

LIVES IN FAVELAS MATTER

Raull Santiago

- *Reducing inequality in Brazil* •
by listening and giving value to favelas

ABSTRACT

This text presents an overview of human rights activism that uses independent media as a tool to dispute narratives and build solutions in places marked by inequality and violent racial exploitation, such as the favelas in Rio de Janeiro. It focuses on the Complexo do Alemão, the place from where Raull Santiago, a member of Coletivo Papo Reto (the Straight Talk Collective), writes.

KEYWORDS

Coletivo Papo Reto | Favelas | Rio de Janeiro | Independent media | Open media | Media activism | Community media | Media in the periphery

It was very complicated to start this text. I tried writing at different times and in different places. I wrote on the notepad on my cell phone, using voice typing, and on the computer. I made several attempts, but my time is short. So, this text was the combination of all of that.

My name is Raul Santiago. I am 28 years old and I live in the Complexo do Alemão, a group of *favelas* located in the north zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. This is the place I am going to talk about: it is where I was raised and where I have lived until now. I will give an analysis of the current situation in Brazil based on our experiences in the Complexo do Alemão.

Favelas are humble places, full of rich experiences in community life. Of all the different *favelas* and neighbourhoods in the outskirts of cities in Brazil, Complexo do Alemão is where I belong. Although it is an incredible place, this well-known *favela* has been exploited in recent years in the so-called “war on drugs”. With the fight against drug trafficking as an excuse, the government uses most of its military power against the population and many people go to prison or die in the process. Mainly the poor, black people of this country.

So, the war on drugs is a modern tool for racial control and perpetuating social inequality. It is cruel and unequally waged in the poorest places in the country – the *favelas* and the peripheries in Brazil. In this context, the police is the only public policy that is here to stay. It is a scene where there is a lot of police violence and grave rights violations occur. Yet, some politicians and the mainstream media insist on saying that the *favelas* are *the* problem in Brazilian society. This big farce serves as the basis for building a negative image of us.

We created, together with nine friends, *Coletivo Papo Reto* (the Straight Talk Collective) to try to stop the violence and racial inequality that we experience daily and that can be clearly seen in the narratives about us. Our collective uses independent media to denounce the violence, to dispute narratives based on our reality and propose ways to guarantee rights and strengthen the *favela* as a place of power, using the idea of “by us, for us”.

Coletivo Papo Reto has two basic lines of action:

1 • Media for resistance: using various technologies to denounce rights violations committed by the state, the goal is to mobilise networks and send reports, together with other public institutions and civil society organisations, to try to reduce the violence we face every day.

2 • Affirmative advertising: we use this to develop the idea of “by us, for us”, while seeking to strengthen the *favela* and its residents and to challenge the dominant media’s narrative that insists on criminalising us by disseminating images that portray us as the problem. We use the media to show the strength that exist in the *favela*. Through street actions and online programmes, we seek to give a different take on our reality.

Using technologies as tools to denounce human rights violations and racial violence, we have worked in partnership with the US-based organisation Witness to learn about online safety and planning collective security. We are also experimenting with and helping to develop applications and technologies that activists can use – such as, for example, audio-visual coverage during a conflict – to capture footage that can be used as evidence in court.

A place in dispute

Complexo do Alemão has often been presented as the symbol of power of the Brazilian mafia, but it has never had the opportunity to be shown in a positive light and as a place full of powerful and incredible people. Independent media is filling this gap and exposing mainstream media for being largely responsible for constructing the negative image of the reality in *favelas*.

A new model of public security, inspired by the experience in Comuna 13 in Medellín, Colombia, where there is a 24-hour police presence in the favela, was adopted in the Complexo do Alemão in 2010. A cable car – a mass transit system that transports people on cars run on cables – was also built.

In Brazil, however, a permanent police presence is a real problem, as it increases the number of confrontations, deaths and violations that people suffer from. The cable car built in the Complexo do Alemão in 2011, which cost millions of Brazilian reals of public funds, was shut down over a year ago. It became just another symbol of corruption and illustrates the scale of the robbery committed by Rio de Janeiro's governor, Sérgio Cabral, who is currently in jail for corruption.¹

Furthermore, in 2007, during the Pan American Games, over a dozen people were assassinated in the Complexo do Alemão. Unfortunately, this was not the first time that large events in Brazil led to suffering and rights violations for the people living in the favelas and the periphery. It was no different during the World Cup or the Olympics. Evictions and serious violations marked these events.²

Brazil's contradictions

Brazil is an incredible country with incredible people. But there is also a lot of inequality here. Even though more than 54 per cent of the population identifies itself as black, black people are still highly underrepresented in spheres of influence and decision-making. What is more, they are the ones who are assassinated and jailed the most. Currently, Brazil has the third largest prison population in the world, with 698,618 individuals held in jail in 2016. It came in only behind the United States (2,145,100) and China (1,649,804), and ahead of Russia (646,085), according to Infopen, the National Prison Information System.³

The prison system has failed and is incapable of improving. There are people in jail who are still awaiting trial. In many prisons, for example, there is a lack of water and food and violence prevails. Unlike the countries that lead the list with the highest number of people deprived of liberty and are discussing ways to reduce their prison population, in Brazil, the prison population is on the rise.

In addition to the high number of arrests, racial genocide is happening in the country. In 2016, over 60,000 people were murdered and the majority of them were black, according to the *Atlas da Violência 2017* (2017 Atlas of Violence) report launched by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) and the *Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública* (Brazilian Forum on Public Safety). It also indicated that 71 out of every 100 people assassinated in Brazil are black.

Between January and August 2017 alone, 712 people were killed by the police, according to the *Instituto de Segurança Pública* (ISP, Institute for Public Safety). The majority of the killings were justified by the war on drugs. Therefore, as a tool for maintaining racism and inequality in the country, the war on drugs continues to incarcerate and execute strong, intelligent, enterprising youth.

Because lives in favelas matter and in order to guarantee our survival and show that favelas are powerful and the solution, *Coletivo Papo Reto* continues to denounce abuses, strengthen the people and the place, and try to connect with youth in the peripheries of Brazil, Latin America and around the world.

Progress in the midst of chaos

On 18 February 2015, the way in which *Coletivo Papo Reto* turns communications into a tool for disputing narratives and promoting concrete actions was the subject of a feature article in *The New York Times* magazine.⁴ The report highlighted the potential of independent media – that is, cell phones and internet in the hands of youth from the periphery. We occupied the pages of one of the biggest channels of mainstream media on the planet to talk about a new way of communicating, contesting the imagery on our reality and, by doing so, challenging the negative coverage of us by the mainstream media in the country.

Also in 2015, *Al Jazeera* television made a documentary on the work of *Coletivo Papo Reto* in partnership with Witness, called “A Bigger Brother”.⁵

In 2017, *Coletivo Papo Reto* participated in collective action to defend residents from the Complexo do Alemão who had suffered from the arbitrary acts of agents of the state: Rio de Janeiro’s military police. In the first few months of the year, police officers invaded some houses and evicted the people who lived there in order to turn their homes into a kind of illegal military base. The people whose homes were invaded went to *Coletivo Papo Reto*

for help. Together with other civil society organisations and public authorities, we quickly traced a plan of action to try to end this abuse. Months were spent trying to resolve the situation. Despite the serious threats we received, we finally managed to win by using audio recordings, photographs and videos as proof. We were able to force the police officers to vacate the homes and the police major to leave the *favela*.⁶

In addition to Coletivo Papo Reto, I am currently participating in a national project called *#MOVIMENTOS: Drogas, Juventude e Favelas* (*#MOVIMENTS: Drugs, Youth and Favelas*), in which youth from the *favelas* and peripheries of the country discuss new drug policies that take into account the issues of racial violence, social inequalities and a war that is only waged among the poor. We want to talk to society about drugs while drawing on diverse knowledge and focussing on protecting rights, reducing harm and putting an end to the racist war.

As a result of this work and with the goal of expanding the network of resistance in the periphery, I have participated in different national and international conferences and met other movements fighting against racism and the violent impacts of the “war on drugs”. In 2017 alone, I have gone a few times to the United States, where I met the US black movement and talked with groups such as Black Lives Matter, among others. I also travelled to Colombia and the Dominican Republic and around Brazil to talk about human rights and racism, and especially to teach and learn how to use independent media and new technologies to denounce human rights violations. This experience has been important for strengthening our networking and developing partnerships with other groups and movements in the same line of resistance. In the midst of all this running around, I continue to use rap and poetry as a form of expression of this struggle.

Here is a poem that is part of the work I develop with words.

FAVELA,

an agglomerate of resistance and power.

Where the scene for survival makes us want more,

LIFE

That around here is full of struggles, but together,

A strong energy that makes us say at the end of each phrase,

WE'RE UNITED,

And we really are, there is no routine,

Surviving between racism and inequality is what brings us closer,

And the LOVE for every backstreet and alley,

That keeps the heart called *favela* pumping,

or for the smile of every child who lives there.

We are power and also the solution,
For the problems, there is only one way out.
We have to keep, at all cost,
The *Favela* and the Periphery ALIVE.

NOTES

1 • “Cabral é Condenado no Rio a 45 Anos e Dois Meses de Prisão por Três Crimes,” UOL, September 20, 2017, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2017/09/20/cabral-e-condenado-no-rio-a-45-anos-e-dois-meses-de-prisao-por-tres-crimes.htm>.

2 • “Dez Anos Depois da Chacina do Pan, Moradores do Complexo do Alemão Vivem sob Violência Cotidiana da Polícia,” Amnesty International, June 27, 2017, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://anistia.org.br/noticias/dez-anos-depois-da-chacina-pan-moradores-complexo-alemao-vivem-sob-violencia-cotidiana-da-policia/>.

3 • “Há 726.712 Pessoas Presas no Brasil,” Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, December 8, 2017, accessed December 13, 2017, [http://www.justica.gov](http://www.justica.gov.br/noticias/ha-726-712-pessoas-presas-no-brasil).

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4 • Matthew Shaer, “The Media Doesn’t Care What Happens Here.” The New York Times, February 18, 2015, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/magazine/the-media-doesnt-care-what-happens-here.html>.

5 • “A Bigger Brother,” Al Jazeera, December 16, 2015, accessed December 13, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/rebelgeeks/2015/12/bigger-brother-151216102151145.html>.

6 • Christiano Pinho, “Defensoria Pública Exige Desocupação do Complexo do Alemão.” Band News, April 24, 2017, accessed December 13, 2017, <http://bandnewsfmrio.band.uol.com.br/editorias-detalhes/defensoria-publica-exige-desocupacao-do-compl>.



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Received in October 2017.

Original in Portuguese. Translated by Karen Lang.



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