

The Name of Favelas: Contradictions of the Urban Toponymy in Rio de Janeiro

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1. Introduction

«To be a place is to be located (or at least localizable), named, known»
(Maskit, 1998, p. 266)

In this paper we aim to explore the power of naming. Quoting Pinchevski and Torgovnik, Vuolteenaho and Berg (Vuolteenaho, Berg, 2009, p. 1) understand place naming as «a political practice *par excellence* of power over space». We seek to present a critical analysis of place naming. In order to do so, we comparatively identify the naming of housing places where the poor population predominates – such as slums [*favelas*, in portuguese] – and residential places where rich social groups are concentrated. Then, we focus in the pivotal concepts of place and naming to clarify a political geography of the city through the critical toponymies.

The text is structured in three parts. In the first part, we will discuss about the significance of critical toponymies. In the second, we briefly present the geohistorical context of socio-spatial in Rio de Janeiro and systematize different toponymies in the city referring to favelas and luxurious residential places, to then analyze the mismatch between the meaning of the names of favelas in the past and in the historical present. Finally, we present a last part – as a conclusion – dedicated to the criticism of the persistent territorial injustices in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and a perspective of overcoming the constraints analyzed.

2. Critical toponymy and its relevance

We defend the premise that there is some ideological control behind toponymies and that this type of control aims often to legitimize social relations of oppression, especially those of domination of people according to the places where they live. «Place names have a semantic depth that extends beyond the

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concern with simple reference to location or to a single image» (Entriikin *apud* Myers, 2009, p.86). Then «the symbolic role of place names as expressions of ideological values» matters (Cohen, Kliot, 1992, p. 653). So, an emancipatory perspective insinuates itself in the studies of critical toponymies. It's like we're deconstructing some complicities in power struggles over toponymies from different angles of interpretation, but which intersect. It's important to note that spatially designating word class, such as common names that classify entities to a culturally known category – badland, alley, boulevard, slum, favela, bidonville – toponyms pinpoint a specific strategy to raise or lower the relevance of the natural and/or social content of that geographic place. «As signifiers of place, place names can involve powerful emotions within individuals and groups, and they thus 'conform to the most classic definitions of symbolism'» (Berg, Kearns, 2009, p. 25).

Vuolteenaho and Berg understand that naming a place is always a socially embedded act in intricate cultural interrelations; then, they touch the question of «why toponymies often appear to people as ideologically innocent rather than power-charged semiotic dynamos for making meaning about places» (Vuolteenaho, Berg, 2009, p. 7). It's crucial to decipher the ideological messages of dominant toponymies. According to Klass Willem (Zelinski, 2002: 243), «names are complex signs with specific linguistic, pragmatic, logical, philosophical, semiotic, historical, psychological, social and legal properties, and therefore represent a vast field of interdisciplinary study». We aim to discuss some issues revolving around place names of *favelas* as foci of conflicting meaning explored across an historical and geographical context.

In essence, even if frequently presented in depoliticized guise in hegemonic discourses, the mapping of toponyms has formed an ancillary form of knowledge-production in the service a wider scientific-geopolitical project of knowing the world as accurately as possible as part of the process of controlling its spaces. [Vuolteenaho, Berg, 2009, p. 4]

The critical toponymy is interested in the role that naming in the construction of places. We try to clarify the contradiction between the urban place naming as a normalizing strategy and it as a contested ideological realm. Concerned with the meaning of the proper names of places, Michel de Certeau recognizes a «strange toponymy, displaced from places, hovering over the city like a nebulous geography of 'meanings' waiting for something» (Certeau, 1999, p. 185). Then a scientific-geopolitical project of deciphering space can be brought into the political geography of the city, requalifying the own project of a city that is being built historically. Therefore, a critical toponymy study is crucial for understanding what type of city project we currently have in Rio de Janeiro. We are inspired by the methodology outlined by Mello (1991) and Fernandes (1995) in their pioneering studies on the relationship between artistic sensibility of music composers and the production of scientific knowledge in Brazil.

3. *Inequal Rio de Janeiro's social geography: favela's names: past and present*

Our central question is to inquire the inherent contradictions in the naming of Rio's favelas from the pioneer formations to the current days. To answer this question, we set the following objectives: 1. to unveil the value judgments that depreciate the favelas through their own names, and 2. to analyze the emptying of the meaning of the names of some favelas as a result of the dynamics of structural violence experienced in the carioca metropolis.

Rio de Janeiro is clearly divided into sectors with better basic infrastructure and transport, as well as the majority of white population living in these sectors with a higher average income. This is the case of *Zona Sul* (South Zone). The South Zone is where the buildings are more sophisticated and the neighborhoods are closer to or facing the sea, such as the famous neighborhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema. In the city, there are also sectors that present a concentration of black population that receive lower wages and that do not enjoy adequate basic infrastructure, such as water, electricity and sewage installations. It's the case of *Zona Oeste* (West Zone). In these sectors, the neighborhoods are cut by the railway lines, present low-income housing and are far from the beach leisure areas, in addition to not having cultural facilities, such as theaters, museums, cinemas or entertainment venues. But there is, however, a socio-spatial aspect that is historically present in all sectors of the city: the *favela* (slum). Currently, in Rio de Janeiro, there are more than 760 slums.

The names of the *favelas* – mostly made up of very aggressive, degrading and oppressive words, such as repulsive animals, tragic events, cursed characters etc. – contrast with the names of luxury residential building. A brief critical analysis of this contrasting toponymy is enough to reveal the geographic ideology that informs it. But, it's not just that. In addition to this evidence, the names of *favelas* seek to express attributes that stigmatize these places. Thus, stigmas such as dirt, ugliness, violence and dangerousness are often directed at *favela* spaces. The value judgments that depreciate the favelas it is also a mark of its naming almost always approaching the favelas with inferiority, attributing names to them that translate the worst that characterizes social life in the city. Consequently, the residents of these spaces – called *favelados* – are equally stigmatized. This standpoint clarify our first objective: to unveil the value judgments that depreciate the favelas through their own names.

We selected favela names based on the methodology suggested by Mello (1991) and Fernandes (1995) whereby composers choose those place names in their songs using artistic sensitivity to achieve a social critique. Seeking to ensure representativeness, the set of favela names we selected qualitatively expresses the discriminatory toponymy verified in Rio de Janeiro. First of all, let's see some names of favelas in Rio de Janeiro freely translated into English:

Hard Pollenta / Dry Tree / String /Red Clay / Black Clay /Seated Dog / Skunk / Rat's Mouth / Misery Village /Hot Hole / Vulture's Path /Tick / Five Mouths / Jaguar's Burrow / Scyte / Whoever To Do It / Lizard / Bumblebee / Dirty Foot / Kerosene / Frog Rock / Rat / Whitche's Alley / Piping.

Now, just as examples of names of buildings and luxury housing projects, we mention the following names:

Riviera del Fiori / Riserva Uno / Ilha Pura [Pure Island] / Península / Golden Green / Cidade Jardim / Mirage / Marbella / Ocean Front / Vila Firenze / Queen Elisabeth / Queen Mary / Tiffany / Ceramus / Da Vinci / Bethoven / Stradivarius / Montese / Chopin / Mozart / Vivaldi / Golden Bay.

The structural conditions of inequality that we present to us are clearly observed in the physiognomy of the favelas. Therefore, it is imperative to present some favelas seen from afar and seen from the inside, that is, at different scales of observation, as shown below in the image catalog that we have selected (fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). However, it is very important to realize that favela residents struggle daily to maintain their dignity as human persons and that the stigmas addressed to them correspond to an ideological reading of the space and the social content that gives it urban life.



Fig. 1 – *Favela Pavãozinho*, Copacabana.

Source: Ivaldo Lima, 2022.

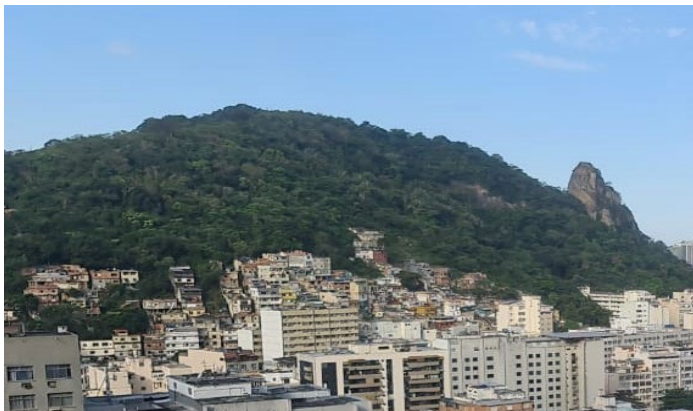


Fig. 2 – *Favela Tabajaras*, Copacabana.

Source: Ivaldo Lima, 2022.



Fig. 3-4 – *Favela Tabajaras*, Copacabana.
Source: Ivaldo Lima, 2022.



Fig. 5 – *Favela Jacarezinho*, Maria da Graça.
Source: Ivaldo Lima, 2022.

The images alone say a lot about the favelas. But what do their names say? We will take as a reference for our critical analysis of the topography of the favelas, the lyrics of a song written by Paulo César Pinheiro. The song: *Nomes de Favela* [Favela Names]. In this song, the composer makes a very curated reading of the names of the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro in order to show how the socio-spatial reality of these places no longer corresponds to what their names designate. There is a double interpretation possible from this song: 1. the mismatch between name and place; and 2. the worsening of the lives of the people who live there. We use this source of research because we understand that it has a high critical potential for reading the socio-spatial reality of the city through the artist's poetic lens. Thus, we try to articulate the artist's interpretative sensitivity to the analytical critique of the political geography of the city. Here we find an analytical critique to the extent that the composer disagrees with the socio-spatial conditions under which favela residents live, directing his attention, above all, to the violence that occurs in these parts of the city. This *démarche* follows our second objective: to analyze the emptying of the meaning of the names of some favelas as a result of the dynamics of structural violence experienced in the carioca metropolis

FAVELA NAMES [*Nomes de Favela*]

The rooster no longer crows in *Cantagalo* [*Where the rooster crows*]
 The water (already) no longer runs in *Cachoeirinha* [*Waterfall hill*]
 Boys no longer catch mango in *Mangueira* [*Mango Tree hill*]
 And now what a big city *Rocinha* [*Countryside hill*] is!
 No one swears love in the *Juramento* [*Swear hill*] anymore
 No one leaves *Morro do Adeus* [*Farewell hill*]
 Pleasure ended up there in *Morro dos Prazeres* [*Pleasure hill*]
 And life is hell in the *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*]
 I'm not from the time of guns, that's why I still prefer to hear a samba
 verse than to hear a gunshot
 By the poetry of favela names, life there was once more beautiful It used
 to be much better to live in, but today this same poetry asks for help
 Or there in the favela life changes or all the names will change

Expressing the mismatch between the names and the current realities of the favelas, the verses of the song point out relevant socio-spatial issues. For example, the verse «The water (already) no longer runs in *Cachoeirinha* [*Waterfall hill*]» denounces the local ecological crisis. The verse «Boys no longer catch mango in *Mangueira* [*Mango Tree hill*]» goes in the same direction, denouncing the destruction of fruit trees to the detriment of the mass of houses built without free space or leisure between them. In «Pleasure ended up there in *Morro dos Prazeres* [*Pleasure hill*]» there is a critique of a violent daily life in which pleasure is absent; the same we can read in «And life is hell in the *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*]». Finally, the verses «I'm not from the time of guns, that's why I still prefer to hear a samba verse than to hear a gunshot» and «Or there in the favela life changes or all the names will change» we find the hope that political attitudes will change the reality of favelas for the better.

4. *Perspective: reinforcing territorial injustices?*

Based on what we have explained so far, it is possible to state that an emptying of the meaning of the names of some *favelas*. The loss of meaning of the names of several favelas due to the urban violence that historically reshapes the political and social geographies of Rio de Janeiro. This symbolic emptying is as if residents are losing sight of their own history. Then, this loss of meaning is equivalent to an emptying of the names of the favelas that no longer translate the environmental structures nor the social contents found there. As we notice «place names can involve powerful emotions within individuals and groups» (Berg, Kearns, 2009, p. 25), including the feeling of loss or emptying. Our argument goes in the direction that critical analysis of the toponymy of Rio's *favelas* becomes imperative, aiming at unraveling the contradictions that inform the circumstances under which the residents of these places undergo daily, as well as pointing out subsidies for the formulation of inclusive public policies that subvert the perverse course driven by such contradictions.

To complete, we assume that this is a form of knowledge-production in the service of a wider geopolitical project of knowing the urban places, namely the *favelas*. More than this, both the names of favelas and the geo-historical contradictions that are articulated to them express the persistence of territorial injustices in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In our point of view, territorial justice «must be conceived as an effective idea capable of expanding the horizons of social rights, by mobilizing people and contexts to build civic spaces» (Lima, 2014, p. 79). Therefore, renewed urban policies that take critical toponymy seriously must be conceived and applied.

The critical toponymy analysis we propose here is one that i) recognizes the inappropriateness of favela names, compared to the names of luxury residential condominiums in the same city; ii) requires decision-making by the authorities through public policies that combat the more intense structural violence present in the favelas; iii) reduces territorial injustice through the elimination of oppressive spaces reinforced by a discriminatory toponymy that corresponds to the stigmatization of the residents of the favelas thus named. A territorial reality based on the perspective of a just city, on joint decision-making between the State and civil society: this is the most general proposal we present.

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The Name of Favelas: Contradictions of the Urban Toponymy in Rio de Janeiro

Currently, in Rio de Janeiro, there are more than 760 slums. In this work, as a central question, the inherent contradictions in the naming of these favelas are approached, from the pioneer formations to the current days. Our general objective is to explain such contradictions and the specific objectives are: to unveil the value judgments that depreciate the favelas through their own names and to analyze the emptying of the meaning of some of these names as a result of the dynamics of structural violence experienced in the carioca metropolis.

Il nome delle Favelas: Contraddizioni nella toponomastica urbana a Rio de Janeiro

Attualmente, a Rio de Janeiro, ci sono più di 760 baraccopoli. In questo lavoro, come questione centrale, vengono affrontate le contraddizioni insite nella denominazione di queste favelas dalle origini ai giorni nostri. Il nostro obiettivo generale è spiegare tali contraddizioni; come obiettivi specifici cercheremo invece di svelare i giudizi di valore che deprezzano le favelas attraverso i loro stessi nomi e di analizzare lo svuotamento di significato di alcuni di questi come risultato delle dinamiche di violenza strutturale presenti nella metropoli carioca.

Le nom des Favelas : Contradictions de la toponymie urbaine à Rio de Janeiro

Il existe actuellement plus de 760 bidonvilles à Rio de Janeiro. Dans cet ouvrage, comme question centrale, sont abordées les contradictions inhérentes à la dénomination des favelas de Rio de Janeiro, des formations pionnières à nos jours. Notre objectif général est d'expliquer ces contradictions et les objectifs spécifiques sont : de révéler les jugements de valeur qui déprécient les favelas par leurs noms mêmes et d'analyser la vidange de sens des noms de certaines favelas du fait de la dynamique de violence structurelle expérimenté dans la métropole carioca.