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SELF, COMMUNITY AND URBAN FRONTIERS IN RIO DE JANEIRO

Sandra Jovchelovitch

Rio de Janeiro is a city of multiple and contradictory layers, at once exposed and hidden by its beauty and complex topography. The distances and overlaps between its neighbourhoods and people are vast and operate at many levels, all immediately noticeable to the senses of those who are in the city. Walking in Rio, close to the Atlantic Ocean, or beyond, through its forests, mountains, people and buildings, it is difficult to focus the eye on one single aspect, because the key characteristic of the city is juxtaposition and mixture, a vibrant carnival of geography and humanity, a space that is both urban and psycho-social, made of many lives, emotions, representations and behavioural patterns.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the contrast between the *favelas* and affluent paved areas of the city, described in the everyday language of Cariocas, as the dichotomy morro/asfalto (hill/asphalt), a signifier everyone understands and uses to navigate the complexity of divisions and lines of segregation that characterise Rio. The separation morro/asfalto is deeply connected to the process of urbanisation in Rio de Janeiro, which kept apart and yet grew dependent on the *favela* communities it marginalised.

Officially called urban subnormal agglomerates, Rio's *favelas* are ecosystems of great complexity, in which a rich and diverse sociality coexists with chronic lack of state services, and heavy social control imposed by drug bosses and police violence. Since the 1980s drug cartels have gradually gained control over *favela* territories, initiating an undeclared and subterranean war with the police. Caught in the middle of this confrontation, *favela* dwellers became a target for the police and over-exposed to the routes of socialisation established by the institutional and business-like character of narco-traffic.

As the population of *favelas* grew, the increase in violence and homicides, combined with the chronic lack of services and socio-economic deprivation configured an environment of intense social exclusion. Despite being integral to the economy and socio-cultural life of the city, *favela* communities were pushed underground, their actual sociability and multiple life forms hidden away by geographical, social, economic, symbolic and behavioural barriers.

This preponderance of marked urban frontiers is a central aspect of Rio de Janeiro and a major component of life in the *favelas*. *Favela* dwellers love their communities as well as the city, but they are acutely aware of borders and separation. Crime, violence and marginalisation are equated from the outside with the identity of *favela* residents, who regularly experience discrimination as they cross borders into the wider city. Negative representations and the stigma generated in the asphalt hurt both socially and psychologically by barring access to work and earnings, and by affecting identity and self-esteem. The words inside and outside are strong signifiers, deployed to express both differences between the

urban worlds and the sharp borders that separate them. Border controls in the city are subjectively internalised: people understand that there is danger when crossing into different *favelas* and feel the pain of prejudice and discrimination when crossing into other areas of the city.

These issues can be illustrated by the psychosocial cartographies of four communities of Rio: Cantagalo, Cidade de Deus, Madureira and Vigário Geral, each located in a different area of the city (enter image 1 about here). Cantagalo and Vigário Geral fit the accepted definition of *favelas*, whereas Cidade de Deus was built as a planned area for relocating *favela*-dwellers displaced from the city centre during the 1960s. Madureira is a formal neighbourhood surrounded by *favelas*. In their similarities and differences, each one of these four communities illuminates how geographical borders intersect with social and psychological frameworks to connect territory, community identity and a sense of self in the city.

As with any map, psychosocial cartographies are established by borders. These can be more or less porous, depending on a combination of psychological and geographical elements, which establish the relations between the *favelas* and the city. These elements include the range and quality of social institutions present in a community, its location in relation to the wider city, the presence or absence of urban connectors, the experience of leisure of its inhabitants and the social representations held by the city as a whole about the area.

Cantagalo

It is located between Ipanema and Copacabana, at the heart of South Rio and its beautiful natural landscape. It benefits from the state services and commercial facilities of these formal neighbourhoods, despite the absence of these from the *favela* itself. The community is connected to Ipanema by a lift and a paved road, which makes it easy to come and go, even more so since the expulsion of the drug trade and the introduction of the Pacification Police Unit (UPP). Social representations of the area are mixed, including positive and negative dimensions. There is flow both ways in terms of leisure, services and intergroup contact, making Cantagalo's borders highly porous.

Madureira

It is in the centre of North Rio and open to the city, although distance gives some density to its borders. There are multiple institutions in Madureira and the neighbourhood enjoys its own facilities and vibrant popular culture. It is placed at the crossroads between the different cultures of Rio and offers multiple references for the sociability of its residents. Madureira is associated with poverty, but also with conviviality and important cultural traditions of the city. Its large market is a strong urban reference, and samba schools such as Portela are exemplary of its rich influence in the life of Rio. Its borders show medium to high porosity; they are very wide and not controlled by the drug trade.

Cidade de Deus

It is located remotely in the western part of Rio, close to forests and to the Barra neighbourhood, its beach and overall facilities. References for sociability are focused on the drug trade and the evangelical churches, although the UPPs are introducing a new, if uneasy, relationship with the state. There is freedom

to come and go but leisure is concentrated inside the community, mainly for fear of discrimination. Dominant social representations of Cidade de Deus continue to link the community to the drug trade, poverty and violence. Its borders show low porosity: they are no longer controlled by narco-traffic, but internalised segregation keeps the horizons of the community primarily inside its own territory.

Vigário Geral

In Vigário Geral, scarcity of social institutions and distance from the city reduce the references for the sociability of its residents, which is polarised between AfroReggae, an important NGO originated in the community, and the drug trade. The drug trade is the central organiser of community life, and, along with the evangelical churches, AfroReggae, and the sporadic presence of the police, comprise the social institutions of the *favela*. Crossfire and stray bullets are part of everyday life; the area is closed and tightly controlled, and circulation is difficult. Vigário Geral is strongly associated with wars between factions of the drug trade and the violence of the police. The territory of the community circumscribes the leisure and the horizons available for its residents.

Levels of porosity in community borders shape the context that is offered to pathways of socialisation inside *favelas* as well as the nature of the relationship between the communities and the wider city. Levels of porosity of borders correlate with the breadth of social networks and potential crossings that are available in the everyday life of *favela* dwellers. The broader the networks and looser the borders, the more the experience of the self is broadened. The denser the borders, the lesser the chances of expanding networks and crossing into the wider city, while the need and importance attributed to the few institutions, good or bad, that operate in the community rise.

Porosity of borders between peripheral communities and the wider public sphere of the city is a major factor defining the routes of socialisation and the individual and collective experience of the city. Actions on the flexibility of urban frontiers are central for the enlargement of the self, the regeneration of territories of exclusion and for giving back to *favela* dwellers the right to the city. Keeping borders open contributes to the transformation of identities and the development of citizenship. It connects a divided society and avoids the formation of ghettos that isolate and prevent the vibrancy embedded in the social and cultural encounters of the contemporary city. The Viaduto in Madureira and the Centro Cultural Waly Salomão in Vigário Geral are exemplary of these processes: they operate as places of encounter, learning, development, psychosocial containment and conviviality, bringing the city to the *favela* and the *favela* to the city. In regenerating the public sphere and the built environment of popular communities, they also regenerate Rio de Janeiro, establish a bridge between hitherto separated social worlds, and take a further step towards the communicative city.

The experience of Rio corroborates the need to decentralise urban planning and consolidate the vistas offered by the mixed city of the twenty-first century. Cleaning the city of its poor by removing *favelas* and unwanted populations from sight is not a sustainable urban solution, and not only because it violates the fundamental right to the city. The study of *favela* life shows that

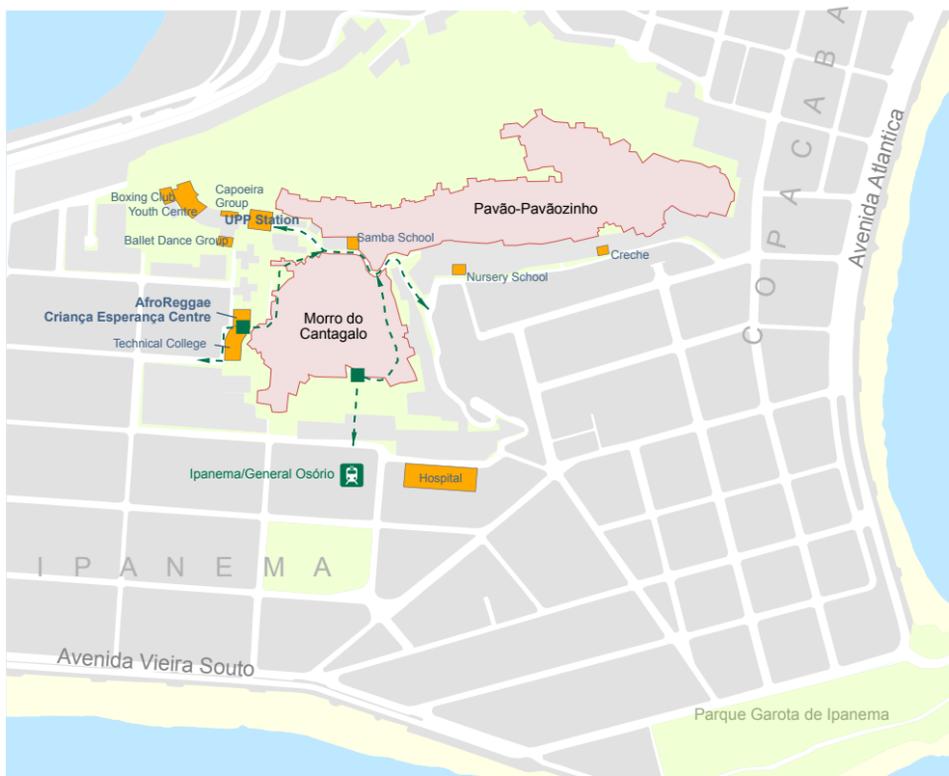
despite social exclusion there is resilience, a powerful culture and a proud collective intelligence living on the edges of the city. To recognise the *favela* and the potentials of its people, culture and economy requires urban policy committed to social integration, without which Rio de Janeiro's development will always be partial.

Sandra Jovchelovitch is Professor of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and co-author of *Underground Sociabilities, a study of Rio's favelas*.

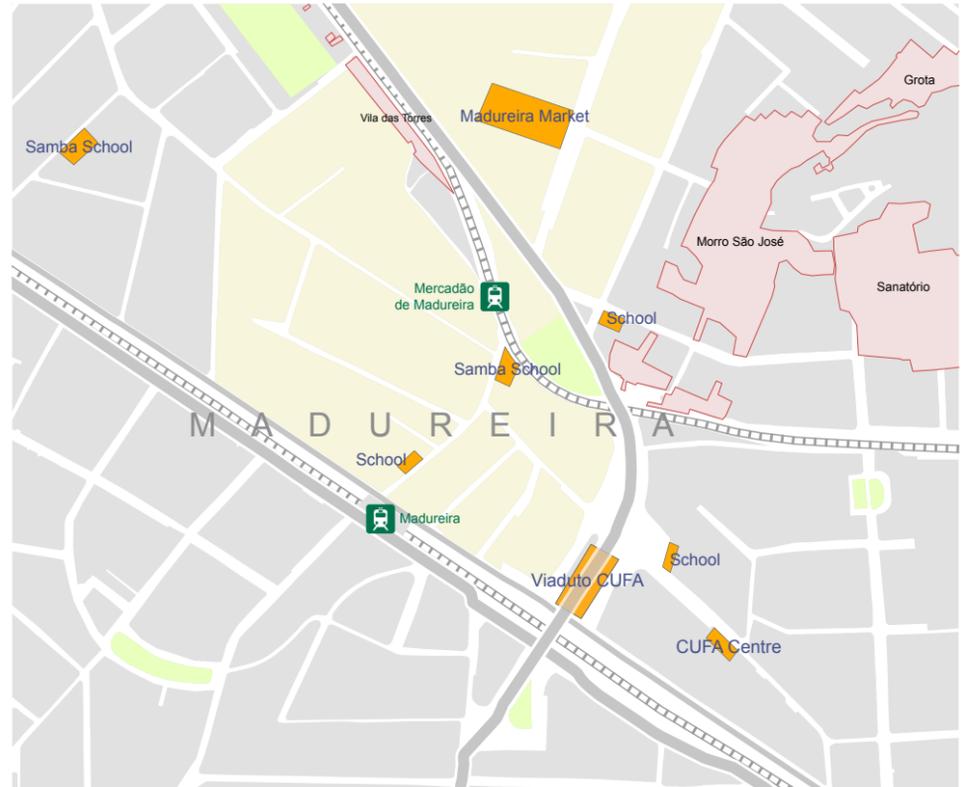
Legend

- Community Assets
- Urban Blocks
- Favelas (as defined by Rio gov.)
- Green Space
- Retail Activity
- Rail / Metro Station
- Major Highway
- Rail Lines
- Access Routes
- Lift Access

Cantagalo



Madureira



Cidade de Deus



Vigário Geral

