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Gringa tales in favela Santa Marta

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an autoethnographic account through tourist favela Santa Marta, Rio de Janeiro. It aims to grasp the role of tourists' practices and performances and their potential to resignify and transform the physical, social, and cultural landscape of slummed communities at urban destinations. Tourism in informal urban settlements is a phenomenon studied from different disciplines and perspectives, mainly covering representational and ethical issues. The paper incorporates insights from the Performative Turn and relational studies to guide the author's reflection over her cultural experience as a favela tourist/researcher. These stories compound the myriad of heterogeneous elements making and shaping the favelas' complex and dynamic assemblages. They also unveil multiple underlying issues that could be further analyzed from different scopes. Finally, favela tourism is seen as an avenue to foster social change. Autoethnography was first being applied to slum tourism research, and it proved to be a useful method to embrace the subjectivities of the field.

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Introduction

The United Nations (2016) defines slums by the 'lack of: land ownership, proper infrastructure, access to water, sanitation, enough living space, and so on. Meanwhile, Slum-dwellers are often deprived of social representation and political rights, stigmatized by social elites, and discriminated against in the formal labor market (Riley et al., 2007; cited in Nisbett, 2017). Slums have historically embodied the 'dark', the 'unpredictable', and the 'unknown'; constructed by the hegemonic urban bourgeois as the place of *Otherness*. Thus, slums' cultural production, social traditions, and citizenship were largely invisibilized and neglected. However, recently, some slums have turned into tourist attractions, and this may have been playing against this process, opening new avenues for visibility and legitimation of their spaces and culture.

Despite the assumption that slums would not offer a background for joy, diversion, and relaxation, they have been turned into alternative tourists' favorite sites for engagement, especially among international visitors. South African township tours began in the early 1990s with a socio-political focus. They were short after replicated in Brazilian *favelas*, major slums in India, and other urban destinations North and South of the world, following a particular pattern of imitation from one destination to another (Frenzel, 2012;

Rogerson, 2004). Visiting slums provide tourists with an opportunity to ultimately experience 'difference' in their quotidian lives by immersing in slums' spontaneous, chaotic and exotic social and physical landscape.

This tourist practice proliferates in a more than ever mobile world, where cities play a central role as places of culture and services' production and consumption. The improvements in technologies and transport empowered globalization processes, transforming lifestyles, consumerism, and mobility patterns. In this context, tourism, cultural production, knowledge-based industries, and the entertainment business propel the city's capital growth (Eisinger, 2000). Since tourism is a socio-cultural and economic phenomenon that mobilizes human and non-human capital that go from local to global (Salazar, 2005), the rivalry among tourist cities to attract them is so fierce that almost every aspect of everyday life can work as a commodity (Judd & Fainstein, 1999). Meanwhile, post-modern tourists are also searching for 'off the beaten track' activities at urban destinations, encouraging the rise and development of unexpected attractions (Pappalepore, Maitland, & Smith, 2014). Such is the case of some slums, customized and advertised by local and outside tour operators as an exciting opportunity to experience a 'complete' and 'real' scenario of the city they are embedded, challenging representations, and power relations (Freire-Medeiros, 2009) and some authors would say, turning poverty and informality into a tourist commodity (Frisch, 2012).

Slum tourism (henceforward: ST) is a complex phenomenon that concerns local dwellers, private companies, urban spaces, discourses and identities, and the political and social classes. The (re)production of the slums' materialities and representations could be analyzed from a contextual frame that hints at the spatial-temporal mobility of their realities and imaginaries: every constructed Otherness will exist as a mirror of current issues in society, targeting or neglecting certain social groups (Steinbrink, 2012). So I wondered, what is the role of slum tourists' valorization practices in renegotiating slums' social, political, and economic realities (Frenzel, 2016)? Could tourists bring visibility to slum residents' struggles and their cultural production? Could that value-added potentially replace slums from the margins to the center of the neoliberal urban fabric?

Our inquiry springs from the need for a holistic approach to avoid polarized moral dichotomies and – only – representational issues. Instead, I propose to accept subjectivities, to look into the relational networks intermingled during ST encounters, and hint at tourists' agency to challenge the status quo towards social change (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). This article provides an autoethnographic account of my journeys through tourist favela Santa Marta (henceforward: SM), in Rio de Janeiro (henceforward: RJ). This rather unconventional method in tourism research is first being applied to ST literature. Before immersing the reader into my fascinating and disturbing tales, I will discuss the research method and my personal motivations. Then, I will briefly review ST's literature and the gaps I hope to cover on this paper. Finally, I will not provide a thorough analysis of my experience, instead, I will unravel the many issues raised on the stories.

Autoethnography: embracing subjectivities

Autoethnographic method invites the researcher to address themselves ('auto') when reflecting and describing, in an artful and evocative written account ('graphy'), their personal experience within a larger social, cultural, or institutional group ('ethno') (Ellis, 1997;

Noy, 2007). The method acknowledges the researcher's subjectivities, emotions, and their influence over their relationship with the informants and on the field (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

In action, the researcher may take participant observation, interview cultural members, examine spaces, customs, ways of speaking and dressing, to study the relational practices, values, and beliefs within the cultural group (Ellis et al., 2011). The writing process can be highly therapeutic, as it helps the autoethnographer to reflect and make sense of one's and others' stories. The goal is to produce an aesthetic text providing thick descriptions of the epiphanies that marked their experiences. Ellis and Bochner (2006) assert that the written product should evoke and provoke reflection, whereas avoiding generalizations, theorizations, and 'definitive descriptions and analytic statements' (2006, p. 435).

Autoethnography has not been used so far within ST academic research. However, I believe it is convenient to break down social and material, moral and immoral, representational and non-representational rigid categories. It opens the field for subjective reflections regarding relationships and experiences to supply 'innovative perspectives on the underlying assumptions and discourses' (Noy, 2007, p. 143). Above all, this method is suitable to the topic for its capacity to raise awareness of political issues that could, ultimately, foster social change (Ellis, 2002b). I hope my stories give voice to some of the many issues and wonders surrounding SM's complex realities. Furthermore, I hope they inspire reflections that hint at the need to support ST bottom-up development, especially from policymakers.

I visited RJ twice between 2018 and 2020. I spent six months doing participant observation on tours in SM, carrying out semi-structured interviews with most of the thirteen official tour guides, as well as policymakers, local artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and project managers from both the public and private sectors. Almost every interview was taped following rigorous data and privacy protection codes, and translated from Portuguese to English. The narrative piece was mostly built up from field notes while experiencing and enjoying myself as a tourist/researcher in SM, and from conversations and interviews with inside and outside cultural members.

Prologue

I was an early teenager when I first read the *Open Veins of Latin America*. Galeano's historic account pictures Latin America as a victim of its own natural richness, perpetrated for centuries by wicked European vultures who left us – Latin Americans – doomed to never-ending political and economic instabilities. The reading was devastating and infuriating. I swore I would never set foot in Europe, especially Spain. Like this one, I've nurtured many personal battles for 'just causes'. Growing up in Argentina in the 1990s, I had plenty of unjust causes to fight.

I didn't keep my ban on Europe for long. On the contrary, I've been living in Spain since 2016. After many years of studying and experiencing the global age of mobility – that we call tourism – I proved to myself that meeting with the Other (in this case: my arch-enemy the 'Spanish conqueror') and experiencing Others' realities, can have transcendental educational value. Traveling opened an avenue to reset my perceptions, end prejudices, and resignify Spanish identity to make peace with the past. This personal experience showed me the power of traveling to create new and more empathic knowledge.

What first drew me to study ST was its potential to be socially and politically transformative (Burgold & Rolfes, 2013; Freire-Medeiros, 2007; Frenzel & Koens, 2012; Rogerson, 2004; Williams, 2008). Especially, tourists' potential to enable spaces for new narratives and cultural elements to emerge or to be re-interpreted. To the academia, ST became an issue for debate at the '*Destination Slum! – Reflections on the production and consumption of poverty in tourism*' conference, hosted by the University of West London in Bristol, 2010. After the event, researchers launched an international ST network and an edited volume *Slum Tourism Poverty, Power, Ethics* (Frenzel, Koens, & Steinbrink, 2012), and a special issue in the *Tourism Geographies* journal (2012). Both publications compound the empirical and theoretical reflections of interdisciplinary researchers and worldwide case studies. The variety of studies showed the global reach of ST beyond slums' heterogeneous nature, whereas they mostly focused on ethics, visual, and representational affairs (Frenzel & Koens, 2012). The conference opened several research avenues and fostered a robust number of – mostly – qualitative studies. Approaches varied from anthropology, economics, business management, history and geography, psychology, and sociology.

The asymmetry between hosts and guests made ST controversial from its early beginnings and called attention from the media, social elites, and academics. Thus, there is a long-lasting debate regarding power relations and the ethics playing out (Burgold & Rolfes, 2013; Chhabra & Chowdhury, 2012; Frenzel & Koens, 2012; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018; Goodwin, 2014; Rolfes, 2010; Selinger & Outterson, 2010). During my research, I have often been disputed in conferences and informal conversations: 'tourism is intrusive for slum dwellers'; 'Isn't it turning poverty into a commodity?'; 'Tourists and companies take advantage of the disadvantaged!'; 'Isn't it *unfair* for slum dwellers, as they cannot travel as visitors do?' Curiously, these comments always came from favela outsiders or people that had never set foot in one. In this paper, I will not be addressing these questions in detail. However, I will state that I believe it is *unfair* to deny slums' existence and to obscure their issues and virtues to the foreign eye. Also, I think it is unethical to impede slum dwellers from producing their own myths and narratives.

Only a few empirical findings reveal hosts' perspectives in RJ, Kenya, and India (Freire-Medeiros, 2010; Kieti & Magio, 2013; Slikker & Koens, 2015). On average, local dwellers' approval of tourism is proportional to the economic and social benefits they perceive from it. Dwellers often expect ST to cope with negative stereotypes; Despite this, studies expose several languages, behavioral and semiotic barriers that hinder a deeper understanding between host and guests. These barriers make guides' role as cultural mediators crucial to bridge between local and global actors; they also (re)produce different versions of the slum, and the places and discourses that make them a tourist attraction (Frenzel & Blakeman, 2015).

Researchers found ST contributions to local economy to be quite marginal, and usually encapsulated into private companies or a handful of residents running tourist business (Chege & Mwisukha, 2013; Rogerson, 2004). However, there is more 'value' to take into account other than the economic one. Frenzel (2016) examined the role of tourists' practices through a Marxist lens and he argues that tourists produce symbolic and material value as they gaze, walk, consume, and share their experiences. This value added 'is not intrinsic to the object gazed at but is produced and constructed' through intermingled practices within valorization processes (Frenzel, 2016, p. 96). Moreover, tourists have a degree of autonomy in co-creating value and values outside the logic of capital

and formal politics. Thus, tourists' practices carry political implications: they have the power to 'put places on the map' and set forth issues as political concerns (Frenzel, 2016, p. 108). For instance, they can foster bottom-up initiatives that bring urban regeneration and change slums' negative perceptions (Frenzel, 2014).

Most academic research on the field consists on ethnographic fieldwork focused on how were slums tailored to be globally (re)produced and consumed as tourist attractions by mobile images and narratives (Burgold, Frenzel, & Rolfes, 2013; Dürr, 2012b; Freire-Medeiros, 2009; Frenzel et al., 2012; Linke, 2012; Williams, 2008). The discourses, stories, materials, people, and places that support ST are as heterogeneous as slums themselves. Hence, not every slum can become a tourist attraction, those who do, may find new meanings and means to legitimize through tourists' practices of valorization (Frenzel & Koens, 2012). While playing tourists, whereas consuming the place and its hybrid elements, visitors' performances produce and react to new images and myths, creating connections between people and the everyday, (re)structuring space, narratives, and social life (Haldrup & Larsen, 2010).

Tourists' valorization triggers assemblage processes between heterogeneous actors that materialize into spaces and narratives beyond the visual, symbolic or discursive (Van Der Duim, 2007). Tracing these practices allows identifying the elements entangled into more or less stable relational networks that (re)produce spaces of material and cultural assemblages (Law & Hassard, 1999). This relational approach calls for using metaphors from the *Performative Turn* (See also Bærenholdt, Haldrup, & Larsen, 2004; Crouch, Aronsson, & Wahlström, 2001; Edensor, 2001). When applied to tourist studies, tourism is seen as an encounter between people and spaces through a sensual set of *doings*, supported by multiple and heterogeneous materials (Crouch, 2004). Hence, acting as a tourist entails more than sightseeing. It involves a myriad of multisensory embodied practices in which the gaze is also a *performance* (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

In the following sections, I will provide vivid descriptions of my experience being a tourist, an observer and an inquirer at several favela tours. The account, sets forth the mesh of elements intermingled through ST encounters, valorization practices of tourists and myself included, and underlying issues questioned or altered.

Welcome to Santa Marta

Santa Marta is located in Botafogo, an upper-middle-class neighborhood in RJ's southern area. Because of its relatively small size – 5000 dwellers according to the last census (IBGE, 2011)-, the consolidated power of local authorities, strategic location, and featuring on the media, SM received many policies, programs, and projects over the last decades, both from public and private sectors. It was one of the first favelas to venture in tourism and now has thirteen certified local guides. This 'model favela', as it is often called, does not represent the normative tourist development nor the political attention of other communities, especially compared to those on the margins. However, I chose it precisely because of the entangled performances of multi-scaled and multi-sited actors that conceived SM as a tourist place, which show tourism's potential role.

One of the breakthrough moments of SM's recent history is Michael Jackson's visit in 1996. The artist spent roughly 12 h in the community to shoot the video for the single 'They Don't Care About Us', a song loaded with political criticism. The shooting happened

mostly at a rooftop overlooking some of the city's prominent landmarks: Botafogo Bay, Copacabana beach, and Christ the Redeemer. Although the video received the initial rejection of political and social elites, it placed and mobilized SM in a global system of images and representations (Freire-Medeiros, 2009). The music video has attracted worldwide fans, and the interest from public and private actors.

In the sight of mainstream mega-events taking place in Brazil (like the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016), the State government developed several urbanizations and social projects across the country. In 2010, one of them was the refurbishment of the rooftop featured in Michaels' video, named 'Michael Jackson's Space': a public area, viewpoint, and memorial of the artist's visit.

The picturesque landscape surrounding SM was listed by UNESCO in 2016. The newly protected urban area received the tag: 'Carioca Landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea', and it was the first in this category. The reasons for listing included the dramatic shapes of the mountains, historical events and diversity of cultural urban identities, that inspire many artists and travelers. SM is at the buffer zone, and this made for one of UNESCO's main concerns, who were required to condition and manage the 'occupation of the hill'. Favelas were described as a threat to the preservation of the cultural landscape and its identity. A select committee was created to manage and develop a strategic plan for the conservation of the central area and buffer zones, although few measures were implemented for this matter.

SM was also the first favela to receive a Pacification Police Unit (UPP) in 2008. The UPP was a national security program aiming to eradicate armed traffic gangs rooted in favelas and re-establish the State's power, mainly in favelas located in the southern area of RJ. Improving safety was mandatory to maintain the candidacy for mega-events (Freire-Medeiros, 2007). Although UPP's efficiency and results are controversial, it was during their most active years (from 2008 until the economic and political crisis of 2016) that SM received the most visits: around two thousand per month (Rodrigues, 2018). The same year, the Prefecture built a five-station tramway to improve mobility and installed free Wi-Fi connection in the favela.

The State government launched in 2010 the pilot-project Rio Top Tour (RTT), as a social counterpart of the UPP. The project was the only public policy targeting favelas to develop Community-based tourism (Rodrigues, 2018). It aimed to prepare the ground for turning favelas into formal tourist attractions under the motto: 'RJ under another point of view'. The project combined efforts from public and private educational, investment, and entrepreneurship institutions. It provided professional education in tourism, craftwork and management, promotional material, and signs (like 'no pictures' charts, a large map, and a tourist information post). Part of the funding came from the World Bank, and former president Lula da Silva inaugurated the pilot-project in SM, having significant success with the public and the media. Unfortunately, it didn't replicate to other favelas as it was originally planned.

SM also called private companies' attention, like Coral Tintas, a Dutch-owned and Brazilian-based painting company. Between 2012 and 2016, at the same feverous investment times, the company supported and developed the 'All Colored for You' (*Tudo de Cor Para Você*) project. They donated paint cans and trained dwellers to color around 900 houses and many murals in SM. The project came from the company's marketing division and

aimed to take advantage of the visibility that mega-events were dragging to the city. Coral Tintas chose favelas because they thought they represent the 'carioca' spirit.

The gringa experience

Come to Rio and have an unforgettable experience seeing the daily life of the residents of Favela Santa Marta on an amazing Walking Tour. Experience the culture and social projects and get to know the backstage of the famous Michael Jackson music clip that was recorded on our hill.

One of the Coolest Things to Do in Rio.¹

I met with Fumaça for the first time at Leme beach on a warm September afternoon. Leme looks like a postcard: golden sand, perfect waves strong enough to roar but small enough to swim through, and rounded misty mountains framing the background. The social landscape is even more sticking. In RJ, the beach is where 'the mix' happens. I've heard, read and felt so often that RJ is a 'divided city'. The material poor are visibly confined to the hills sprouting in the city's south and downtown area, surrounded by luxurious white and glassy buildings. It's a violent, yet intriguing contrast. But there we were all blended: black, white, brown and yellow half-naked folks, relaxing and drinking their 'stupidly cold' beers, all sorts of tourists, all kinds of stuff vendors, people surfing waves or taking part in spontaneous volleyball matches.

I was with a group of new friends, some Argentinians and Brazilians based in Rio; and Fumaça came with a younger nephew. Fumaça was born and raised in SM. He's a hard-working father of five, good humored, great dancer, a dreamer, activist and pioneer on favela tours. We met through another random yet fortunate encounter. I'd met a Brazilian tour guide, Carlos, a year ago at a music bar in Barcelona (where I was living). We talked over a glass of red about life and career paths as *latino* migrants living the European dream. 'You need to talk to my friend Fumaça when you get to Rio. He runs a community-based tour agency in SM and he'll introduce you to everyone there'. He said, and I Facebook friended him immediately.

Long story short, after a breath-taking beach sunset and a dire introduction to caipirinhas, Fumaça took me to a loud and lively *baile funk*² in SM, to confirm I'm light years from nailing my twerking moves like locals do. 'Ah, *gringa*! Unfortunately, you came at a time you won't find much *bailes* going on ... with the police now raiding every other time, it sucks!', a local girl told me when she saw I was utterly enjoying the dance. Fumaça did introduce me to everyone, from the DJ to the street vendors. We had a long and heated debate about tourism with a group of local men. 'Tourists help to show that the favela is not all drugs and violence. It's life, families, joy, music, art, creativity. It's fighting and Resilience!', Fumaça said solemnly, summarizing the group's shared thoughts. By the end of the night, our friendship was rock-solid, and I was officially – and warmly – welcomed to the community.

None of my white, middle-class friends living in the *asphalt*³ have taken (nor considered taking) a favela tour. I couldn't blame them; I'd never thought about visiting a slum in Argentina either. What is it about favelas that makes them so attractive? Is it the exotism that comes with the unknown? I could note the fearful looks in my friends' and colleagues' eyes every time I mentioned my ins and outs of SM. However, I could sense it was quite unconscious, since they tried not to reproduce negative prejudices

against favela dwellers but were also too aware of their historicity and the media's narrative. I felt pity for favela dwellers' fate of oppression, but I couldn't condemn my friends for reproducing a systematic marginalization regime as old as slavery itself. So, every time they asked if I felt scared, I always alleged to the kindness and honesty I've encountered in favela dwellers, and explained that I'd also been afraid of visiting the Ramblas after 2017 terrorist attacks in Barcelona, or walking around my quiet hometown's neighborhood in Argentina where my parents were robbed five times.

As a foreigner, I was blessed with ignorance. After all, I hadn't actually experienced any violent event in SM – yet. Still, having been long researching ST and favelas, I had fears of my own (soon to be confirmed wise). If knowledgeable and 'mind-made' citizens avoided favelas, are people like me – the ignorant tourist – best suitable to walk through, stretch and bend, these contested spaces' borders? (Figure 1).

The sense of safety and belonging I felt after the party had already faded by the time I arrived at Corumba Square, one of the two community's entry points, for my first tour. I was joining an English group at the tourist information post. The post was placed in 2013 due to the insistence of the guides' collective to have a proper workplace. It serves as a meeting and information point, and guides usually come and go from 9 am to 6 pm on a daily basis. There is a chart telling SM's foundation myth, the UPPs role, Michael Jackson's visit, and Coral Tintas painting project. Also, a large-scale map showing the community's attractions and tourist sites made during RTT's workshops. RTT and Tudo de Cor's project managers attained part of the funding and permission from the State government



Figure 1. Tours board hanged at a centric hostel. Favela tours to Rocinha and Santa Marta offered among other classic itineraries in RJ. Source: Eugenia Altamirano.

to place the post for a few months, which turned into years. As Figure 2 shows, it's the materialization of a collaborative process that transcended time, spatial and political scales, assembling multiple actors from public and private sectors, and from in and out the favela. The post validates SM as a formal tourist place.

The advent of tourism, provided some residents with a novel profession – and passion –. However, 'by the time of the football world-cup, I had clients every day, I was booked-out! But now that mega-events are over, the Government stopped giving us support; and



Figure 2. A plaque showing supportive institutions at the tourist information post. Eugenia Altamirano.

also, because of the increasing insecurity and violence every day, we have very few tourists. I had to take other jobs to make a living, like most of the other guides. The situation is distressful', one of the guides told me.

As the tour started, my hands were trembling so profusely I could barely take notes; although, my sensorial self was so alert that I can still recall every detail. We came across several animals sharing space and food during the tour (Figure 3). 'You see? That's the favela!' the guide said, smiling with pride. 'Here we all live together in peace:



Figure 3. The dark side of Santa Marta. Source: Eugenia Altamirano.

cats and rats, dogs and hens, gangsters and police ... ', and she laughed. We laughed at the grim metaphor too. 'It's beautiful! So beautiful', one of the tourists cheered. He was amused with the way the constructions came together so organically on the rugged ground, and surprised by how everyone seemed so happy and welcoming to him. We stopped for pictures in a vibrant area filled with colored houses, murals, and a race course painted on the lane (all made during Coral Tintas project). SM has steep contrasts of colors and joy, inventiveness and wit, but also bulks of decomposing waste, sprouts of human idleness and public services limitations.

I was not able to enjoy this tour like the other tourists were, out of fearful experiences in the near past. The first morning I went to SM by myself, I was to interview a local tour operator. She was saying that the only way the community would benefit through tourism was if tours had an educational scope, 'otherwise you are just going to see a lot of *shit*, and won't understand how it came to be'; when suddenly, a police helicopter interrupted us with a raid over main square, Praça Cantao (Figure 4). Two armed teenage-gangsters sneaked into the hallways in front of us, and my informant, also alarmed with what might happen looked into my stunned eyes and screamed 'Eugenia, run!'. We hid away until the raid was over, so we could resume the interview. Two weeks later, I was leaving a capoeira group session one night, when three UPP officers stopped me pointing their guns to my face on an empty street. I froze, and after a few seconds they went past me and up the stairs still pointing their weapons. 'Don't be afraid *gringa!* They are just doing their watch', some locals drinking beer close by told me in comfort. Not one



Figure 4. The colorful main square *Praça Cantao*. Designed and executed by two Dutch artists supported by Coral Tintas in 2012. Bullet holes can be seen on the residences' front walls. Source: Eugenia Altamirano.

person down the street was startled by this event. How can this kind of formal violence be normalized?

Formal violence is not the only kind dwellers have to endure in their everyday life. Armed traffic is also deeply embedded in SM's spaces and social relations. Gangsters walk around loosely and they are always someone's neighbor, son, father or friend. Some tourists are eager to see and experience this reality on tour. Like two French men in their 20s, who requested the guide to meet traffickers during their tour. To my astonishment – and disapproval –, traffickers happily accepted to interact with the tourists and even show them their Uzis closely. Both, hosts and guests, were clearly enjoying and pleased with the experience. Leaving aside my moral reprobation on showcasing armed-traffic, I wonder why should gangster's violence should be denied or invisibilized, when structural violence appears so blatantly? In their discourse, tour guides assure that tourism helps with changing people's minds about favelas' negative stereotypes related to drugs and violence. However, the everyday reality offers a great deal of both, and tourists are suitable agents to problematize, question and make those issues visible.

Tourists react both with rejection and desire, discomfort and curiosity, to gangsters' paraphernalia. Some local guides take advantage and commoditize it, naming these experiences 'Tour with thrills'. Others do not foster any involvement with traffic along their itinerary, namely 'Tour without thrills'. Instead, the latter offer a rosier, safer and 'under control' view of the favela. However, encounters with traffickers often occur by chance, causing tourists' fearful and disconcerting reactions. Be it intentional or unplanned, those encounters are always a milestone in tourists' remembrance and reproduction of the tour, as I was able to confirm in later conversations with them. 'It was the highlight of the tour! This is something I would never see back in Poland ... or anywhere in Europe!' A young Polish tourist said, when I asked him how he felt about the armed teenager we walked past.

Thrills-less tours usually take tourists through several view-points, social projects like the children's nursery; the house-museum of clocks which holds a collection of over 300 wall clocks from around the world; the Residents Association, although all tours visit it; two locally-owned souvenir shops, where I left a small fortune on: hand painted notebooks, magnets, oil paintings, a dress, a handbag, several postcards and coasters portraying a map of the favela designed by one of the owners' 11-year-old son. The whole set of souvenirs depict a colorful, lively, full-of-joy version of the favela that décor my house's living room. But the apex of each of these tours is visiting Michael Jackson Space.

The Michael Jackson Space is to me the most surreal place in SM (Figure 5). There's no other place like this terrace to bring together the materials, stories and people producing the favelas' essence. It converges locals doing their usuals, wandering tourists, several formal and informal businesses, a World Heritage view, Michael heritage, a story of solidarity and sense of community, and the sum of public policies and private ventures. There is a metal chart at the terrace placed by Coral Tintas in 2014, telling the story about the house below, which belonged to a deceased local leader now turned into an NGO. There's also a bronze statue of Michael performing his signature move with an arm stretched up defiantly, made by the cartoonist Ique, and a large mosaic mural by Romero Brito, both Brazilian artists (rumor has it, that the State Government paid



Figure 5. Tourists and locals at Michael Jackson Space. Source: Eugenia Altamirano. .

several thousand *Reales* for the pieces). When Michael's siblings visited the place, they liked the mural so much that they entrusted the artist with a twin version for Neverland.

At one of those tours without thrills, I joined a friendly couple from Parana State, in the country's Southeast. They came to attend the 20th edition of the worldwide famous music festival Rock in Rio. I was glad that events were still attracting tourists, especially Brazilian ones. I was also not missing out on this event. The venue was humongous: it had four stages, national and international performers (from Caetano Veloso to the Red Hot Chili Peppers), food trucks, game courts, and even a roller-coaster. Even though Iron Meiden and Scorpions were playing that night, the performers at the *Espaço Favela* (Favela Space) affected me the most. Not without controversies, favela dwellers were given a stage for the first time (since the festivals' first edition in 1985). The stage was a colorful and standardized favela representation: packed houses, stairs, messy wirings, hanging clothes, cats and dogs. During the festival, artists from favelas across RJ recited poetry, played samba, funk and rap, performed dance choreographies, and acting numbers. I was deeply moved for this cultural achievement and tears of joy and liberation spread around me with every uncoordinated slamming of my hips. But I was also bewildered. As I saw it, favelas materialities and cultural elements were still confined to a segregated and romanticized space. It wasn't Rio's 'under-culture', 'upcoming artists' or 'alternative' stage. It was made clear that it belonged to the *othered* – ragged but sexy – part of the city. And also, how come favelas' cultural performances were condemned in-situ (like *bailes funk*), but celebrated on an event where probably not many favela dwellers could afford to attend?

There's only one outsider among SM's tour guides, although he works for a locally owned company. Residents greet him kindly as we walk through the alleys. This guide's performance is very professional and carefully curated. His discourse is the most politicized and focused on tours' educational value. We took long pauses at the usual tourist sites where he delivered thorough historic and statistic data to explain how public policies systematically neglect favelas' essential services; dwellers extended suffering from racial prejudices and police brutality; and how the linkage between favela dwellers' lack of access to education and exclusion from formal work markets sustain drug-cartels success and favela's perpetuation. I made a great effort to detach myself from the 'poor-but-happy' idealization and wild exotism other guides produce on their tours; but, although the narrative was full of truths, I was finding the tour depressing. SM never appeared to me so dirty, deficient, dangerous, needy, and hopeless; although, I agreed with the need to expose that the favela is a political and social problem steaming from a system of formal oppression and exclusion. I couldn't help noticing how much this discourse resembled the UN's definition of slums: both have a fixation with 'the lack of' and totally disregard slums' abundances and opportunities. What about what the favela is, rather than what is not? Maybe those who experience it every day are the most suitable agents to grasp those alter realities.

Nevertheless, this tour prompted tourists to reflect. The three visitors took lesser pictures and made the most donations at social projects I had seen on any other tour. The guide outlined tourism's negative effects, like residents' loss of privacy and potential conflicts among them (e.g.: competition for attracting more tourists, people for and against tourism, and so forth). But also, the positive ones like the economic benefits to some residents, and, most importantly, the visibility tourists bring to the favela, 'because this is why State action appears to produce infrastructure like the *bondinho* (Figure 6), for instance, which State Government placed after (and, probably, partly because of) SM's tourism potential, but is very positive for residents as well', the guide stated.

SM is nothing like any other favela I visited in RJ. Its spaces and residents' vocation to attract tourists is so evident, that even the elected local 'Major', the President of Residents' Association, agreed that they have received a distinguished treatment for their attractiveness, since tourism planning came as a counterpart for the urbanization and security programs. The Residents Association is the last stop in almost every tour. The Major takes friendly pictures with visitors and answers all their questions. 'Tour guides are partners with the Association, (...) and tourists connect SM *internationally* speaking. But tourism is not the one integrating the favela with the rest of the city, it is the State Government including SM in public budgets and policies. The role of tourism is to improve the services for the community and to call the attention of the State Government', the Major told me in an interview. Before leaving him to take care of a conflict between two neighbors, we took another smiley picture that he posted on social media: 'Today with my friend and researcher from Argentina'.

Some final considerations

Like stated before, it is not in autoethnography to objectively analyze or make any definite judgments on personal experience. My tales from SM unveil the complex realities, and the



Figure 6. Outside the *bondinho's* third-station, purposefully made as a viewpoint. Behind the clouds, Christ the redeemer. Source: Eugenia Altamirano.

multiple entangled actors, material and discursive elements that (re)produce the stages of favela tourism. The issues raised throughout the stories could be further analyzed separately, from different scopes and theoretical perspectives. I will compound some of these topics in a non-definitive nor closed list, as readers might also find their way to new reflections and questions.

Evidently, there is not one *real* favela, but multiple ones co-existing and constantly reshaping to meet the observer or the interpreter's point of view. For UNESCO it is a problem to be addressed, an emerging market for the State Government, a marketing strategy and a carioca spirit representative for Coral Tintas, a dwelling place for guides, a business place for traffickers, an amusing place for tourists; the many subjective readings of the favela confirm that the autoethnographic method is suitable to explore the dynamic and complex underlying issues of yet another subjective view, that of the researcher.

Another game changer is the role of tourists as 'connectors'. Their performances enable spaces of encounter and exchange between the favela, the rest of the city, and the world. Tourists' valorization practices showed enough autonomy to value people and places (like those related to traffic) regardless of the 'approval' or support of institutional players in place promotion, who in this way lose their hegemony over imaging (Russo, 2012). Local leaders capitalize on tourists' valuation of heterogeneous elements by attracting public funds and policies. Hence, tourists' practices show a potential to transform the favela's physical landscape and political representations.

However, these practices are choreographed by guides' performances, which are also shaped by their personal experiences. Each guide disclosed a subjective version of the favela, based on their own world-view, relational ties and experience of the place. They act as cultural mediators, as visitors' lack of behavioral and practical knowledge makes it difficult for them to safely move around the favela. Guides allow or prohibit, encourage or limit tourists' practices, and also, condition and size their autonomy to valorize and make spaces, people, materials, and stories visible and questioned.

Tourist performances affect the making of a place and how it becomes physically structured (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006). In SM, value- and meaning-making by tourists, through and towards materials, links dwellers, houses, government, garbage, landscape, policies, companies, artists, paint, rooftops, dealers, events, and others. The built environment and unfolding of social life, and the way it is consumed, results from the materialization of multiple and heterogeneous practices enmeshed with such hybrid actors. Their conditioned and interdependent relationships produce spaces that represent not only the place of the Other but also a place for learning, joy and admiration for an outsider audience. Tourists' valuation of favelas' elements cannot provide a permanent solution to the structural political failures that produced them in the first place. Nevertheless, it does show how the imaginaries and cultural identities of slums can be renegotiated and mobilized, as an assemblage of actors, from the margins to the center of networks that could potentially drive physical and symbolic change.

Hopefully, I am helping to raise the voice of my friends in SM, and contributing to broaden the discussion regarding the potential of tourists' valorization practices towards social change.

Notes

1. <https://riobyfoot.com/tour/favela-tour-michael-jackson-on-the-rio-de-janeiro/>.
2. Dance parties organized in favelas and by favelados, playing funk music mainly. There was a time when locals and also some tourists ventured to enjoy these parties, but not as much after police break-ins became more regular.
3. How favela dwellers refer to people living in the formal city of RJ.

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