *Vila Canoas* resided.

We ducked into an alley leading to the *São Martinho* Community Center, a two-level brick structure with a classroom, kitchen and upstairs activity room. A group of giggling teenagers hanging out at a picnic table waved as we entered the schoolroom filled with six-year-olds. Marcelo explained that the school was non-certified, and



Marcelo (left) talking to a group of tourists in the Vila Canoas favela in Rio.

operated without the right to issue diplomas. Its main function was to reinforce public education, which, according to Marcelo, was free and bad. Besides a lunch program, the kids also participated in craft activities, making crocheted items to sell.

From the second floor of the community center, *Vila Canoas* revealed itself. I could see the more stereotypical hodgepodge of brick and wooden *favela* architecture descending the ridge into lush trees. The area that it covered seemed tiny even for its small population.

Back on ground level, I better understood the dimensions. We descended into the maze of pathways bordered by houses as high as four stories. The cramped passageways zigzagged up and down the hills. Little light reached the ground and I had the sensation of walking through a medieval village.

Marcelo took a seat at one of the wider parts of the path as residents walked past saying, “*Oi, Marcelo, tudo bem?*” (“Hey, Marcelo, how’s it going?”) The remains of a political poster glued to a wall gave him a segue to politics. Until 1988, one needed to be literate to vote. Now the system is electronic and voting is universally mandatory, with a hefty fine of R\$90.00 (U.S.\$47.50) levied on those who don’t. Usually the fine isn’t paid until one tries to get an official state document, like a driver’s license, which is impossible without showing a voting receipt.

Around 20 years ago, when the system was still based

on hand-written ballots, an interesting form of political protest happened. At the Rio zoo, a customary campaign stop, one particular monkey, named “*Tião*,” (Chee-OW) had the odd habit of throwing bananas at visiting campaigning politicians. The monkey was so well liked that many people wrote in *Tião* as a candidate with the “Brazilian Banana Party.” In the election, the monkey garnered a half-million votes, coming in third. When *Tião* later died, it made front-page news.

Pointing to another wall, Marcelo asked if anyone knew what the scribbled letters “CV” meant. This stood for *Comando Vermelho*, or Red Command, also known as the Red Falange (FV). The Red Falange, the most powerful drug gang in Rio, controlled the drug trafficking in *Vila Canoas*, *Rocinha*, and other areas. The presence of this gang had the odd consequence of making the *favelas* safer under the unified rule of the drug dealers.

“They [the drug dealers] are the law. Respect them. Don’t commit crimes. They are the only ones who make crimes,” explained Marcelo. “If someone gets robbed... simple. The gang beats him, kills him, [or] shoots his hands.”

Basically, the gang didn’t want anything impeding their lucrative drug trade, like police investigating petty crimes. “We have bad people in the *favelas*. They just don’t do bad things there.”

As proof of the security, Marcelo left his van unlocked when in the *favelas*, something he said he would certainly

not do in ritzy Copacabana or Ipanema.

Marcelo attributed the birth of the mafia-style Red Falange to government error. Thirty years ago the military dictatorship jailed political prisoners with common criminals. The political prisoners, many of whom were communists, taught the others guerrilla tactics and principles of hierarchy. The petty criminals got out of jail and constructed a formidable criminal organization. The “red” part of the name was a tribute to their communist teachers.

Only vaguely did Marcelo mention getting permission from the gang to do his tours. I asked him later about this and he said he never talked to any drug dealers directly. However, friends of his in Rocinha that know members of the Red Falange assured him that it was OK. “Drug dealers know my face, and know my car. They don’t bother me.”

As for the regular residents of the communities, Marcelo said he was surprised at how open they were to the idea. He had started with *Vila Canoas* because he had grown up a mile away and had friends there. At the invitation of the neighborhood committee president, he attended a community meeting. His request for permission to do his tour in their *favela* was met with full support. As he explained to us, “We are safe and welcome. We are not disturbing the people. [They] are proud of their place and want to show that it is not a ghetto.”

I identified with Marcelo. Doing photojournalism is a constant exercise of being the outsider, of explaining yourself, of asking for permission. The humbling part of the process is that the subject can say “no,” that they don’t want their pictures taken, or a tour in their backyards. Surprisingly, though, people are more open to these “intrusions” than not.

“I don’t know how it works, but it works,” Marcelo commented as we passed clusters of pirate electrical connections resembling bird nests on the utility poles. Actually, within Vila Canoas and about 300 other Rio *favelas*, a program of the city and federal governments and the Inter-American Development Bank was pumping half a billion dollars millions into infrastructure, improving electrical, water, and sewerage systems. The five-year-old program was called “*Bairrinho*” (“Little Neighborhood”), and will be operating for another three years.

I actually took the tour on two occasions, in May and September, and noticed a significant difference. On the first visit to *Vila Canoas*, we slipped along muddy, uneven paths as we passed businesses squirreled away inside the *favela*: plumbing and electrical shops and small grocery stores. My white Nike tennis shoes turned more reddish-brown the farther we ventured.

By September, the mud had been covered with ce-

ment, and steps made the inclines easier. City workmen had put in electrical meters, and were methodically replacing the “*gatos*” (cats), or illegal electrical connections with legal ones. As I talked to one workman, he said that they weren’t fixing “*gatos*” but “*onças*” (leopards).

After the group stopped for mineral water at a snack stand, the “Little Resort of Luciano” (the sign was spelled out in English, which gives one an idea of how much Marcelo’s tour meant for Luciano’s business), we made the walk out of the *favela* back toward the van. Before exiting, however, Marcelo walked us through the *Cia dos Sabores* (Flavor Company) bakery, an example of a successful *favela* business on the edge of *Vila Canoas*.

The bakery was based in the nicest looking three-story house on the *favela* side of the main road. Ronaldo Gonzales Da Silva, a native of Vila Canoas, had worked for a German man making strudel before the latter’s untimely death. The Brazilian persisted in his baking dream, opened his own strudel shop, and now provides pastry to most of the fine hotels and restaurants in Rio. Since he was on the *favela* side of the street, his million-dollar business, which employed 12 locals, was tax-free.

Piling back into the van, we headed to Rocinha. All roads seemed to converge at the base of the *favela*, feeding into a two-lane ribbon of asphalt snaking up the hill. Everything happened on the road all of the commerce, transportation and city services. It was the lifeline for a couple of hundred thousand people. I could only imagine the headaches that would come with one good fender bender.

Marcelo started talking about all of the development — about the two banks, two supermarkets, 12 clinics (though only one is public, and no hospitals), four public schools, two radio stations, three local newspapers and one cable station (which offers lower rates in the *favela* than in town). Rocinha even had its own website: www.Rocinha.com. A city within the global city.

The idea of making money in Rocinha had caught the eye of people from outside the community. Marcelo slowed near a small laundry service, “*Sabom*” (good soap), opened by a rich engineer from São Conrado. There was also was a rumor about a McDonalds coming, which made it into a *Washington Post* report³ on Rocinha: however, the location instead became a *pasteleria* (a place that sells *pastel*, a deep-fried pastry with meat and/or cheese inside).

With all of this development and marks of legitimacy, though, the stigma of being a *favela* still remained. A public bus marked “São Conrado” rolled by. Marcelo explained that the bus’s terminal is Rocinha, and that it never descended as far as São Conrado. However, its route traversed upper and middle-class areas in the

³ *Washington Post*, August 3, 1999, page.A10, “A Slum Sweeps Away Despair.”



A young resident of Rocinha

city, and, according to him, those people would fear getting on a bus destined for the *favela*.

Our next official stop allowed us to climb to the roof of a private home, and take in the amazing view I mentioned on page 1. Multitudes of rooftops and TV satellite dishes spilled to the ocean, like a glimmering red brick Sea of Olives flowing to the Gulf of Corinth. Marcelo nodded toward a large water tower constructed by drug dealers as a Robin Hood-ish gesture. Rimming one side of the *favela* were city-built cement supports to keep the top of the mountain in place during summer rains.

Back on the road again, three military police officers with machine guns in their hands walked down the hill toward a small police post. "The higher law is drug dealers," Marcelo commented as we passed.

About a year ago, kidnappers took the girlfriend of

a well-known São Paulo rock musician. Because of rumors, the police thought she was being held in Rocinha, and mounted an extensive search in the *favela*. A couple of days of uniformed cops blanketing the area seriously inconvenienced the drug trade.

At 3 a.m. one morning, frustrated gang members opened fire on the police. The exchange was intense, the criminals outgunning the police with sophisticated weaponry. After 40 minutes of battling, filmed by a TV news crew, the fighting ceased with only one injury on the police side. As it turned out, the woman wasn't being held in Rocinha after all. The police rescued her from another *favela* a few days later.

During those days of police searches and gun battles, Marcelo suspended his touring. The only other time violence impeded his work was in the years following the Candelária⁴ slayings when Rio's reputation as a violent city reached its apex. Tourism was severely affected and his business fell precipitously. However, friends and clients urged him to continue, and soon interest in his tour picked up again.

Finally we arrived at the very top of the hill, and pulled over one last time. As we took in the view from the backside of Rocinha, which looked into the trendy neighborhood of Gávea, Marcelo explained the word "*favela*." He took issue with the popular translation as urban slum or shantytown. "*Favela* is *favela*. Just like *Samba* is *Samba* and *Bossa Nova* is *Bossa Nova*....

The word originated from the Canudos rebellion in the northeastern state of Bahia, a religious/anti-republican movement of 25,000 people that was annihilated by government forces in 1897. In the hills where the soldiers camped grew "*favela*" bushes.

The soldiers returning to Rio built their makeshift houses in the hills above the growing city. In honor of the campgrounds in Canudos, they referred their new homes as "*favelas*."

Finishing the tour, we re-traced our path, descending through Rocinha towards São Conrado. At the bottom we crossed the invisible but real line between poverty and wealth. We rolled past the trendy three-story shopping mall (called a "*shopping*" in Portuguese) with its espresso machines and "hippy-chique"⁵ boutiques, and ended the tour in the driveway of the Intercontinental. Marcelo blurted out, "We just came to the most dangerous place in town and luckily we survived."

⁴ Refers to the 1993 slaying of eight street children in Rio de Janeiro at the hands of three policemen and a civilian.

⁵ Refers to a current fashion trend which uses 1960's style clothing, like bell-bottomed jeans, with fancy accents.

CONCLUSION

Thinking back to the experience, I have to admit that Rocinha was a special case, being more developed than any other *favela* that I had seen. Also, although the disparity of worlds that we had seen was great, the real division in the city was more between the *Zona Sul* (South Zone) and the *Zona Norte* (North Zone).

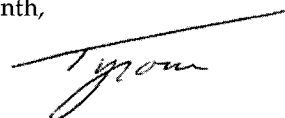
The *Zona Sul* was what people think of as Rio. Here were the tourist points, the statue of Christ, Sugar Loaf, as well as Copacabana and Ipanema beaches. Both poor and rich lived in the *Zona Sul*, in places like Rocinha, *Vila Canoas* and São Conrado.

The *Zona Norte* was mostly poor. An unbroken landscape of impoverished "morros" (slums), the *Zona Norte*

stretched north from downtown. It was what one passed over on the elevated highway to the international airport. In the recent months, the newspapers had been carrying accounts of dozens of men and women murdered in *Zona Norte* gun battles between rival drug gangs.

All in all I was impressed with Marcelo and his tour. Here was a Brazilian trying to "normalize" views of *favelas*, at least for visiting foreigners. It was his attempt to introduce a part of society that is mostly feared and kept at a distance, but that one cannot avoid if one is to understand Brazil.

Until next month,



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