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As a Scott Kloeck Jenson International Internship Fellow, I spent the summer of 2008 in Brazil, where I was able to do pre-dissertation research and intern with a non-profit organization located in the favela (“shantytown”) of Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro.

Research and Internship Site:

Rio de Janeiro has over one thousand favelas. These communities are controlled by heavily armed drug traffickers engaged in a war with police and rival gangs. Though gang rivalries usually play themselves out within favelas themselves, crime spills over into every corner of the city. It is not at all uncommon for restaurants to be held up during dinnertime, or for criminals to block off the tunnels that connect different parts of Rio’s mountainous terrain, shooting randomly and stealing the cars and valuables of all the motorists who had the misfortune of being in the tunnel during rush hour. Notably, the high crime rate has remained steady over the past decade and this has led to a normalization of the state of emergency in the city.

Though most residents of favelas are honest and hardworking, the media tends to present these communities as teeming with unsavory elements-- as chaotic warzones full of people eager to assault the middle class. As a result, favela residents are both criminalized and strongly discriminated against. Thus, from a development perspective, favelas are more or less abandoned by the state. In my dissertation, I trace the local, national and global utility of the institutionalization of violence in favela communities with an eye towards the frictions and overlaps between these spheres.

Dissertation Research:

My research examines the production and consumption of violence and in the favela of Rocinha. In the past decade, Rocinha has achieved international acclaim, not only for being the largest shantytown in the Americas but because an estimated 90% of all of the cocaine that passes through the city allegedly passes through this favela. In this regard, Rocinha is not a typical favela-- if such a thing can even be said to exist. Furthermore, it is too big, too well-located in between two of the richest neighborhoods in the city, its view is too picturesque. While these factors make it atypical, the prominent place the favela occupies in the city imaginary has led to a sensationalization of the violence that goes on there. Compared to favelas in other parts of the city in which police operations and homicides might not even make the paper at all (and which we can conclude, human rights abuses are far more widespread), if Rocinha is invaded by the police or a rival gang it will be the leading story on every television channel; the front page of every newspaper in the region.

Paradoxically, the favela of Rocinha also receives upwards of two thousand foreign tourists per month. There are eight major tour companies and dozens of private guides. Tours range from the purely voyeuristic to “socially conscious tourism”-- where guides attempt to raise tourist awareness of the challenges that urban slum dwellers face. In almost all cases, company owners and guides are outsiders who give little back to Rocinha. Fortunes are being made off of exhibiting poverty and suffering.

On the other hand, favela residents’ ability to engage with foreign tourists presents a glimmer of opportunity where there was previously none. Even if tourist motivation makes no sense to them, most residents will jump at a chance to profit, whether by learning a language and working as a guide, driving vans or jeeps, selling arts and crafts at fairs where the tourists shop, or by renting one’s rooftop as a place for tourists to snap photos. Thus, residents are far from passive victims of the foreign gaze but creatively work to mold tourism to serve their own interests.

Internship and Community Service:

There is a serious lack of social services and educational opportunities for children and adults in Rocinha and it was in this arena that I focused my attention during the tenure of my SKJ award. I began my dissertation work shortly after my SKJ time and so I spent an year living in Rocinha itself and I opted to continue the work I started as a SKJ fellow. I volunteered as an English teacher at a small community-run non-profit organization. Although my internship was technically with one organization, I found myself unable to decline others requests for teaching and administrative assistance and as a result, I volunteered at five different organizations over the duration of my fieldwork period. I did different things at each organization, ranging from assisting with the filing of non-profit papers (a difficult process in Brazil), to acting as "house mother" in a residence for international volunteers, to helping to develop a community-run tourism agency, to just plain cleaning and washing dishes, etc. Beyond teaching, I was lucky to be able act as a mentor and positive role model for dozens of wonderful children and teenagers.

People would often ask me what I was doing in Rocinha: “Have you always done volunteer work?” “Don’t you have poor people that need help in your own country?” I had to take these questions seriously. How could spend so much time in Brazil volunteering, while at home I did not seem to find myself as concerned with actively working on social problems? I am grateful to the SKJ for helping me to have greater awareness of the challenges communities like Rocinha face *and* to be more sensitive towards similar problems right here at home.