

REDBRICK IN RIO MOISES LINO E SILVA

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1 My own translation.

2 Jorge Barbosa and Jailson de Souza Silva, *Alegria e Dor na Cidade* (Rio de Janeiro: Senac, 2005), 24.

3 See Max Weber on the concept of status groups. In editors H. Gerth and CW Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991).

4 "Center for Urbanistic and Social Orientation."

Favela Amarela / Yellow *Favela*¹

Favela amarela / Yellow *favela*
Ironia da vida / Irony of life
Pintem a favela / Paint the favela

Façam aquarela / Make watercolor
Da miséria colorida / Out of colorful misery
Favela amarela / Yellow *favela*
—Jota Júnior and Oldemar Magalhães

What is a *favela*? Jorge Barbosa and Jailson de Souza Silva open their book *Alegria e Dor na Cidade* (Happiness and Pain in the City) with this very question.² They maintain that many people think that a *favela* can be defined as a place that "lacks"—order, sewage, asphalt, and so on. I am unable to give a definite answer to the question; however, after having spent more than a year living and conducting research in Rocinha—one of the biggest *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro—I am certain that the apparent "lack" of things should be carefully considered. Here I want to tackle the issue of the lack of paint in the landscape of some *favelas*. Discussing deeper social dynamics within *favela* life however can be a more effective means for defining what a *favela* is than the mere "lack" of something.

Why do people living in *favelas* tend not to paint the exterior of their houses, although the interior of these same houses are often very colorful? I suggest that it has to do with the type of status one achieves—or doesn't—by decorating the exterior of houses.³ I have often been surprised when visiting places in Rocinha that I judged from their exterior appearance to be very simple and found highly elaborate colors inside. This issue seems to go beyond the mere lack of resources.

A few weeks after Michael Jackson's death in June 2009, people from the *favela* where I lived were excited to visit the place where the music video for the song "They Don't Care About Us" was shot, in *Favela Dona Marta*, in 1996. During our visit to the rooftop where Michael danced so intensely, one of my friends found it odd to look out and notice that colors in that *favela* were so diverse. She thought the mix of colors was ugly and preferred the more neutral red-brick and cement-gray tones of Rocinha. At this point, another friend—a student of architecture—told us more about a color project run by the municipality through the local POUSO (Posto de Orientação Urbanística e Social).⁴

In this project, people were given a neutral color with which to paint the exterior of their houses, and the choice of a second color for building details. The latter would be chosen by the dwellers themselves: orange, purple, red, or others. The result was an ongoing transformation of the *favela* landscape.



Coincidence or not, however, this is the same *favela* in which permanent policing units were placed in 2008 as a pilot project that attempts to obtain control over the *favela* territory and eliminate drug trafficking.

Would a *favela* without organized crime, and looking more colorful than ever, still be a *favela*? Given the historical government desire to eliminate *favelas* and, more recently, to “solve the *favela* problem,” I would expect public authorities to hope the answer would be “no.”⁵ But during our visit to the colorful Dona Marta, people still spoke about the place where they lived in terms of a *favela*.

In Dona Marta, not just the colors were different; those in charge of the territory were different, and the inhabitants claim that even the popular *favela* “baile funk”—a kind of block dance party—had been forbidden by the police to keep “order.”⁶ However, “*favelas* are similar but different” is what I often heard during fieldwork. It therefore becomes easy to accept the idea that some *favelas* have the presence of organized crime and others do not. Some have a stronger presence of “militias,” and others a greater presence of the police. Some *favelas* are becoming more colorful, while others remain red brick.

A recent article on Rocinha’s “official” website discusses the possibility of a partnership between a multinational paint company and the governments of both the municipality and the state of Rio de Janeiro, with the objective of

Images by Moises Lino e Silva

5 The book *A Century of Favelas* contains a discussion on various initiatives for the elimination of favelas over the past 100 years; Marcos Alvito and Alba Zaluar, *Um Século de Favela* (Rio de Janeiro: FVG, 2006).

6 The movements and lyrics of funk music can sometimes be sexual, aggressive, or glorifying of organized crime, depending on the type of event.



painting more *favelas*.⁷ The authors, Isabela Bastos and Luiz Ernesto Magalhães, argue that there seems to be a historical desire on the part of the government to minimize the “visual impact” of *favelas*.⁸ The question I would like to put is: what “visual impact”?

In my home *favela*, I lived in a one-bedroom ground-floor flat. The wall outside my house was made of cement. The interior, however, had a combination of tile patterns on the walls and floor. The tiles in the kitchen and tiny bathroom were blue; they were beige in the living room and brown in the bedroom. Meanwhile, the top parts of the walls—the tiles went up only halfway—were yellow in the living room, light yellow in the bedroom, and deep blue on the ceiling of the kitchen and bathroom. The house was very colorful inside, but rather monotone on the external walls.

Upstairs lived a family of four: Raquel, Carlos, and their two children, Clara and Jefferson. Before living with Raquel, Carlos had lived with another woman and, with her, had an older son called “Mano” and a daughter called “Mana.” Raquel told me that Mano’s house was beautiful and that she wanted to take me there someday. The first time we started climbing stairs uphill to get there, I became tired. Mano lived a lot further up the hill than we did. The narrow ways leading to his house were sometimes challenging, steep and dirty at some points. Most houses on the way were red brick on the outside. We finally reached a hidden door in a gray-cement rendered building. Raquel knocked. Mano’s partner opened the door and invited us up through a staircase covered with brown tiles. Inside the house, there were three floors and many colors on the walls. The living room was highly decorated with pictures, good-quality furniture, and small colorful objects everywhere. The upper floors were equally impressive. The contrast between the elaborate interior and the simple exterior struck me. The couple obviously had ample means to color the exterior of their house had they wanted.

On a different occasion, I was walking around Rocinha with a friend, Goianiro, who offered to teach me some shortcuts. We went all the way uphill through “becos”—narrow alleys—and then back down using a side way near the big rock just beside the area where I lived. At a certain point we stopped to rest, and from that spot had a great view of the *favela*. Looking at the red-brick tones that dominated the scene, I asked my friend: “Why is it that people don’t paint the outside of their houses?” He didn’t think long before saying: “Because they don’t care about that.” A few seconds later, though, after giving more thought to the question, he said that it was not worth spending money on the exterior if it is the interior that matters. The answer was important to me as an anthropologist, but I felt it sounded a bit too obvious. As we kept going down, he brought up the topic again and said that it was expensive to take building material all the way up to the *favela* just to decorate the exterior of a house, when that doesn’t make any difference to your life.

Months after this conversation, I traveled with Raquel and Clara to Ceará state in northeast Brazil. Raquel had migrated from there to the *favela* in Rio where she had been living for more than twenty years. A few days after we arrived in Ceará, we went to visit the house of another friend I had made back in the *favela* in Rio. Her house was still under construction, with the walls bare red brick. She was a bit embarrassed about the house and told us that the building work was not finished; the inside and outside walls still had to be painted. I was surprised that she would be concerned about that. “Will you paint

7 Isabela Bastos e Luiz Ernesto Magalhães; *Parceria com fabricante de tintas permitirá pintar barracos*, <http://www.rocinha.org/noticias/view.asp?id=1029> (accessed February 24, 2010).

8 Their argument is based on the work of Brazilian historian Milton Teixeira and presents other historical initiatives that led to some *favelas* in Rio being painted. The projects mainly reflected top-down approaches.

A wall in a school in Rocinha where color is used to teach French.

(Image: Luciano João dos Santos.)

the outside walls as well?" And she said: "Here I have to do it; it is not like in Rocinha. Here, the only ones who don't paint the external walls are those in total deprivation, and I don't want people thinking of me in those terms!" After a while she said: "This is a good thing about the *favela* in Rio—there nobody cares about these things!" This statement reminded me of what Goianiro had told me.

Based on my fieldwork, I came to believe that there is something about living in a *favela* that makes the external appearance of a house less important than it is in other places— whether the neighborhood of Ipanema in Rio, a small town in the state of Ceará, or even Goiânia, my hometown in the interior of Brazil. The reason for people not painting the exterior of their houses doesn't seem to be financial or at least not only financial. Of course with money being limited, people need to make tougher choices; my experience in a *favela*, however, makes me think that painting the exterior of a house comes very low on the list of priorities. The decoration of the interior of the house, including amenities such as a big television, a powerful sound system, or tiles all over the house, have a lot more importance.

In this sense, urban projects that try to improve *favelas* through colorful paint may be operating only on the place where this paint is going: the exterior. The attitude behind not turning red brick into other colors runs deeper, to what it means to live in a *favela*. The color of exterior walls does not seem to confer the same status or have the same value in *favela* life that it usually does in other places. Changing the color of *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, then, seems to be a preoccupation more for people outside *favelas* than for their own inhabitants. Colored walls can be a sign of increased social status, but not necessarily to the people undergoing the color changes.⁹

⁹ As I write, in 2010, a few houses in Rocinha have been painted as part of the interventions made by the PAC program, a federal government project to promote the acceleration of economic growth in Brazil. The houses chosen to undergo color changes were along the road that leads to the wealthy neighborhoods of Ipanema and Barra da Tijuca (Auto Estrada Lagoa-Barra).

