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Representing Brazil's favelas through the lenses of community photographers



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Community photography is being implemented around the world to enable socially disadvantaged communities to represent their everyday lives from the inside. In this post, Alice Baroni describes how community photographers in Rio de Janeiro not only have successfully achieved a portrayal of favelas that often challenges the images presented in the mainstream media, but have also fostered dialogue and enhanced self-esteem amongst their neighbours.

The term community photography includes a wide range of grassroots photographic initiatives. In Rio, where journalistic reporting has usually regarded favela territories as “exclusive spaces of violence” (Ramos & Paiva, 2007: 77), community photography has recently helped to productively account for favela dwellers’ dissatisfaction with the mainstream media’s negative portrayal of their communities.

I began [my research](#) with a specific problem in mind: the absence of favela dwellers’ voices and perspectives in the mainstream media. I focused on community photographers — favela dwellers who have taken part in institutional photographic initiatives — and to understand their attempts at creating new representations of favelas and their residents, I explored their working practices, identities, and discourses.

The [Viva Favela](#) portal was founded by the NGO [Viva Rio](#) in 2001 as a response to favela dwellers’ desire to have a magazine produced by the people, for the people, and with the people. Its newsroom combined experienced mainstream journalists and favela residents, who later became active media producers. The portal marked a new way of looking at and talking about the favelas because, for the first time, favela residents could tell their own stories, using their own language and codes. Since its foundation, the initiative has inspired the creation of other projects, such as [Imagens do Povo](#) (Images of the People), which was set up in 2004.



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[Imagens do Povo](#) is a project inspired by renowned Brazilian photographer João Roberto Ripper, who was invited by the NGO [Observatório de Favelas](#) to document favela communities from a different perspective. At that time, Ripper met photographers from Complexo da Maré, including 17

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Social media



different favela communities, who were starting out on their journeys as photographers. This encounter made Ripper realise that those photographers were the ones who could produce images of favela communities from an insider perspective because they were rooted in their communities. Hence, Ripper suggested to the **Observatório de Favelas** creating the agency-school **Imagens do Povo**, which would include a photographic agency, an image database, and the School of Popular Photographers.

The project **Viva Favela**, and later on **Imagens do Povo**, were conceived with the idea of enabling favela dwellers to generate images and representations of their own homes and themselves to provide Rio's society and authorities with different perspectives with regard to the favelas and their residents (see **Jucá & Nazareth, 2008; Lucas, 2008; Ramalho, 2007; Silva 2009; Valladares, 2005; Zalar & Alvito, 2006**).

By documenting the favelas in a positive light, community photographers have come through a process of rediscovering their neighbourhoods. Furthermore, through the interaction with the people and the sharing of the images, photographers have provided their communities with the possibility of seeing themselves portrayed from the inside. This has fostered the dialogue between photographers and their neighbours. AF Rodrigues (2010), a photographer at **Imagens do Povo**, explained how his photographic practices, which happen through an intense dialogue with his neighbours, have enabled them to look at themselves in a different light, strengthening their self-esteem:

The woman has always been insulted. What she sees on TV is a paradigm of beauty absolutely distorted, surreal, so she doesn't want to be photographed because she doesn't understand that there is beauty beyond the traditional paradigm, and so she doesn't believe she is beautiful as well ... in her act of working, studying, fighting to achieve things in life. However, when you begin shooting and then you present the photographs to her, she starts realising your proposal and valuing things that she didn't value before.

This kind of initiatives, however, is not exclusive to Brazilian favelas but rather a movement in other socially disadvantaged communities around the world. Similar to community-based initiatives in Rio, Italian non-profit organisation **Fotografi Senza Frontiere** aims to provide local youths from extreme regions in Nicaragua, Algeria, Argentina, Panama, Uganda, and Palestine with the skills to document their own communities in order to tell stories from their own perspectives. Regarding the way these community-based organisations operate, unlike **Fotografi Senza Frontiere's** photo labs that are run by the locals themselves, **Viva Favela** is run by the NGO **Viva Rio**. **Imagens do Povo**, in turn, has some degree of independence from the NGO **Observatório de Favelas**, although it is still subjected to its institutional framework.



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By analysing the initiatives of **Imagens do Povo** and **Viva Favela**, we come to understand that community photographers in Brazil have in common with those in Uganda and Palestine an attempt to document, store and communicate their cultural heritage: they strive to generate a positive visual record of the development of their communities for future generations. Their work shows that documentary photography in marginalised communities is

about the recording of the daily struggles for survival that emerge through a myriad of images of the everyday life of forsaken communities. These images call for an acknowledgement that everyone has a right to be portrayed in a context of dignity and integrity. Or in Lucas' words,

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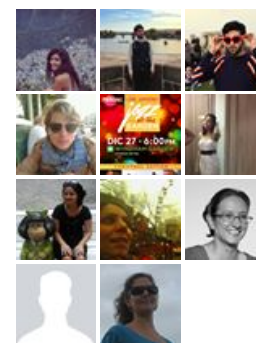
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"everyone has a physical life, an intellectual life, a spiritual life, an emotional life, a life of the senses and an aesthetic life" (Lucas, 2012: 13), which are the core values of human dignity.

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