Introduction

The relationship between mainstream and community photographers in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, in Brazil, brings to light social and cultural borders which have transformed Rio de Janeiro into a *Cidade Partida* (divided city), a term coined by journalist Zuenir Ventura (1995) who, after having lived 10 months in the Vigário Geral favela, described the 1993 massacre of 21 Vigário Geral residents by police. However, the socio-spatial apartheid described by Ventura, which divides the favela, on one side, and the city, on another, can also be observed among favelas which are ruled by different drug gangs. ‘Favela’ is often translated simply as ‘slum’ or ‘shantytown’, but these terms connote negative characteristics such as shortage, poverty, and deprivation which end up stigmatizing these low income suburbs.

Despite the steady, sharp drop in income inequality in Brazil since 2001, the country is still one of the most economically unequal countries in the world (de Barros et al. 2007, 22-23). Approximately one third of Rio de Janeiro’s 10-million-plus residents live in favelas. Homicide and drug-related crime rates are rampant in these communities. Rio de Janeiro’s metropolitan area has one of the highest murder rates in the world due to regular shoot-outs between police and drug dealers and ongoing confrontations with each other¹.

Theories developed to explain urban violence in Brazil demonstrate the complexity of the theme and also the impossibility of generating simple responses. Regarding the city of Rio de Janeiro, two different approaches were identified to explain its high levels of violence: (1) Rio as a ‘divided city’, where there is the existence of a ‘parallel power’ inside favelas, and (2) the neo-clientelist view, which looks at practices of clientelism; the interconnections among criminals, civic leaders, politicians, and police (Arias 2006, 297).

This paper reflects on how a cultural and social divide in the city of Rio de Janeiro shapes community and mainstream photojournalists’ practices, discourses, and identities. To do this, it will present the partial results of a research project which investigated subjectivities and practices of community media photographers working - favela dwellers who have developed photographic projects in favelas – alongside photojournalists of the mainstream media.

¹ Regarding critiques and scholarly studies of violence and criminality in Brazil’s favela see (Misse and Lima 2006; Soares, Moura and Afonso 2009; Soares 2000; Soares, Bill and Athayde 2005; Ventura 1995)
Data collection and analysis

As the data analysis indicated the existence of socio-spatial borders all over Rio de Janeiro, I adopted the idea of a ‘divided city’ without denying interconnections between favelas and the city’s political life. My data collection includes: (1) 21 audio recorded interviews with community and mainstream photojournalists that I conducted between November 2010 and January 2011 in Rio de Janeiro; (2) two documentaries from Brazilian film-maker, Guillermo Planel (2010b, 2007). *Abaixando a Máquina: Ética e Dor no Fotojornalismo Carioca* (Lowering the Camera: Ethics and Pain in Carioca)\(^2\) Photojournalism and *Vivendo um Outro Olhar* (Living on the other side); and, (3) the rushes of Planel’s film *Living on the other side* which contain around 50 hours of video recording, including forums and interviews with favela residents, and community and mainstream photojournalists. The interviews were conducted by Planel between September 2008 and December 2009. I took a comparative approach to analysis by adopting a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006).

Understanding the borders

To analyse how community and mainstream photojournalists cope with the state of violence to cover the daily life of favela communities, I will explain four categories which emerged from the data. Table 1 summarises these categories.

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<td><strong>Building the wall</strong> means a process which includes the rise in violence and armed confrontations in favelas, and a gradual abandonment of favela communities by the mainstream media.</td>
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<td><strong>Feeling offended</strong> emerges as a result of the breakdown between favela dwellers and mainstream photojournalists. It expresses how community photographers, mainstream photojournalists and favela residents are affected by the state of violence in Rio de Janeiro.</td>
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<td><strong>Disturbing the favela system</strong> means different kinds of relationships which take place in Rio’s favelas which involve drug dealers, residents, community and mainstream</td>
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\(^2\) The word carioca is a Portuguese word that is derived from the indigenous language of Brazil’s Tupi people. It is used to refer to Rio de Janeiro’s metropolitan area and/or people who were born in it.
photojournalists, and policemen.

**Opening the doors – unity in diversity** means a process which has occurred since a program called UPP (Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora – Pacifying Police Unit) was established in the favela of Santa Marta in December 2008. From that time, Rio’s low income suburbs have experienced a police intervention which has transformed the everyday life of those communities. In addition, ‘opening the doors’ explains the encounter between community and mainstream photojournalists and its outcomes.

Once the categories are summarised, the next step is to expand, clarify, and explicate them to illuminate the practices, identities, and discourses of community photographers alongside those of the mainstream media.

**Building the wall**

The category ‘building the wall’ tells the story of a process which has occurred in Rio’s favelas, especially from the 1980s. It has reinforced socio-spatial boundaries among favelas, on one side, and the city, on another. This process embraces

1. the increased levels of violence;
2. the rise in the influence of drug trafficking;
3. the lack of access and sources of information in/from favelas ruled by drug gangs,
4. the consolidation of the idea of the broken city, and
5. the rupture between the mainstream media and the favela communities.

Thus, ‘building the wall’ means manifold events which together have cemented boundaries all over the city of Rio de Janeiro, not only in terms of the divide between the city and the favelas, but also among favelas. These divisions have also influenced policy-making processes.

The mainstream photojournalist Wilton Júnior (2010) from Grupo Estado explained how mainstream (photo)journalists’ work practices were transformed to cope with the violent context in Rio de Janeiro. He has witnessed the relationships between journalists, photojournalists, and favela communities throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and now in the 2000s. Júnior has been in newsrooms since he was 13 years old³, because he used to accompany his father who was also a photojournalist. During the interview, Júnior (2010) explained that during the 1980s his father and other photojournalists used to go into the favelas to listen to favela dwellers’ viewpoints about violent and/or everyday events, even though they had to

³ He was 36-year-old in December 2010.
negotiate access with local residents’ associations. After the 1980s, having access to Rio’s low income suburbs was gradually becoming a challenge because this period saw a steady increase in the use of weapons by drug gangs and the loss of credibility by the police. It was a result of police engagement in criminal activities, such as bribery, kidnappings, torture, racketeering, and homicide. Júnior’s experience was shared by other very experienced mainstream photojournalists, such as Severino Silva (2010) and Domingos Peixoto (2010).

According to Misse and Lima (2006, 184-185), the rise in the influence of drug trafficking and increasing levels of violence, police brutality, and armed confrontations in favelas reached their peak between 1985 and 1992. However, the photojournalist Domingos Peixoto (2010) pointed out that he had witnessed the increase in the use of high-powered weapons by drug gangs since 1993-94. From that time, he has covered intense armed conflicts in Rio’s favelas. From the mainstream media perspective, this process of violence reached its peak with the killing of the mainstream journalist, Tim Lopes, who was doing an investigative report about the sexual exploitation of teenage girls in Funk parties in the favela of Grota in Complexo do Alemão in 2002. This episode marked the end of the negotiation process between the mainstream media and the favela communities. Before Lopes’s murder, mainstream news workers used to negotiate with Associações de moradores (Residents’ associations) which mediated their access to the favelas. In other words, a person from the local residents’ association used to contact drug dealers to explain (photo)journalists’ endeavours. If they had their approval, news workers were allowed to go into the favela. Though they had drug dealers’ permission, they operated under strict surveillance. After the death of Lopes, this process of negotiation came to an end.

There is a consensus among photojournalists that Lopes’s case marked a rupture between the mainstream media and the favela communities. Some mainstream media companies adopted formal rules of security and explicit norms that changed their work practices, and some even stopped allowing their professionals to undertake journalistic reports in favelas. Bulletproof vests and cars were adopted and journalists did special training to work in areas of high risk.

In addition, the rise in drug gangs’ influence in favelas consolidated the boundaries among favelas which are controlled by different gangs. Francisco Valdean (Planel 2009), from Complexo da Maré, mentioned the difficulties Maré residents face in dealing with drug

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4 They are very often financed by drug gangs in Rio’s favelas.
5 Complexo do Alemão encompasses many different favelas, such as: Adeus, Baiana, Viuva, Pedra do Sapo, Grota, Fazendinha, Nova Brasilia and Alvorada.
gangs, on one side, and the police repression and Rio de Janeiro’s government policies, on another. Valdean said that from the Rio de Janeiro government perspective, the big issue of favelas is drug trafficking; therefore, violence needs to be employed to tackle it. Furthermore, the government financed the construction of walls surrounded the Complexo da Maré by claiming that it aimed to isolate the noise from the Linha Vermelha (Red Line) rail network. Valdean explained that only two communities were close to the Red Line, Parque União (10 metres) and Pinheiro (20 metres); the others were almost a kilometre away from the railway track. Valdean also questioned whether walls would protect the people who passed by the Red Line, and the fate of those ones who lived inside the walls and had to deal with five different drug gangs and police brutality. Through street parades and different forms of communication, favela residents have strived to change mainstream ideas about the places where they live and themselves in order to transform policy-making in Rio’s low income suburbs.

**Feeling offended**

The expression ‘feeling offended’ comes directly from the words of photojournalists and favela residents. It describes the breakdown between mainstream news workers and favela residents. Community photographers very often mentioned that they felt offended when mainstream (photo)journalists went into their communities wearing bullet proof vests or accompanied by the police. On the other hand, mainstream photojournalists also declared that they should feel offended, because they became targets of drug dealers when they were the only ones who were exposing the armed confrontations in favelas. Nevertheless, the expression ‘feeling offended’ brings to light important issues which underline discussion between community and mainstream photographers.

From community photographers’ perspectives, it emerges as a claim to be heard and recognised as citizens who held equal opportunities and human rights, including the right to life. During the interview, Itan (2011) explained that during the police intervention in Complexo do Alemão, every mainstream (photo)journalist was wearing a bullet proof vest and safety cap. In contrast, he covered the conflict located inside the favela wearing shorts, t-shirt, and thongs/flip-flops. Suddenly, he asked himself: ‘What’s the difference between their lives and my own?’ (Itan 2011). Favela residents live between different sorts of violence and disputes. In their everyday lives, they have to learn how to cope with drug gangs, police
corruption and brutality, and the obliviousness of the state and Rio’s society. Within this context, ‘feeling offended’ emerges as a cry for residents to be viewed with a humane perspective, rather than in association with criminality, violence, and shortage. Community photographers have strived to establish a positive view about favelas and themselves, because they argue that they also have a right to be portrayed in a context of dignity.

In contrast, mainstream photojournalists express the view that their role and importance are misunderstood by favela communities even though they often mention that they are very pleased by their job. Photojournalists state that their role is of primary importance for the defence of human rights in the favelas by helping to prevent, for instance, police abuses and violations. By documenting violent confrontations, photojournalists promote discussion between society and the authorities about certain issues. From their perspectives, their pictures have influenced policy-making and added to the documented history of Rio de Janeiro.

**Disturbing the favela system**

The phrase ‘disturbing the favela system’ was coined by the mainstream photojournalist, Eduardo Naddar (2010), in his attempts at explaining relations between mainstream media, police, and favela communities. Disturbing the favela system means, first, the disturbance caused by police interventions in favelas to fight against drug gangs and/or trying to prevent things getting worse, when drug dealers fight with each other to gain control over favela territories. It disturbs because it breaks the ‘agreement’: fragile deals between police and drug gangs to live ‘in peace’, and causes distress in the lives of favela residents who face a state of war during police interventions. On the other hand, as (photo)journalists very often accompany the police to document violent episodes, they are associated with the police by favela residents, who may not discriminate the difference between the role of the police and that of the press.

Community photographers very often speak of the favela as if it was a family. Within this context, when drug dealers are from the community they are also part of it. However, the favela does not accept people who do not originate from it, i.e., *nordestinos* (persons from northeast Brazil) and/or persons who moved into the favela, including those ones who moved in during their childhood. They are rejected sometimes, and drug gangs’ rules are very often
stricter towards them. Hora (2010) says that mainstream (photo)journalists who enter into the favela are outsiders there, so the community does not accept them.

As community photographers live in favelas they have emotional ties with residents. Itan (2011) mentioned that a few of the friends who grew up with him in Complexo do Alemão later became drug dealers. In order to explain this relationship, Itan said that there is friendship and engagement. The friendship remains, but each of them has their own walk of life. Hora (2010) shares the same view with Itan by saying “the boy who is dealing, he is a son of a friend of yours or he is your friend. It is a thing which comes from generations, so the favela doesn’t accept anyone who wasn’t born there”.

This strong connection with residents differentiates and shapes the work practices of community and mainstream photographers. With the exception of Itan (2011) and Bira (Planel 2008), who said that they never had to ask permission from drug dealers to work as photographers in their communities, all community photographers agreed that the first thing before undertaking a project in favelas ruled by drug gangs is to go to the head of the drug trading point (*dono da boca de fumo*) and ask his approval for their endeavours. Once it is done, they have ‘freedom’ to work. Within this context, it is easy to understand why community photographers neither photograph nor denounce drug dealers.

In contrast, mainstream photojournalists present the opposite argument. Naddar (2010) explained the importance of documenting wrongdoings and criminal activities in favelas. One of the roles of the mainstream media is to call the society and authorities to discuss and tackle certain issues. Comparing his work practices with those of community photographers, Naddar said:

> My job is not to exploit the suffering from poverty in the world…. I don’t think along the lines that I’ll take this picture because I’ll win a prize by using this person. But, I think, I’ll take this picture because it will help people who are being jeopardised by this individual. For instance, a community photographer maybe he didn’t take a picture of a drug dealer even though he would have an opportunity to. However, my job is to photograph, to show the criminal with his rifle, to show the criminal bullet shooting, why? Because I’m saying to the society ‘Hey, society, take a look at what is going on here inside this favela’. Something must be done. This is not right. If I didn’t take that shot, maybe, things would never change. Why? Because no one knows that happened. If that was not documented that would not exist (Naddar 2010).

Domingos Peixoto (2010) says that when he once asked community photographers what they did when the police went into favelas during crossfire, they responded that they
used to do nothing. Peixoto was impressed to see that community photographers did not cover armed confrontations. The mainstream (photo)journalists were the only ones who had done the job of denouncing drug trafficking in favelas.

Rio de Janeiro has faced a transition process since the first UPP (Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora - Pacifying Police Unit) was established in the Santa Marta favela in 2008. This initiative aimed to re-establish control over Rio’s low income suburbs, strengthen the dialogue with favela residents, and increase community participation. It has changed favelas’ identity and their residents’ ways of life, and marked the return of mainstream (photo)journalists into pacified favelas. In addition, the encounter between community and mainstream photographers who have covered the same suburbs but from a different perspective also occurred in 2008. It is this process which the last category, ‘opening the doors’, is about.

Opening the doors – Unity in diversity

The premiere broadcast of Planel’s documentary Abaixando a máquina (Lowering the camera) at Viva Rio NGO in April 2008 marked the encounter between community and mainstream photographers. At that event, photographers built strong partnerships that resulted in the creation of meetings, forums, jobs and social parties. For the first time, community photographers could discuss the traditional media coverage on favelas and their residents with mainstream photojournalists. A remarkable outcome of this encounter was the production of Planel’s (2010a) last documentary Vivendo um Outro Olhar (Living on the other side), a film which involved two years of discussions with community photographers and residents from more than five different favelas.

Reflections

The data analysis indicated that the relationship and dialogue between community and mainstream photographers are a work in progress. Planel’s films marked a novel way that those photographers see and deal with each other; however, the data suggested that the openness is still embedded in resistance. Photographers are ‘together and mixed up’, but they want each other to know that their roles and identities are diverse. In enabling photographers to see their different perspectives and work practices, it simultaneously reinforces those
differences while also helping them recognise their commonalities. On the other hand, the establishment of UPPs across Rio’s favelas has also enabled the return of news workers. Mainstream photojournalists are pleased with UPPs, because they have had access to pacified favelas. Severino Silva, Ernesto Carriço, Wilton Júnior, and Eduardo Naddar shared the view that there is freedom to do journalism and to cover the everyday life of favela communities. In addition, the people from those communities are not as worried about talking to mainstream news workers as they used to be. Photojournalists share the same feeling that favela residents are more pleased with the mainstream media.

It is too early to tell whether UPPs will soften Rio de Janeiro’s borders, and/or whether walls will consolidate them. On the other hand, the relationship between community and mainstream media who cover the everyday life of favela communities will document and record their attempts to break down boundaries and heal this fractured city. Time is needed to tell whether those initiatives can be harnessed for the purposes of giving voice to favela communities and creating a less divided city.
References


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