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## SOCIAL DISTANCING IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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### ABSTRACT:

The objective of this article is to be a mythopoetic exercise of the photographic gesture, supported by the contributions of visual anthropology. It is from the Pereira da Silva favela (Pereirão) view of Rio's South Zone and Pão de Açúcar, that I reflect on the different meanings of "social distancing" during the COVID-19 pandemic. I present the view in front of me as the "fantasy" Rio de Janeiro, while the place where I take the photographs as "realistic" Rio. However, I problematize my experience in this duality by defining myself as a symptom and intruder in the gentrification process of the favela, but also as contradiction and "placeless" when reflecting on my ethnographic field, due to the "trajectories" I have traveled, I don't belong to any "piece."

### CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

The photographs presented here were produced with an old Canon camera in April 2020, exactly in the first month of the "lockdown" decree, i.e., beginning of the quarantine due to COVID-19. It was also the year I started writing my master's thesis about the sound-sensorial flows in lofi hip hop. The photos were taken from the place where I did part of the isolation and consequently the beginning of my writing: the Pereira da Silva Favela (Pereirão), located between the neighborhoods of Santa Teresa and Laranjeiras, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, this essay seeks to critically reflect on my experience in this place by defining myself not only as an intruder and a symptom of the gentrification processes within the favela (Harvey 1980, Novaes 2018), but also as a contradiction and "placeless" by transporting such reflection onto the role of ethnographer that I exercised in my master's research.

I start from the prerogative presented by Howard Becker (1995), in exploring “society” through photography, by practicing a complementary approach between social sciences and art. I claim that such photographs perform a “cut in temporality” by making “visible what would disappear” through time (Ferreira 1995, 119), as they are able to organize a universe of meanings through a link between past, present, and future (Ferreira 1995, 120). That is, I intend to tell a story with such photographs, this narrative can only be organized by the temporal distancing of when they were clicked. The montage and combination of photos aim to expose an “urban macro-writing permanently altered” by time (Coutinho and Vazquez 2000, 103)

Through the visual representation of an “urban nature,” I understand taste and sensibilities as “integral parts of the act of knowledge” (Galano 2000, 85, Hennion 2011). I try to achieve with such photographs what verbal language cannot communicate, using them as narrative and metaphor, rather than just a record or document (Pinheiro 2000, 132). Therefore, by the concession of silence and distance that the photographic object provides, I critically reflect on my camera-mediated gaze on the place in which I was inserted, allow me to potentially “highlight a particular aspect of reality that is diluted in a vast field of view, thus making explicit the uniqueness and transcendence of a scene” (Guran 2000, 156-157).

If the singularity starts from a critical perspective of my experience situated in the place where the photographs were taken, it also evidences a transcendence in exposing a “web of unseen” surrounding the experience of “social distancing” within the gentrification process (Brandão 2004, 29, Ingold 2015, 215-229). Therefore, I understand this essay as a mythopoetic exercise of the photographic gesture, as I jump “from the founding but never reductive objectivity of an analysis of ‘field data’ to the multiple possibility of personal interpretation” (Brandão, 2004, 36). I do this because I agree with Brecht and Walter Benjamin (1931/1985, 106) that the “mere reflection of reality” cannot say anything about it, it is necessary to “be built up, something artificial, something fabricated”.

## **SOCIALLY DISTANT SPICES AND VIEW**

*Escrevo diante da janela aberta.  
Minha caneta é cor das venezianas: Verde!...  
E que leves, lindas filigranas  
Desenha o sol na página deserta!*

Rua dos Cataventos I, Mário Quintana (2005)<sup>1</sup>.

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1. I chose to keep the original text in Portuguese since it is a poetic work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the term “social distancing” became associated with the safety of people in open or closed spaces, even if there were problems of effectiveness on the control of bodies at the ethical/moral micropolitical level of respect for the rules of social distancing. That is, even at the height of the pandemic, consequently, the apex of self-control, surveillance, and discipline of bodies, there were noises, mistakes, failures, and contaminations in supermarket lines, banks, among others (Foucault 2008, Rui et al 2021). Therefore, I strived to be part of the 75% of people who stayed home, and as a way to elaborate sadness, isolation, and anxiety, photography was the tool to record the everyday, ordinary, and extraordinary by being a way of making life<sup>2</sup> in the pandemic (Ingold 2015, Malta et al 2020, Gajanigo and Souza 2021, Caggiano e Segura 2022).



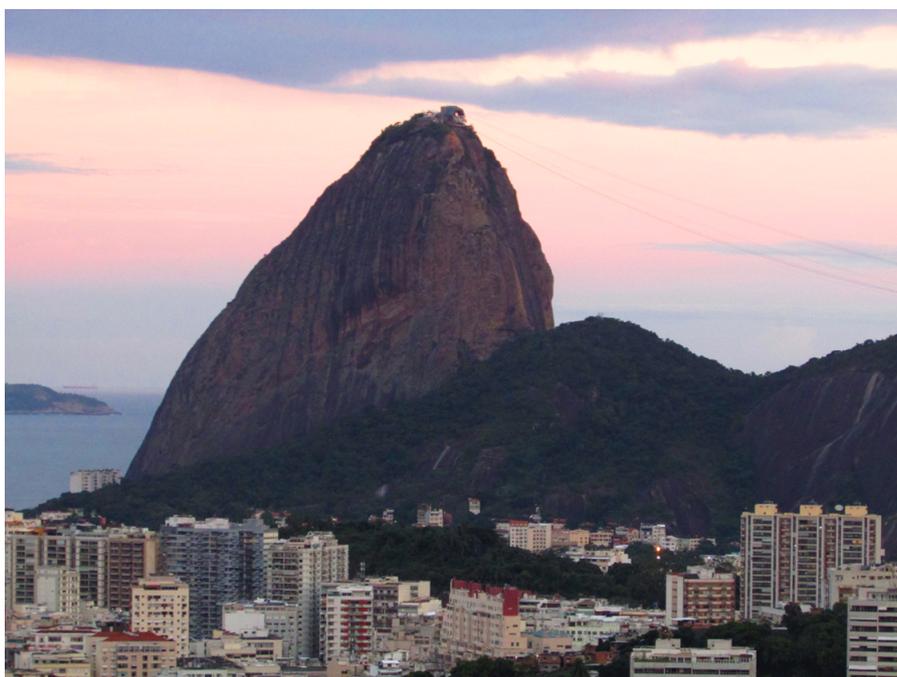
**IMAGE 1**  
Socially distant  
spices

Image 1 is the perspective of inside/outside that I was in, the focus was on Pão de Açúcar<sup>3</sup> and the spices in the kitchen window were blurred. The cold and bluish tone is a good symbol of the process of isolation, seen

2. Whenever the conjunction of words “making life” or “to be alive” is worked upon, I will be referencing Timothy Ingold’s proposal presented in the book “Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge, and description,” especially parts III and IV (2015), in a simplified way and taking advantage of its subtitle, I understand my “movement” of photographing, from the Pereirão, as a way to “describe” the world around me and thus aim to produce “knowledge” of this experience.

3. Sugarloaf Mountain, a postcard of the city of Rio de Janeiro, I chose not to translate its name.

now as one of the elements “of remembrance not always possible to be experienced in the present” (Ferreira, 1995, 119). The focus is centered on what is beyond the window. At first, in a playful and gastronomic way, I understand the spices as “socially distant” from the Pão de Açúcar. For, the spices represent the private, the isolation and the favela, while the Pão de Açúcar is nature, “public,” but symbol of a perspective, imagination, and construction of Rio de Janeiro. In this way, I attribute to the category “social distance” a connotation not only spatial, but also political and economic.



**IMAGE 2**  
Socially distant  
view

As I put my head and camera out of the window and away from the isolation, the landscape turned into a pinkish tone, thus I registered Image 2, showing a view and a life “socially distant” to that I was in. It’s the Pão de Açúcar with the base that supports it, the buildings of the neighborhoods of Rio’s South Zone: Flamengo, Laranjeiras, and the Urca, illuminated by the natural light of the late afternoon.

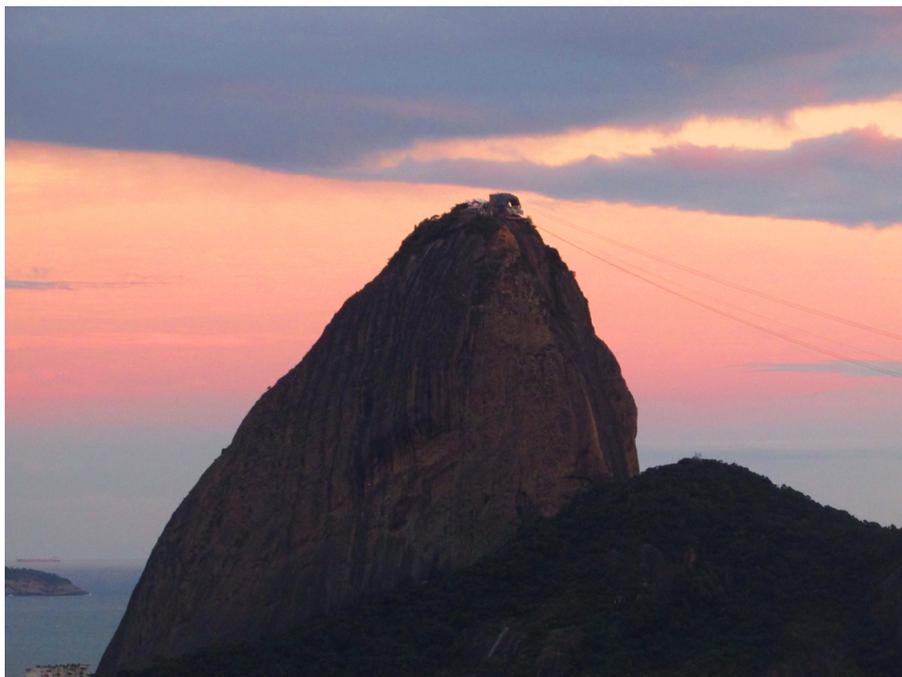
According to Eliska Altmann (2021), there were “two” cinematographic representations and cultural construct of Rio de Janeiro, one focused on treating the “natural” landscapes as harmonious, building a “fantastical” and “utopian” Rio. While the other, focused on “realism” and “authenticity,” by showing the workers and the suburbs which confronted the postcards images of the “wonderful city.” Thus, Pão de Açúcar became, for the cinema, since the 1920s, one of the symbols of the “fantasy” Rio,

harmonious and beautiful, (Altmann 2021)<sup>4</sup>. As is common in large Latin American cities, there is a collective effort to manufacture a cultural identity, and Rio is not exempt from this mode (Gorelik 2005). It is from institutions and social actors of the local bourgeoisie that Pão de Açúcar was placed in this role, which is symbolically represented in Image 2, with the Rio de Janeiro South Zone serving as the basis of support for the “natural” monument.

## PÃO DE AÇÚCAR

*Não sei que paisagista doidivanas  
Mistura os tons... acerta... desacerta...  
Sempre em busca de nova descoberta,  
Vai colorindo as horas quotidianas...*

Rua dos Cataventos I, Mário Quintana (2005)



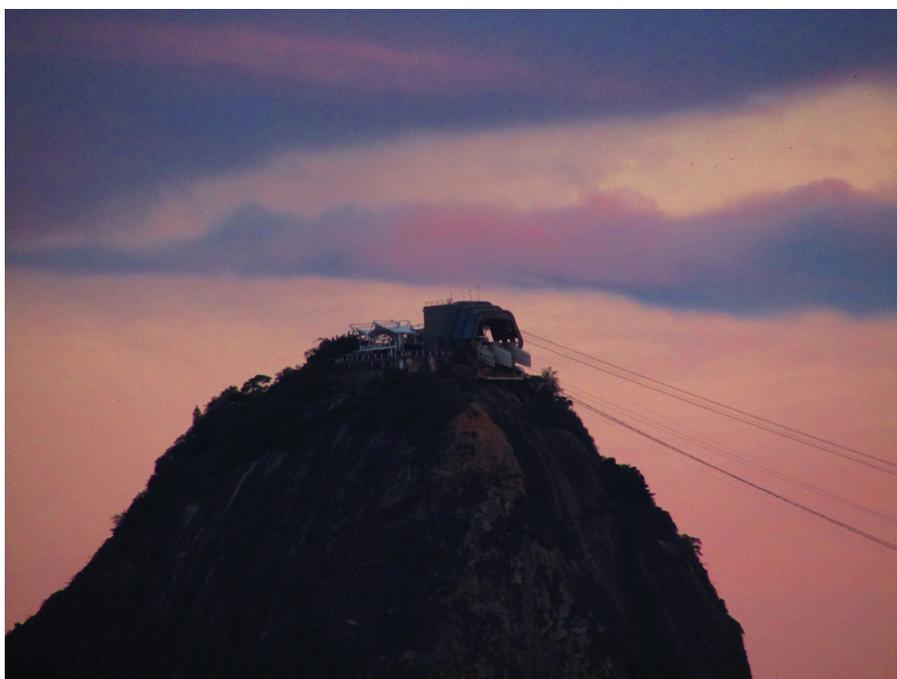
**IMAGE 3**  
Has to rise to the  
top

Thus, I understand my perspective of the Pereirão as associated with “realistic” and “authentic” Rio, and I decided to explore the fantasy that

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4. I borrow these concepts from audiovisual anthropology, presented by Eliska Altmann, and understand them as (Weberian) Ideal Types, that is, they serve for analysis and to fabricate the narrative of this article and not as “absolute truths.”

is available in front of me, through the camera lens I try to diminish our “social distance.” I understand Image 3 as a symbolic top, in which the “utopian” Rio de Janeiro tries to convince the “dystopian” to rise for recognition (Altmann 2021). Since I acknowledge the human construction at its top as a symbol of man’s domination over nature, it represents a perspective of progress and civilizing process, antagonistic to the social dynamics of a favela, stigmatized as “barbaric” and “dangerous” by the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, which tries to control it and “pacify” it. That is, “climbing on top” for progress (Goffman 1988, Vaz 1994, Zaluar 1998, Valladares 2005, Carvalho 2013, Rodrigues 2016).



**IMAGE 4**  
The top

In Image 4, with the camera’s zoom, still protected by distance, I climb to the “top” of the symbol. There my gaze rests, I feel a strange melancholy in my body, because of the pandemic, there are no more bodies transiting on its top, the tramway is closed. Such feeling expressed by my body was well documented by Paulo Gajanigo and Rogério Souza (2021) in the article “*A pandemia e o ordinário: apontamentos sobre a afinidade entre experiência pandêmica e registros cotidianos*”, reserved to the particularities, I highlight the feeling expressed in one of the accounts presented:

They say that being Carioca means eating Globo biscuits, drinking Mate iced tea with lemon, and practicing the famous “altinho” in the parks and sands of the marvelous

city. Today, March 22nd, 2020, being carioca doesn't mean being on the beach. To be carioca at this moment is to think about the whole, to understand that alone we can't find the Mate's guy or play that football. Today, on the first official weekend of the quarantine in Rio de Janeiro, the famous Copacabana beach was completely empty. A huge emptiness that brought with it a silence apparently composed of fear and also hope, it was the carioca's understanding that at this moment the "brotar" would be each one in their own home for the good of all. In almost thirty years it is the first time I find the beach like this on a sunny day (Gajanigo and Souza 2021, 47) (my translation)<sup>5</sup>.

"They say being Carioca means..." but what is it to be a carioca? For Eliska Altmann (2021, 197) the cinema of Rio de Janeiro constructed the character "carioca" as the contradiction in living in the "wonderful city." Looking at Image 4, I wonder if, even when dismissed as a Rio resident, this contradictory body was the one that occupied the top of Pão de Açúcar pre-pandemic days. What bodies transited there before the pandemic? Had not the tramway been closed much longer for some people?

## THE SOUTH ZONE

*Jogos de luz dançando na folhagem!  
Do que eu ia escrever até me esqueço...  
Pra que pensar? Também sou da paisagem...*

Rua dos Cataventos I, Mário Quintana (2005)

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5. Original: Dizem que ser carioca é comer biscoito o Globo, beber Mate gelado com limão e praticar nos parques e areias da cidade do maravilhosa o famoso altinho. Hoje, 22 de março de 2020, ser carioca não significa estar na praia. Ser carioca neste momento é pensar no todo, entender que sozinho não podemos encontrar o carinho do Mate ou jogar aquela bolinha. Hoje no primeiro fim de semana oficial de quarentena no Rio de Janeiro a famosa praia de Copacabana estava completamente vazia. Um enorme vazio que trazia consigo um silêncio aparentemente composto por medo e também esperança, era o carioca entendendo que nesse momento o "brotar" seria cada um em sua própria casa para o bem de todos. Em quase trinta anos é a primeira vez que encontro a praia assim em um dia de sol [SIC] (Gajanigo and Souza 2021, p. 47). "Altinha" is a mode of playing soccer on the beach and "brotar" is slang for "showing up".



**IMAGE 5**  
Socially distant  
buildings

In Image 5, I move the camera lens to the base that supports the symbol of Pão de Açúcar: the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. By opening the lens a little further, I register the disorder of the buildings, the feeling is that many buildings are “crooked,” and I ask myself: Did Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1995) climb Santa Teresa to profile the Portuguese as “sowers”?

I name this image as “socially distant buildings,” because of the real estate speculation exposed there. The  $m^2$  to buy a property in Flamengo costs R\$ 13,043.76, the 8th most expensive in the city<sup>6</sup>, Laranjeiras costs R\$ 12,873.74<sup>7</sup>, and Urca costs R\$ 14,398.00<sup>8</sup>, while the place where I practiced my isolation is not mapped by real estate agents. The street Pereira da Silva in Laranjeiras ends where the Pereira da Silva (Pereirão) favela starts, the value of  $m^2$  on the street is on average R\$ 9,500.00<sup>9</sup>, while at its top, in the neighborhood of Santa Teresa the value is R\$ 7,539.00<sup>10</sup>.

6. Accessed 17 Aug. 22, site imovelguide, “Valor do Metro Quadrado 2022 no Bairro Flamengo - Rio de Janeiro” available in: <<https://www.imovelguide.com.br/valor-do-metro-quadrado/rj/rio-de-janeiro/flamengo>>

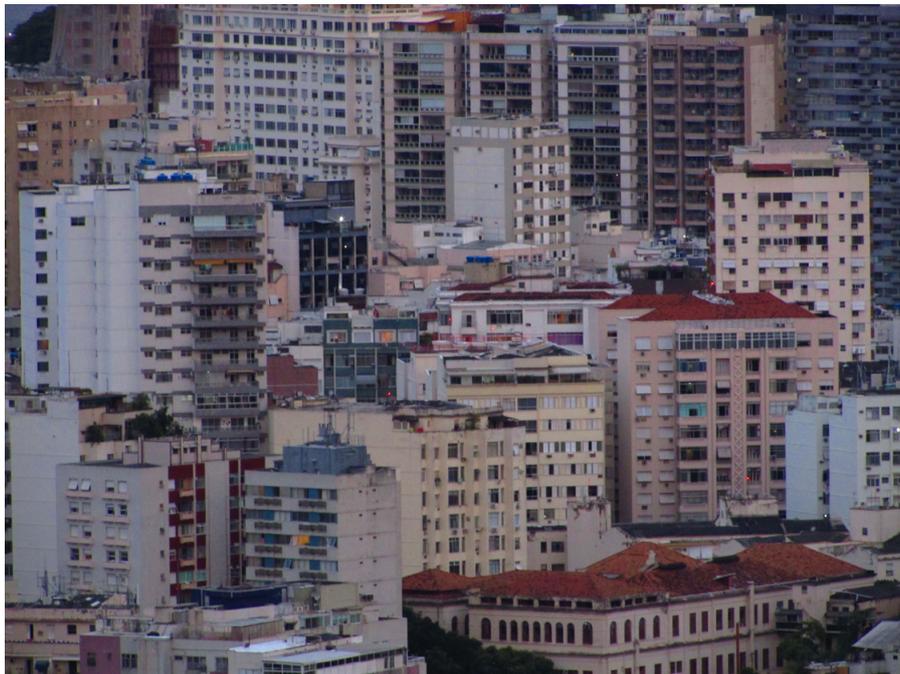
7. Accessed 17 Aug. 22, site imovelguide, Valor do Metro Quadrado 2022 no Bairro Laranjeiras - Rio de Janeiro available in: <<https://www.imovelguide.com.br/valor-do-metro-quadrado/rj/rio-de-janeiro/laranjeiras>>

8. Accessed 17 Aug. 22, site agenteimóvel, “Preços & Valores de Imóveis à Venda do M2 em Rio de Janeiro - RJ | Agente Imóvel 1” Available in: <<https://www.agenteimovel.com.br/mercado-imobiliario/a-venda/rj/rio-de-janeiro/>>

9. Ibidem

10. Ibidem

That is, the place that was available to my perspective, presented by the photographs, was a favela that squeezed between the neighborhoods of Laranjeiras and Santa Teresa. This scenario of buildings squeezed between mountains and beaches designed the “fantasy” Rio, but for the South Zone gaze, upon which such “utopia” was built, the favelas could be read as contamination, noise, evidencing that despite the geographical proximity, there was a socioeconomic and historical distance between the buildings and favelas (Vaz 1994, Bourdieu 2007).

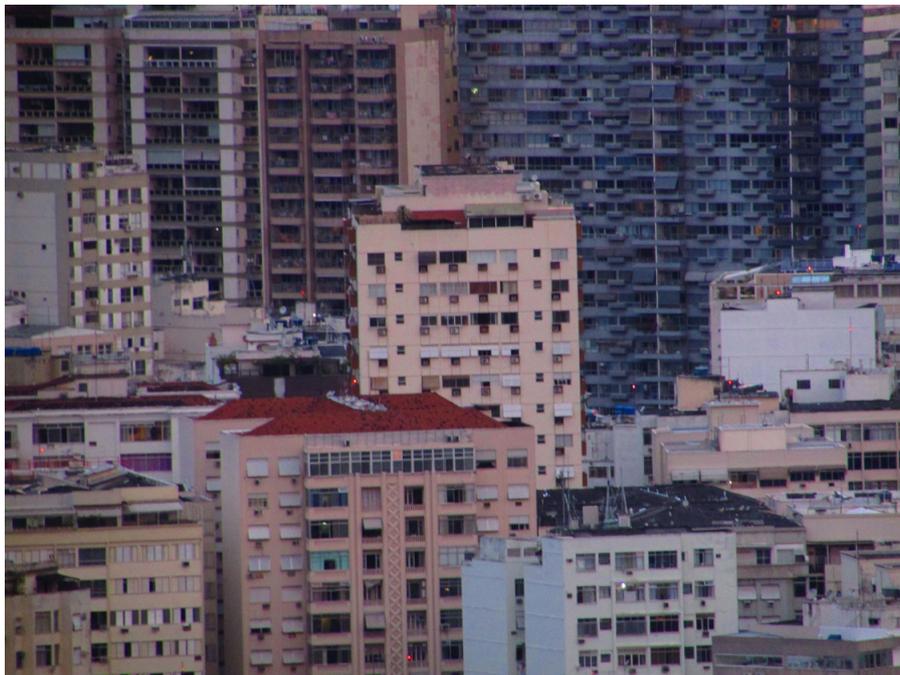


**IMAGE 6**  
Socially distant?

In Images 6 and 7, I approach the mess of buildings, all glued together, and imagine that each window has people performing quarantine. From the perspective of the favela that produced these images, I conclude that the “social distance” between the buildings and the persons that inhabit them is reduced, both spatially and economically.

But until now, when “facing the image” of the buildings of Rio’s south zone, I tried to speak “what I see,” and imagine, from that, “what looks at me” (Didi-Huberman, 2010; 2013). I saw the Pão de Açúcar as a symbol and the buildings of the South Zone as the base that sustains the perspective of Rio de Janeiro as “wonderful city,” “fantasy,” “utopian.” Whereas my position of looking from the favela is defined as “realistic,” “dystopian,” “authentic” because when the south zone “looks” at me, it would theoretically see me as “contamination,” “favelado,” “dangerous” (Zaluar 1998,

Valladares 2005, Carvalho 2013, Altmann 2021). However, this is not real, my perspective is not “socially distant” from the gaze of the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro just because I am in a favela.



**IMAGE 7**  
Not so far away

I believe that I am both a symptom and an intruder. A symptom, because, even though I was raised in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, in the neighborhood of Jardim América and in the city of Itaguaí, I was a consequence of the social policies of university expansion, graduating in a course created by REUNI program<sup>11</sup>, the Degree in Social Sciences at UFRJ. Therefore, by occupying the lookout provided by Pereirão, I was not only closer to the South Zone category, but I was also part of a movement, along with the neighbors around me, of gentrification of the Pereira da Silva favela. Above the place of my isolation lived a Frenchman, one of the owners of a “gourmetized” restaurant in the Botafogo neighborhood, in another house next door lived an Argentine, along the alleys of the favela is a mixture of “gringos,” young university students, and some old residents who still lived there (Rodrigues 2016, Novaes 2018).

Therefore, at the same time, the South Zone, as a category of the Carioca petite bourgeoisie and middle class, stigmatizes the favela, it also cultivates the desire to occupy it in order to enjoy the look provided by this

11. REUNI is a government program aimed at expanding universities.



place. It is from the favela that I click the images of the “beautiful” and “fantasy” Rio. Added to this is the fetish of Rio de Janeiro for the external, “gringo” perspective, as Florestan Fernandes well defined when he accused Brazil of being an “imagined community heteronomously conditioned, that is, a national society whose internal orientation presents an important external conditioning” (Moraes, 2018, p. 209). The foreigners who lived there are not “refugees” trying to live a better life in Rio de Janeiro, the choice for such a location was based on the appreciation of the postcard “view” of the “fantasy” Rio as a metonymy of Brazil (Pesavento 1995; 2002, Altmann 2021).

I reach for José Guilherme Magnani (1992) to help me in this self-reflection, when he presents the conceptualizations about “piece,” “path,” and “stain.” For the author, “piece” is the intermediate space between public and private, street and house, characterized by two basic components, one spatial and the other symbolic. From these references, complex relationships of personal investment are established, involving categories of loyalty, presence, and common codes for the subject to become “of the piece.” A path “unites complementary, alternative, or antagonistic points in the urban landscape as a result of the application of a logic of compatibilities” (Magnani 1992, 201). Whereas “stain” are spaces “cut by paths, divided by porticos, and punctuated by pieces” (Magnani 1992, 201).

I define myself as an intruder because the place of isolation was not my home. I ended up turning the Pereirão favela into a “stain” of my daily life “paths,” and I stayed there because of the beginning of the lockdown sanitary measures. My apartment was on Cândido Mendes street, in the Glória neighborhood, it could easily have been one of those buildings I was photographing. However, even there in Glória and in the category of the South Zone as carioca petite bourgeoisie and middle class, I was also an intruder. Enjoying this imaginary and fantasized “South Zone” position was a novelty compared to the 25 years of life I had experienced so far, and it was only possible for me because I had gotten a “good job” thanks to the university experience I had cultivated, but would lose in the near future.

Therefore, I was not part of either of the two “pieces” (Magnani 1992). I felt caught in a knot, inhabiting the in-between place, closer to the conceptualization of “wayfaring” presented by Timothy Ingold (2015), in which a person’s movement is a line of history and experience, “as soon as a person moves he or she becomes a line” (Ingold 2015, 149). In other words, by carrying out the mythopoetic exercise of the photographs herein, organizing them in this article, I am raising the maxim that in “wayfaring [...] things are instantiated in the world as their paths of movement, not as objects located in space. They are their stories” (Ingold 2015, 162), that

is, my not belonging to places was a consequence of the wayfaring mode. Classifying these perspectives – favela × south zone, dystopian × utopian and etc – was the way I found to express the knowledge generated from this experience.

Having outlined these possible conclusions made me reflect on the research I was developing, since, for me to write a good quality text, I needed to answer questions regarding my role as an ethnographer: What really was my perspective? And what was really looking at me?

## THE RETURN

*Vago, solúvel no ar, fico sonhando...  
E me transmuta... iriso-me... estremeço...  
Nos leves dedos que me vão pintando!*

Rua dos Cataventos I, Mário Quintana (2005).



IMAGE 8  
Distant

In Image 8, I tried to center the building, but it was intersected by the geometry of the other buildings in front of it. Behind the centered building is nature and in the left corner a small slice of another favela, like a “stain” or would it be a “flawed act” in the discourse of the image? Which

would potentially evidence the “optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis” (Magnani 1999, Benjamin 1931/1985, 94)? That is, photography carries the power to expose plots, which could pass unsuspected, hidden or invisible to the naked eye, but I reiterate in this image the concern of Walter Benjamin (1931/1985), in which a photographer needs to know how to read his own works, as well as the importance of the caption for the image.

Therefore, I understand this photograph as an attempt to show the real and the social distance from the difference (Luna 2012), that is, the urban image becomes as a discursive space of power (Roca 2012), a contradiction in being. For, “[...] isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn’t it the task of the photographer – descendant of the augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?” (Benjamin 1931/1985, 107). In other words, exposing the economic inequality of the urban macro-scripture, as a detail behind the buildings, is what exposes the “crime.”



**IMAGE 9**  
socially distant  
view

In Image 9, I zoom out of the camera and register what surrounds the window outside, the water tank, the bricks and tile of the favela and in the background the “fantasy” Rio de Janeiro. For, the “context that creates the imaginaries, the promiscuity of images and the constitutive force of signs works within contemporary processes of subjectivation” (Luna 2012,

27) (my translation)<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, as much I was an intruder in that place and represented a “social” symptom, there was an affectivity inherent to me, which was circumscribed in my speech and language (accent and slang), which reflect the experience acquired in 20 years, between childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, in Rio de Janeiro. That is, of deep identification in the contradiction that is being alive and having made such a “path”/“wayfaring” in this city (Magnani 1992, Ingold 2015).



**IMAGE 10**  
Socially distant  
spices 2

In Image 10, I return to the starting point of this essay, but now the focus is on the spices, and the landscape of “fantasy” Rio is blurred. Thus, I retreat into the introspection of thinking about the contradictions, the betweenness, that I would come to face as a young anthropologist with the task of writing a master’s dissertation in the coming months of that year (Duarte 1996). Later, I organized such “subjective” confusions and contradictions in my research by defining the dynamics of my field as “sound-sensory flows” through the conceptual aid of Ulf Hannerz (1997), as the way of dealing with the in-betweenness among subjects, sounds and affectivities in the lofi hip hop web, was only possible for me to understand through the idea of “movement in flow”.

12. Original: “En un contexto en el que la gestión de los imaginarios, la promiscuidad de las imágenes y la fuerza constitutiva de los signos trabajan dentro de los procesos contemporáneos de subjetivación”

## CONCLUSIONS

In the practice of anthropology, photography is increasingly an interval between the image given to science and the image offered to art, as something placed inevitably on the border between evidence and mystery; as an object of dialogue between those who show and those who see, balanced forcibly or tastefully between information and communication; between understanding, interpretation, and the generous and desirable fruition of a rare and precious moment of beauty (Brandão 2004, 29) (my translation)<sup>13</sup>.

It was in this way that I understood the mythopoetic exercise carried out in this article, as belonging to a gap between art and the production of knowledge.

Although these photographs have no apparent connection with my master's research, they represent the subjectivity of my preparation to experience the field and object that I set out to study. In this case, the dilemma of doing a digital ethnography on the lofi hip hop expressive form, since my interaction in groups, chats, and comments belonged to a sphere of "virtual relations," in which I dealt with avatars, nicknames, masks, representations of people and their ideas (Rifiotis 2016, Landarini 2021). I strained to ask myself, what was I looking at? What was looking at me?

Such questions, add up to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, because during the moment of "collective trauma, the widespread fear, the lurking pain, everything [...] disorients and ends up inviting us to sort affections, tenderness, sadness - and thus to discover unforeseen longings, to mourn previously unsuspected losses" (Gajanigo and Souza 2021). Therefore, how to fabricate the ethnographic narrative under these conditions? The photography was a way of making life during the "limiting event" of the COVID-19 pandemic that organized my feelings so that I could deal with the research. Therefore, I sought in this article, to use the capacity of the image as a fragment belonging to its "*devir*" (Constantakos 2021) and its strength as a metaphor (Pineiro 2000, 132) to compose the experience I lived as a form of knowledge through visual anthropology.

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