

**The Fetish and the Favela: Notes on Tourism and the Commodification  
of Place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**

**Austin Zeiderman  
Cultural and Social Anthropology, Stanford University**

**DRAFT: 27 March 2006  
The Right to the City and the Politics of Space (April 14-15, 2006)**

The tour starts at my hotel. At 9 a.m. sharp, the guide (who I'll call Fernando) meets me in the lobby and escorts me to an air-conditioned, white minivan. I am introduced, in English, to the driver, though he speaks only Portuguese. Fernando takes his place in the front passenger seat, from where he controls the ambient climate, the door locks, the windows, and the sound system that broadcasts his voice, through a microphone, to speakers located about the van. Since I am the first to be picked up, the driver makes his way through the world-famous, beachfront neighborhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema to the hotels of the rest of our group. A young German businessman temporarily stationed at the DaimlerChrysler office in São Paulo, a middle-aged French-Canadian couple on Brazilian holiday, a Scottish backpacker traveling throughout South America, and an American couple from California with digital video cameras in hand join a not-quite-yet Stanford anthropology student, wandering around the cities of Brazil after attending a conference on Latin American urbanization and the environment. Once the seven of us are comfortably seated in the van, the guided tour can begin.

Fernando tells us that, today, our tour will include visits to two of Rio de Janeiro's almost 600 *favelas*—Vila Canoas, a small, relatively recent settlement occupying an island of once-forested state-owned land, and Rocinha, known to many as the largest slum in all of South America with an estimated 200,000 residents living on steeply-pitched hillsides less than a mile from the beach. Fernando repeats claims made by his company's brochure and website, which

assure us that the tour will be an “illuminating experience,” certain to give “an insider point of view of Brazil” by introducing us “to another Rio, within Rio city: the favela.”<sup>1</sup> Fernando promises that the tour, first and foremost, will change the stereotypical opinion we hold of favelas by revealing to us their true nature. Despite what we have heard, read, or seen, he continues, favelas are not areas plagued by violence and poverty. They are economically-vibrant settlements of industrious and entrepreneurial people that have been left, by a negligent municipal government, to fend for themselves. The favelas, we are told, are also friendly and safe places. They are, he says, counter-intuitively the safest parts of Rio—orderly sanctuaries standing apart from the dangerous and chaotic “official” city. There are almost no robberies, we are told, since the drug dealers, for whom the favela is refuge, would never take the risk for such a petty reward. Dealers even discourage crime by ordinary residents to avoid drawing the attention of law enforcement to the favela. Moments later, the driver takes a sharp turn off the main boulevard and up the steep, winding paths that lead to Vila Canoas. The windows roll up, the doors lock, and the rules of conduct are laid down—no photographs of people, no wandering away from the group, and, if anyone approaches you with drugs, ignore them. But wait a minute, I think: which sort of “favela” is this that am I supposed to be experiencing?

In this paper, I comment on a peculiar, yet increasingly popular, form of urban tourism in Brazil: the favela tour of Rio de Janeiro. By interpreting the favela tour as a site in which images of Rio de Janeiro are made for export, I argue that processes by which localities are produced for global circulation and consumption are revealed. With international travelers as clients, the tour aims at no less than a transformation of the figure of Rio de Janeiro in the global imagination. Drawing on my brief experience as a favela tourist, I suggest that attempts to resignify an emblematic image of Rio de Janeiro (the favela) are characterized by a persistent

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.favelatour.com.br>.

“schizophrenia.”<sup>2</sup> The tour’s paradoxical representations—favelas are simultaneously and paradigmatically safe and dangerous—continue to subvert its own desire to prescribe and fix meanings associated with the favela. I also ponder whether, in seeking to determine how the world views the city, the tour reflects the symptomatic ambivalence that often marks culturally-dominant views of marginalized urban spaces.

But first, a few words about what sort of paper this is. I have to ask to be excused for the lack of thick description and ethnographic data, either within the paper or implicitly backing it up. My argument is based on one tour company and one tour guide on one day. This does not claim to be an ethnographic paper, in any sense. I lack extensive experience in Brazil and have spent no time studying the city, neighborhood, or tour agency I will discuss. One could argue, I suppose, that tours like these involve a performativity that is regularized, rehearsed, and practiced and that it would, therefore, be unusual if the experience I had were at all unique. Or that my experience—as a foreign tourist, anonymously attending one tour, without contextual knowledge—is typical of tour participants. In a way, this *is* a useful perspective. However, long-term ethnographic research would, I am sure, uncover infinitely more nuanced (and perhaps radically different) interpretations than the ones I offer today. What I specifically have in mind is the significance of race, which is an obvious and regrettable gap in my analysis.

---

<sup>2</sup> With the term “schizophrenia,” and its adjectival form “schizophrenic,” I intentionally invoke two somewhat different connotations held by these concepts. In ordinary, everyday usage, “schizophrenia” (or, more commonly the modifier “schizophrenic”) refers to “mutually contradictory or inconsistent elements,” as the OED puts it. This schizophrenia I will be talking about during the first half of this paper. The other use of “schizophrenia,” however, specifically refers to a mental disorder that does not necessarily associate with contradictions, but rather delusions, hallucinations, and a general breakdown in the cognitive link between thoughts, actions, and so on. My analysis draws on both senses of the concept, shifting to the more technical and psychoanalytic one in the second half of the paper. However, I intend to distinguish my usage of “schizophrenia” from its clinical and diagnostic applications. I will discuss this later in the essay when I draw on Jameson’s Lacanian understanding of schizophrenia as a breakdown in the signifying chain, and his application of the category as a descriptive tool outside the realm of psychosis. As such, I use “schizophrenia” in a looser, and perhaps psychoanalytically imprecise, way that does allow somewhat of a blurring of the boundaries between the two ways of understanding the concept. But I neither intend to collapse the distinction between them nor use them interchangeably.

The discourse of the favela tour, while heavily focused on class tensions between “official” Rio and the favelas, is essentially race-blind. By extension, so is my analysis. This is a fact worthy of extended discussion, as the absence of race in the discourse of the tour could be read as a present absence or, in other words, a commentary on the racial silences within Brazilian society. However, given my own lack of knowledge of the history of “race” in Brazilian society and my unfamiliarity with current public and academic debates in Brazil, I am hesitant to address this problem here. The best I can hope for, at the moment, is that the reader will experience the absence of race in my analysis as a reflection of the present absence of race in the discourse of the favela tour. A few questions to consider might be: What is it about race in Brazil, or in the tourists’ imagination of it, that makes the favela tour of Rio de Janeiro attractive in ways that a tour of inner-city Baltimore might never be? How is the popular claim that race is an irrelevant category in Brazilian society implicitly, yet unconvincingly, reinforced by the absence of race in the discourse of the tour? And what of the disjunction between the absence of race in the tour’s narrative and the phenomenological materiality of race in the physical encounters between white, Euro-American tourists and black, Afro-Brazilian favela residents?

I also want to stress that I hope to avoid slipping into the most obvious arguments one could make about favela tours—that they are mere ideological misrepresentations with no grounding in material reality; that they reflect yet one more instance of the Western fascination with the exotic “Other”; that they are middle-class romanticisms of the poor; or, that they reinforce structures of discursive power that deny favela residents the opportunity to “speak” for themselves. What I hope the paper to be, rather than an easy critique, is a preliminary and

speculative theoretical endeavor. I apologize for its general nature, but hope it will allow me to propose some fairly odd ideas for discussions about the *cultural economy of urban space*.<sup>3</sup>

Henri Lefebvre famously coined the concept “production of space” in a 1974 book of the same name, thereby opening up new worlds of possibility for urban theory and practice. After Lefebvre’s book, published in English in 1991, it was hard to argue that space was merely an abstract container filled with social life, or that somehow space and society were separable categories. Space was, itself, a *product* of social relations and labor. The notion that space is never given, but always dependent on both material and ideological projects in order to be brought into being, also stimulated analysis of the historical process by which social formations come together to produce places. In tourism, we see one of the most explicit forms of the cultural economy of space and the commodification of place.<sup>4</sup> The actions taken by cities to lure foreign direct investment and business headquarters, as well as the lengths to which neighborhood homeowners associations go to raise property values, represent examples of the imperative to commodify localities. The favela tours of Rio de Janeiro are no exception, as their explicitly stated aim is to package favelas for a international tourist clientele.

It is worth noting that, in reference to the local production of favelas for global consumption, I am conceptualizing the “commodity,” not as a purely physical object, but as something closer to what Mazzarella, referring to the product of advertising campaigns, calls a “commodity image” (Mazzarella 2003:20, 293 n.24). This corresponds somewhat to what

---

<sup>3</sup> The conceptual nature of this paper should not be heard as a perfunctory attempt to make an example fit existing theory or to illustrate an already accomplished truth. See Butler, Laclau, and Žižek (2000), as cited in Mahmood (2005:26). Following these examples, I aim to round up some useful theoretical tools, assuming that the presuppositions underlying them will need rethinking and reformulation based on the cultural and historical particularities central to ethnographic research.

<sup>4</sup> I distinguish between the “cultural economy of space” and the “commodification of place” to highlight the fact that the former is a component of what Lefebvre calls the “production of space” in general. The latter, on the other hand, is used to signify the specific translocal processes that effectively, though not conclusively, produce a specific locality, such as the favela, for exchange.

Ebron, referring to “Africa” in the global imagination, calls an “object of significance” or a “cultural object” (Ebron 2002:1). That the production of the favela is both a cultural phenomenon and a material one is demonstrated by the efforts made by the tour company to support a community school, Para Ti, in Vila Canoas. There neighborhood children are taught computer skills and the art of making handicrafts out of recycled materials (like plastic bags). Both the computer classes and the handicrafts are displayed for the visiting favela tourist; the former is to be consumed one way, while the latter is to be consumed in another.

The favela tour is a local production, or, better yet, the production of a locality. Yet it is significant that the tour is specifically intended for a global consumer. I will return to this point later when I discuss how sliding scales of meaning—when favelas are treated as representative of the city of Rio and emblematic of the nation of Brazil—manifest themselves in contradictory representations. But I now want to draw attention briefly to the ways in which the tours are simultaneously local and global productions. On the one hand, their discursive claims are quite localized compared to those of human rights, environmentalism, or globalization. On the other, they presuppose and address a global geographic imaginary. Their audience is the international tourist, and the tours depend on globally-circulating images and people for effect. Although we do well to think of global productions, following Anna Tsing (2005), through the situated actions by which universals or “the global” are produced in particular times and places, this is different. As I said, the tour involves the self-conscious production of localities for global consumption. One could stop here and simply conclude that, by engaging the semiotics of urban space, we find that cities (and their constituent parts) are localized signs, open to constant resignification throughout their life in the global marketplace. But can we go further in thinking about the

favela as a commodity (image), by examining the fetishization of place and the ideological work involved in uncoupling its production and its consumption?

In the volume “Thinking Space,” geographer Andy Merrifield shows how, for Lefebvre, the production of space “can be likened to the production of any other sort of merchandise, to any other sort of commodity” (Merrifield 2000:172). Thus, he continues, space can be *fetishized* in much the same way as well (2000:172). Merrifield quotes a passage from Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* in which Lefebvre offers “a spatialized rendering of Marx’s famous analysis on the fetishism of commodities from Volume One of *Capital*” (2000:171). Lefebvre says:

[I]nstead of uncovering the social relationships...that are latent in spaces, instead of concentrating our attention on the production of space and the social relationships inherent to it...we fall into the trap of treating space as space ‘in itself’, as space as such. We come to think in terms of spatiality, and so to fetishize space in a way reminiscent of the old fetishism of commodities, where the trap lay in exchange, and the error was to consider ‘things’ in isolation, as ‘things in themselves’ (1991:90).

In other words, Lefebvre argues that instead of uncovering the social relationships inherent to the production of space (as Marx did for other commodities), we are prone to treat space independently of the material, ideological, and sociohistorical conditions of its production.<sup>5</sup>

Following a Marxian notion of commodity fetishism, one could say that the factors involved in the social process of producing the favela—the ideological work of the tour, its political-economic milieu—are meant to dissolve behind a façade: the tourist’s direct experience of the favela. According to the tour company, favelas “remain a mystery for most people who don’t live there.” The tour offers to reveal their “true” nature to outsiders. But in “demystifying” favelas, the tour ends up mystifying them all over again. It conceals the fact that the conditions of producing the commodified favela and the tour require both sides of the safe/dangerous binary. To attract people to visit favelas with an organized and reputable tour

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, it may not be obvious to the reader that I build on Lefebvre’s notion that capitalism has the tendency to “fetishize space” by examining the specific translocal processes that commodify localities. To engage with the latter *process*, I employ the additional concept of “fetishization of place.”

company, rather than on their own, favelas must be dangerous places, unsafe for unknowing tourists to explore by themselves. The aura of inaccessibility, opacity, and threat hovering above these places makes favela tours desirable and popular to tourists. However, to deliver a positively transfigured image of the favela, the tour must *also* show them to be surprisingly safe. Marketing the tour and commodifying the favela both require the contradiction I am describing. The fetishization of the commodified favela, however, masks the discursive infrastructure that gives rise to such ambivalent representations.

Later on our walk through the narrow passageways and steep hills of Vila Canoas, we are introduced to a favela artist—a disabled painter, waiting patiently for us in a dark, one-room apartment that doubles as his studio-gallery. I remember what Fernando had just told us in the minivan on our way to Vila Canoas. “Don’t to be shy with the favela residents,” he said. “They welcome us here, and they support your visit.” With that in mind, I feel a surge of inspiration to counter my voyeurism (which, by the way, is explicitly disavowed by the tour company). I ask the painter, in English, about a specific work of his art that depicts the colorful social landscape of the favela while it displaces, to the margins of the painting, white police officers accosting and arresting a black youth. However, since I speak almost no Portuguese and the artist no English, we are unable to engage directly. But there is also an unwillingness on the part of the tour guide to facilitate our communication. He does not translate, but offers his own assessment instead. “Very rarely are there acts of violence in the favela,” Fernando responds. “At times, the police have to come to arrest one of the perpetrators,” he says, as if to dull the sharp political edge of the artwork. This same mediation occurred on a few other occasions when tour participants unsuccessfully tried to communicate with favela artisans through the guide-as-translator. Only through cultural-artistic commodities were the favela artists and the tourists able to relate to, or



exchange with, one another. The artists, although directly selling the product of their labor to the consumer, were ironically and simultaneously reified and alienated by the mediating politics of the tour.

We might also say that the fetishism of a commodified place involves the objectification of the favela as a commodity image followed by its personification. During the tour, the favela becomes a thing imbued with human characteristics—moral, entrepreneurial, courageous, resistant, resilient, well-organized, as well as their inverses. In middle- and upper-class imaginaries, the favela is also sometimes endowed with a mythical causal power of its own. Evidenced by fears expressed to me by residents of “official” Rio or elsewhere in Brazil, the favela is an ominous presence, gazing down on the city from above, always capable of engulfing the city at any moment if left unchecked. But, as Ebron notes in her work on the cultural object of “Africa,” commodification of place goes beyond mere objectification and, I would add, personification. It constitutes the place as a site of desire. In this regard, we can see the ambiguity of danger and safety as a powerfully affective tension—a gap between significations, at the heart of the commodity image, that generates attractiveness and value (Mazzarella 2003:19-21, citing Bhaba and Chakrabarty).

At this point, we are getting closer to needing a broader notion of fetishism. Commodity fetishism, in a strict Marxian sense, is limited in its ability to explain the desire to definitively know and represent the favela or why it becomes the site of contradictory and paradoxical values. Marxian commodity fetishism often locks analysis into the limiting categories of true and false, person and thing, material and symbolic, surface and depth, use and exchange, real and imagined. It is not my intent to seek out the original and true favela behind the one that is fetishized and, again, I stress that the favela, for tour companies and international tourists, is a

commodity image. And yet the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism—which uncovers the social relations behind the thing and attends to the personification of the object—must be stretched to deal with the emotional, affective, and psychic dimensions of the relationship between people and cultural objects. It must be able to engage with the ambivalent, contradictory, and paradoxical values involved in commodifying and resignifying the favela.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we now do well to bring in the parallel, and occasionally intersecting, legacy of fetishism in psychoanalysis.

I am inspired by feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Ann McClintock, and Gayle Rubin, all of whom offer critical readings of Freud and Lacan, in which they reject the universalist, naturalizing, and heterosexist tendencies of psychoanalysis. These critiques are extremely productive as well, and I will not attempt to describe their diverse contributions here. But I can say that along with other anthropologists and social theorists, they utilize psychoanalysis by reformulating it for a range of cultural, social, and historical domains extending beyond the realm of the unconscious. Thus, they offer a way to move between the commodity fetishism of Marx and the fetishism of psychoanalysis, which often turns on richly theorized notions of *value*. This, I argue, helps us to understand the cultural economy of the favela tour and the fetishism that animates urban space.

After a lengthy and insightful critique of semiological and poststructural (mis)readings of Marx, Pietz (1993) lights on value as the crux of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism. In his view, value is a social substance that appears in material forms. It is the "crucial starting point for Marx's mature theory of capitalist fetishism" and must be recentered (Pietz 1993:145). In the domain of film and sexuality, Mulvey is especially adept at combining Marx and Freud by

---

<sup>6</sup> Since the object is usually a physical entity, believed to have a true and material existence prior to, and concealed by, its fetishized form, it remains difficult to identify the way the commodity image of the favela is, itself, transmogrified by the fetish.

way of fetishism's relation to value. For Mulvey: "The obvious link between their concepts of fetishism is that both attempt to explain a refusal, or *blockage*, of the mind, or a phobic inability of the psyche to understand a symbolic system of value" (1993:8). She goes on to explain that, for Marx, this derives from "the problem of inscription" or the inability of the sign of value to be marked onto a commodity (1993:8). For Freud, it derives from the undervaluation of the female anatomy and the overvaluation of the object that substitutes for the mother's lack (1993:8). McClintock, for her part, sees the fetish, not as a product of pre-capitalist economies or industrial capitalism, but as that which, in the encounter between two or more cultural economies, "embodies the problem of contradictory social value" (1995:186). This contradiction, she argues, was present in the "inhabited intercultural spaces created along the West African coast by new trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be almost incomprehensible to each other" (1995:186). This allows McClintock to explore fetishism as "the historical enactment of ambiguity itself" marking specific crises in social meaning (1995:184).<sup>7</sup>

With this emphasis on *value* in mind, let me now return us to the favela tour. After Vila Canoas, we get back in the van and move onto our next stop—the famous and infamous favela-of-all-favelas called Rocinha. We drive down the main thoroughfare, while the uplifting story of bootstrap progress is narrated to us through the microphone. We are told that the government is absent from the favela, and the residents, ever opportunistic and industrious, spliced the electric cables from the "official" city and wired their houses themselves.<sup>8</sup> They also built the infrastructure to supply their homes and businesses with water and organized their own social services like sanitation and health care. In addition to the obvious vibrancy of the favela's

---

<sup>7</sup> Yet it is essential to note that, for McClintock, in lieu of resolving such conflicts in value, one can only displace contradictions onto a fetishized object, which then embodies the impossibility of resolution (185).

<sup>8</sup> However, during the tour we spontaneously encounter Gilberto Gil, the world-famous guitarist and singer, and currently the Brazilian Minister of Culture. He was departing from a community center along the main thoroughfare of Rocinha, rupturing the narrative of total government absence and neglect.

commercial center, we are shown that many of the residential streets are paved and that there are even banks in the neighborhood. Favelas, Fernando explains, produce economic value and generate wealth that stays within the bounds of the neighborhood. Rarely is it being appropriated by outsiders.

We also see that one of the effects of the favela tour is the sense that the tours themselves generate positive value in the favela. Our visit to the community school, Para Ti, was an opportunity to highlight the tour's economic contributions to the favela. Likewise, a favela tourist, reflecting on her experience, concluded: "I discovered that not all favelas are synonymous with poverty, and that the presence of visitors could bring some money into their economy." Later on in her article, which appears on the internet, she reveals how the tour succeeded in terms of its explicit goal. She writes: "Despite being labeled a favela, this community was not as poor as I had expected. Most houses looked solid and weatherproof, with running water and electricity. Many even sported a satellite dish on their roof. Plump dogs wandered around the pathways, and my Guaraná soda cost one real, as it would at any beachfront Copacabana kiosk" (Mahieux 2002). The tour company is interested both in the cultural value that elevates (or inverts) the stereotypical construction of favelas in the tourist imaginary and in the economic value that follows increased visitation to Rio de Janeiro. Yet, as I noted above, it is the dark underside of this valorized image of the favela—not to mention the romantic possibility that it is, in reality, false—that incite desires to take the tour in the first place. As such, the tour depends on the play between contradictory values and, more generally, on the articulation of cultural value and economic value—one aspect of the cultural economy of urban space.

Towards the end of the tour, Fernando brings us to the rooftop of a five-story apartment building that, for a favela, is relatively posh. From there, near the favela's highest point, we look down on an abstract mass of dense settlements and out to the sparkling blue of the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. Atop everything, we gain a vantage point external to the favela. Looking down, Fernando critiques the municipal government's neglect, in light of which the miraculous existence of the favela stands out. In doing so, however, he lapses into what, to my mind, is the stereotypical characterization he set out to change. He shows us, from above, that favelas, without any rationally planned organization, are impenetrable to law enforcement forces, not to mention public services like sewage removal or the post. He invokes favelas as dirty, disorganized, and chaotic and blames the government for its reluctance to address such inequity and squalor. As a result, he tells us, favelas are governed by drug gangs, which hold the neighborhoods together, it can be sure, but through violence, intimidation, and the allure of fast cash and flashy style. Again, I am not arguing that Fernando's contradictory narrative "misrepresents" favelas. After all, what do I know about what they are "really" like? Rather, I contend that by examining the cultural production of the favela, we learn something about how and why the commodification of marginalized places is schizophrenic (in the ordinary sense of mutually contradictory elements). But as we have seen, the favela tour is also shot through with ruptures of meaning, the ambiguity of value, and the inability to close and fix dominant significations. Following Frederic Jameson, I see this as a kind of cultural schizophrenia. But I will return to this in a bit, after briefly laying the groundwork for the use of some psychoanalytic aspects of "schizophrenia" in this context.

Lefebvre, though well known as a Marxist social theorist, frequently unites material, symbolic, as well as psychoanalytic dimensions in his discussions of space. It must be said that

Lefebvre, like Mulvey, McClintock, and others, is highly critical of Lacan, and psychoanalysis in general, on many fronts. However, as Steve Pile argues:

Lefebvre's attitude to psychoanalysis is thoroughly ambivalent. He is scathing about psychoanalysis when it appears to explain the spatial in terms of the psyche; when it appears to explain the spatial in terms of the linguistic; and when it offers one-dimensional interpretations of the social. On the other hand, Lefebvre is prepared to appropriate psychoanalytic terms of reference in his analysis of society and space. Social space, then, prohibits and prescribes in ways which can be understood psychoanalytically (1996:153).

Inspired by Lefebvre, I undertake to combine Marxian and psychoanalytic approaches and apply them to the anthropology of cities and urban space. Yet, it is to be seen whether I can avoid the very mistakes Lefebvre and others caution against. I propose that, to continue, it may be useful to think of urban space in terms of, but not necessarily the same as, Lacanian categories or registers. While Hansen uses such abstract concepts to examine subject formation in Bombay, I apply them to attempts at conceptualizing and representing cities (2001:7-8). It is noteworthy that Hansen also identifies the usefulness of these conceptual tools for interpreting the “anxieties and desires *generated by the urban landscape*” (2001:8, my emphasis).

The Lacanian register of the Real, or that which is impossible to know, represent, or fully symbolize, is always threatening to disrupt the coherence of the other two registers—the Imaginary (which is sensory and affective) and the Symbolic (or, the conventions of society, culture, and language). This has the effect of making subjects unstable and incomplete, and therefore sites of persistent contradictions and fissures. In other words, the Imaginary and Symbolic registers of subjective experience are often complicated by the intervention of the Real. I bring in these Lacanian concepts to make more sense of the paradoxical features that arise from the commodification of places like the favela, specifically in the context of international tourist consumption and global circulation. The impossibility of accessing (and signifying) the register of experience called the Real is marked by symptoms, one of which is a schizophrenic disjunction within the signifying chain that constitutes the favela tour in the realm

of the Symbolic. I suggest this is just one example of how marginalized urban spaces acquire irresolvable ambivalences and contradictions.

Now what does this discussion of psychoanalysis have to do with global productions? Why do I discuss representations of the favela in the context of these tours, rather than by other actors in other contexts? Let me explain. This is precisely because the tours are explicit attempts to define how the world sees Rio de Janeiro. Following Tsing's (1999) attention to scale-making, I point to how such projects often cross-cut different scales—in order to make one scale (the local) they play to another (the global). Tsing argues, each scale-making project has “its sights set on a different scale...The links among them cross scales and strengthen each project's ability to remake the world” (1999:122). Following Tsing, I argue that it is only given the transnational—shall we say global?—nature of these tours that the commodification of the favela *metonymically* slides into a commodification of the city of Rio de Janeiro itself. Consider this: for residents of the wealthy beach communities less than a mile from Rocinha, representations of the favela remain representations of the favela—a near one to one spatio-semiotic relationship, however deferred and unstable that relationship may be. However, the favela, known through globally-circulating cultural productions such as *City of God*, *Black Orpheus*, and the favela tour, represents to transnational consumers the city of Rio de Janeiro as a whole. Favelas are, in the global imagination, as synonymous with Rio as are the mountains, beaches, samba schools, and Carnival. As such, they are local productions, made for global consumption and circulation.

This sort of rhetorical claim is found in the language of the tour. On the website, and repeated by Fernando during the drive back to our hotels, the favela tour asserts that, to understand Rio, you have to come to the favela. The favela is “another Rio, within Rio.” But

the scale often shifts: the tour also advertises, “if you really want to understand *Brazil*, don’t leave Rio without having done the Favela Tour.” As such, the favela is asked to perform a difficult task: to represent, in a microcosm, all that is Rio and all that is Brazil. The favela, a part, thus takes the place of the whole, in a metonymic transformation. The category of favela offers a conceptual marker for tourists to understand spatial categories that are objectively larger, more difficult to perceive, and maybe impossible to represent, such as the city or the nation. The inability to represent the unrepresentable, to translate the Real into the Symbolic, engenders a metonymical slide along a chain of meanings and associations. This responds to the tour company’s yearning, as well as the tourist’s desire, for complete and coherent representations of the favela to commodify, sell, and consume.

If we can say that the favela is made to stand for Rio de Janeiro and even Brazil—and thus highly important to those with material interests in marketing the cultural image of the city or the nation to the world—can we follow by saying that such metonymical representations of the favela are symptomatic? By symptomatic, I intend to invoke a legacy of thought in psychoanalysis: as Willford points out, Lacan’s notion that metonymy is a symptom of desire (Lacan 1977:175) follows Freud’s work on symbolic condensation and fixation. Willford interprets metonymy as “a symptom in that it covers over the dependent and contingent origins of both the signifier and the subject’s self-consciousness obtained through the signifier” (2006:53 n.5). As Mulvey puts it, we ought to be able to “consider history in terms of symptoms” and to “consider how semiotics and psychoanalysis might be brought to bear on history, to attempt a theoretical means of articulating the relation between representations and their skewed referentiality” (1993:5). Symptoms, in a Lacanian sense, refer also to floating signifiers, and their variable and vague relations to signified and referent.



Freud argues, in his 1905 essay “Fetishism,” that the fetish is seldom experienced as a symptom (1995:152). Usually, the fetishist is quite satisfied, as are tourists who have joined the favela tours. As I already noted, by citing one woman’s post-tour reflections, they come away feeling as though they have been given what they came for: a “true” and “authentic” experience of the favela, and one that is comfortably distant from what they came expecting. As such, they lose sight of the relations of production that make up the favela—the fact that the transformation of the imagined favela is itself built into the production of the commodity image. But are they *truly* satisfied? Like the fetishist described by psychoanalysis, the tourist also recognizes in the fetishized object of the favela a mixed quality. For Freud (156), this is the tension between disavowal and affirmation. In this case, I argue, it is the tension between the ambivalent discourse of the tour that engenders a simultaneous satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

The symptoms I have in mind can be identified within the contradictory values ascribed to the commodified favela. I cannot adequately demonstrate this ethnographically. However, as I have alluded to thus far, the tour is chock full of such paradoxical valuations. As a place, the favela is, at once, orderly and disorderly, attractive and repulsive, safe and dangerous, accessible and inaccessible, legible and illegible. Meanwhile, the people who live there are alternately moral and immoral, empowered and disempowered, vital and tragic. These paradoxes—integral to the favela tour and, therefore, to the commodity image marketed and delivered to tourists—suggest the impossibility of fixing and closing the resignification that the tour attempts to achieve. But to be precise, this makes them “schizophrenic” only in the ordinary, and not the psychoanalytic, sense of the term. But, can we go further to connect the favela tour to both forms of “schizophrenia”?

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson uses Lacan's account of schizophrenia, not as a clinical diagnosis, but as a descriptive tool with which to discuss postmodern aesthetics and spatial disorientation. I follow Jameson by agreeing with the utility of schizophrenia as a cultural (not clinical) descriptive and by avoiding claims about psychosis on the part of tour guides or tourists. Yet I wish to distance myself from the notion that these features of the favela tour represent a cultural phenomenon brought about by a late stage in a political-economic progression. I will return to this point later in the essay, but for now let us consider how Jameson relates Lacan's version of schizophrenia: it is a "breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or meaning" (Jameson 1991:26). For Lacan, meaning is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier (not by the one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified). Therefore, the signified (in our case, the concepts or meanings associated with the favela) is projected by the relationship between signifiers themselves (i.e., the relationship between all the representational symbols, utterances, or images produced by the tour). When this relationship between signifiers breaks down, the resulting breaks in the signifying chain form a cultural schizophrenia: what Jameson refers to as "a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (1991:26).

These unrelated signifiers are, I argue, what we find when we look at the discourse of the favela tour. Though Fernando's individual utterances do make sense, taken together the tour's ambivalent representations of the favela forfeit its ability to fix a coherent meaning to place. Furthermore, they contain the epistemological impossibility of apprehending an object by virtue of qualities that are directly opposed to one another. This way of "knowing" the favela, which is characterized by illogical contradictions, is bound to produce unease on the part of tourist

participants. If this unintelligibility is not immediately recognized as such, it nevertheless remains within what seems a unitary image of the favela. We are then left with a schizophrenic disjunction among the chain of signifiers in the tour, preventing the favela from attaining a determinate symbolic value. Contrast this to the initial assurance made by the tour that its clients leave with an entirely different image of the favela. It may be entirely different, but it is certainly much more unstable and ambivalent than the one with which most tourists begin.<sup>9</sup>

A proper response to what I have said so far would challenge me to identify the particular political-economic structures, material conditions, and historical transformations that are instantiated in the favela tour, and that justify the theoretical choices I have made. I have mentioned how the *global* nature of the circulating commodity image produced by the favela tour requires a peculiar kind of analysis. However, it is also obvious that, while invoking a linkage between Marxist and psychoanalytic projects, I have not been true to either. In consideration of the former (Marxian), I have left open the question of the historical political-economic forces that, if not determine (as Jameson might have it), at least articulate with the symptomatic representations of the favela. I have mentioned the transnational tourism market and the global geographic imagination it presupposes (which are by no means new). But I have failed to address two of what Stuart Hall calls the three main premises of Marx's method: the *materialist premise*, by which the "analysis of political and ideological structures must be grounded in their material conditions of existence," and the *historical premise*, by which

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, it would not be useful to criticize the favela tour for ambivalence on the ground that consistency and coherence is an inherent good. In fact, as I will discuss later in this essay, I propose we treat ambivalent and contradictory valuations as closer to the norm, in the context of culturally-dominant discourses and representations of marginalized urban spaces. But that should not stop us from asking under what conditions ambivalence comes about and under what conditions places attain a seemingly unitary identity. Furthermore, I take the contradictions inherent to the favela tour to be, on the one hand, powerfully affective and effective and, on the other hand, an uncomfortable tension within the discourse of the tour, in light of its mission to replace the negative image of the favela with a positive one and market their product (the tour and the favela) to the international tourist.

“specific forms of these relations...must be made historically specific” (Hall 1980:323).<sup>10</sup>

Though I am far from able to correct these defects, I can point to a few possibilities proposed by other scholars.

First, we could look to scholars who argue that globalization, or global interconnectedness and circulation, inspires attempts by locally-based, yet globally-situated actors to totalize the “imaginary space” of the city, despite its deterritorialized and diffuse reality. LiPuma and Koelble have recently explored this problem in an essay in which they are concerned with the following: “Within the context of the multiple and overlapping cultures of circulation that interconnect the Americas, this essay seeks to develop a notion of the urban imaginary, conceptualizing it as a culturally imaginary space that is created in and through the relationship between these forms of circulation and the practices of stabilization that seek to objectify the city as a totality” (LiPuma and Koelble 2005:154). It is worth quoting their analysis further, and at length, since in Miami they tend to run up against many of the same processes as the favela tour:

That Miami is so recognizable, indeed, overexposed on the world stage, involves more than constant nominalization. It turns on the creation of images of totality on a number of symbolic registers. The quest is to create a complex spatial image, composed of other nested images...in order to provisionally stabilize a territorialized space of concretized forms. Certain cultural forms bring the imaginary of the city into existence by presupposing its reality as a condition of their own...The city’s project of self-totalization centers on canonizing these images as self-referential emblems of Miami, so that seen from any distance, whether from abroad or from its own communities, to consume them is to presuppose the existence of the city (2005:175).

We can look to other works in progress that resonate with the goals of my essay. A recent workshop, entitled “Psychoanalysis, Urban Theory, and the City of Late Capitalism,” brought together Marxist urban theorists and Lacanian psychoanalysts in much the same spirit. However,

---

<sup>10</sup> The third premise, located by Hall in Marx’s later work (*Introduction to the Grundrisse*), is the *structural premise* (1980:328). Hall argues that this premise, as developed by Althusser and other structuralists, results in the concept of articulation, following both Marx and structural linguistics. I believe my essay has been more faithful to this premise than to the other two in its attempt to reveal the articulation between different sorts of production, commodification, and valuation.

while LiPuma and Koelble focus on the city in a late- or post-modern period, the theoretical combination espoused by the organizers of this workshop is stimulated by the related promise of late- or post-capitalism. According to the workshop's introduction, they intended for the conference to "lay bare how the city of late-capitalism depends more and more on psychosocial processes to generate the necessary increase in 'return value' or to secure control over its subjects." As examples, they cite "the production of geographies of fear, the stimulation of a phantasmic economy of all-pervasive transgression, the explosive 'inmixing' of race and class tensions, the virtualization of the everyday, etc." All of this, they claim, seems "to unveil the 'urban unconscious' of today's metropolis." We could also turn to Deleuze and Guattari (1977; 1987), Jameson (1991), and Harvey (1990) for insights into why political economy, culture, and psychoanalysis have been or should be combined.

I, for one, am not entirely convinced that the utility of this theoretical approach is necessarily tethered to the end of a historical period (and, of course, a political-economic one) or to the emergence of another, as some theorists suggest. In my view, some of the Left's teleological arguments more likely serve to legitimate a particular ideological analysis than actually respond, with appropriate conceptual tools, to the conditions in which the analyst finds him or herself. Rather, I suggest that one's use of theory be judged, not on the basis of whether it distinctly corresponds to (or attempts to bring about) a particular stage or moment in a predetermined teleology, but on whether it convincingly describes the phenomena one sets out to better understand.

In conclusion, I should address those who have heard my argument as prefiguring, or even positing its own telos toward, a prescriptive solution of sorts. I want to emphasize that, in discussing the commodification of marginalized places by the favela tours of Rio de Janeiro, the

fetishisms associated with it, and the schizophrenic disjunction it produces, I am not presenting some sort of pathology or deviance in need of a “cure.” Rather, I want to argue paradoxically that this “abnormality” is something closer to the norm. I propose we could tentatively extend this sort of analysis to dominant cultural understandings of a range of marginalized urban spaces—from the barrio, to the mohala, slum, ghetto, inner-city, and beyond.<sup>11</sup> But what would it mean to say that the ambivalences embedded in the favela tour are more common than we think? What is going on if we find that closed, unified, and coherent discourses, either valorizing or denigrating places and people, are unusual? Or, what if essentialisms—such as that favelas and their residents are *either* chaotic *or* well-organized—are far less common than indeterminate and irresolvable representations marked by a fetishistic quality? This might then lead us to inquire about the processes by which things like the favela occasionally come into being as an objectified and coherent totality.

As McClintock puts it, one must ask the “historical question of how certain groups succeed, through coercion or hegemony, in foreclosing the ambivalence that fetishism embodies by successfully imposing their economic and cultural systems on others” (226). As far as I can tell, this is not the case for the favelas of Rio at the moment. As I have shown, the tour fails to ascribe a dominant and stable valuation to the favela. But significant is the fact that these representations do come from outside. And McClintock’s point begs the question of how new ideological formations might emerge, perhaps from the margins or the favela itself, to foreclose this ambivalence. But we also should ask, if favelas are as resourceful and entrepreneurial as the tour describes them, and they are used to providing for their own needs in spite of the city’s

---

<sup>11</sup> As the summary statement of a recent conference organized by Thomas Blom Hansen put it, the mythical quality of certain parts of the city is often marked by a deep-seated ambivalence: “[w]ithin cities, it is always the poorest and most dense parts that acquire a quasi-mythical status as sources of crime, amorality and danger but also of hidden forces, enormous strength and heroic courage” ([http://www.yale.edu/ycias/southasia/urban\\_charisma.htm](http://www.yale.edu/ycias/southasia/urban_charisma.htm)).

neglect, what stops them from running their own tours? Why does the tour seem useful primarily to people outside the favela? Are not those on the inside perfectly capable of, or interested in, running something as simple as a tour of their own neighborhood?<sup>12</sup>

But this is only one of a number of possibilities and there are many questions left unanswered and even unasked. For example, what sort of favela resident is discursively invoked by the tour? Is the tour bringing into being fractured and ambivalent subjectivities as well? How might this be intensified if favela residents were more central to the production of the tour? Rather than locating the genesis of the subject in the individual, we could examine the way space itself—and its production, commodification, and fetishization—may be a mirror in which the identification of the self takes place. What, then, is being produced—the place or the people?—and can we separate these two? Can it be that these two productions (of space and the subject) are at odds? Or can we ask how ambivalent spatial discourses and subject positions intersect and articulate, as do the *spatial order of things* and the *social order of things*? I am no position to discuss this further, though I am interested in bringing these theoretical discourses together and in applying this sort of thinking to my own future work. The essential point in this paper remains that attention to the fetishization of commodified urban space is a way to analyze what I have called the schizophrenia of the slum. And this, in turn, hinges on the fact that the favela tour is, all along, a global production.

---

<sup>12</sup> Such a development might parallel the story of the hypothetical schizophrenic who is cured once he is able to inhabit an ontological and symbolic world that corresponds to the linguistic rules he knows and within which he lives (cf. De Waelhens 1978). This line of thinking does, however, return to the question of the “cure,” which I have been intent to avoid.

## References

- Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. 2000. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso.
- De Waelhens, Alphonse. 1978. *Schizophrenia: A Philosophical Reflection on Lacan's Structuralist Interpretation*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1977. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. New York: Viking Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ebron, Paulla A. 2002. *Performing Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1995. Fetishism. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
- Hall, Stuart. 1980. Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance. In *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom. 2001. *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Post-contemporary interventions*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *Écrits: A Selection*. New York: Norton.
- Levebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- LiPuma, Edward, and Thomas Koelble. 2005. Cultures of Circulation and the Urban Imaginary: Miami as Example and Exemplar. *Public Culture* 17 (1):153-179.
- Mahieux, Viviane. 2002. Rio de Janeiro's Favela Tourism: "Off the Beaten Track," Urban Style. *Harvard Review of Latin America* Winter 2002  
(<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~drclas/publications/revista/Tourism/tcontent.html>).
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mazzarella, William. 2003. *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. New York: Routledge.
- Merrifield, Andy. 2000. Henri Lefebvre: A Socialist In Space. In *Thinking Space*, edited by M. Crang and N. J. Thrift. New York: Routledge.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1993. Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture. *October* 65 Summer 1993:3-20.
- Pietz, William. 1993. Fetishism and Materiality: The Limits of Theory in Marx. In *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, edited by E. S. Apter and W. Pietz. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pile, Steve. 1996. *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity*. New York: Routledge.
- Psychoanalysis, Urban Theory, and the City of Late Capitalism. 2005. Introduction. Paper read at Psychoanalysis, Urban Theory, and the City of Late Capitalism, at Jan van Eyck Academie, Netherlands.



- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 1999. Inside the Economy of Appearances. *Public Culture* 12 (1):115-144.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Willford, Andrew. 2006. The "Already Surmounted" yet "Secretly Familiar": Malaysian Identity as Symptom. *Cultural Anthropology* 21 (1):31-59.