

Sounding Out! Podcast #20: The Sound of Rio's Favelas: Echoes of Social Inequality in an Olympic City

Hello, I'm Andrea Medrado. I'm a lecturer at the Media School of Bournemouth University in the UK. Rio de Janeiro is hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and the Summer Olympics in 2016. This podcast is about the sounds of the city during the preparations for these mega sports events. How is the city changing, and how can these changes be heard in the sound streets?

Rio is at once joyful and poetic city and nature, laid back and energetic. Rio is also one of the most unequal cities in the world. Looking over the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, their countless favelas on the hillsides. You will hear how the soundscapes of Rio speak of a process of elitization, gentrification, and what's worse, a process of eviction of impoverished communities as a consequence of the preparations for the World Cup and the Olympics. You will hear the echoes of fun and excitement, but also the echoes of racial, gender, and social exclusion. You will hear the beats of the carioca samba, but also you will hear the voices of those who live in Rio Favelas. I'm in a taxi, and we are taking the Liam Vega Expressway from Rios International Airport to the south zone of the city, and from the window, I can see that there are plastic and concrete walls, and they have been stalled along the expressway. I ask the taxi driver why. The city's authorities say that this was built as a form of **acoustic barrier**. The idea here is to protect the residents of complex Sudamare, which is an agglomeration of favelas, which border the expressway, from sound pollution and from the traffic noises.

But what is noise? In a book called *Noise*, David Hendy argues that noise is not always a sound out of place. It's not just something inappropriate. It's not just something irritating. Noise is more important than this. To quote Hendy, "noise is a sound that someone somewhere doesn't want to be heard." The question then is, who gets to make a noise, and who doesn't? Who gets their voices heard? Who doesn't? Who gets to listen? Who doesn't?

For example, when we speak with the residents of Favela Da Maré, they are not convinced at all that the walls have been built to protect them from the noises of traffic and sound pollution. They then ask, "Since when have the authorities been concerned with poor people's acoustic comfort?" They tell us a very different story. These barriers are not there to protect their ears. They are there to protect the eyes of tourists who come to Rio from the sight of poverty.

But sound does not respect space, as Bull and Back remind us, and so no walls can prevent us from hearing the sounds of the favelas and Rio's voices of dissent.

The FIFA World Cup and the Olympics might be all about competition, but the residents of Rio's favelas do not accept to stay out of the game. They rightly claim their share of the marvelous city. Famous for being the marvelous city, Rio is also infamous for its violence, shootings, stray bullets, police confrontation with drug dealers. These were all frequent events in people's daily lives. Yet the concerns with violence, the concerns with public safety, do seem to have decreased in recent years.

The government has introduced a policy of pacification of Rio favelas. This policy involves a military-style invasion of selected slums, and these favelas are then occupied by police forces, which are called police pacification units, or UPPs in Portuguese. For many residents, this was one of the most important benefits that events such as the Olympics have brought to the city. I can definitely feel a much more relaxed atmosphere in Rio. I'm walking in the upper-class neighborhood of Flamengo, where I'm staying. As I walk towards the beach, I can see people calmly passing by. There are some parents playing in the park with the kids. There are people relaxing on the beach. I can see Rio's scenic sugar loaf, and I can hear the sounds of a pacified city. In wealthy and charming Copacabana, hundreds of people, many of them tourists, use its sidewalk and its sandy beaches to play volleyball, football, to jog, to skate, to flirt, to sip some caipirinhas, or to simply relax. At night, Copacabana is vibrant and bohemian, with several small bars or botecus. I'm right in front of a small bar in Copacabana.

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There are musicians of various ages sitting around a table playing traditional and modern sambas. I have been warned that the owner of this bar is very, very particular about noise. He strictly forbids the customers from talking while the band is playing, and he shouts at those customers who disrespect his rule. If people just want to drink beer and talk rather than listen to the music, then they should leave the bar. People in the audience are not even allowed to clap their hands to applaud the band.

What you just heard was the sound of people clicking their fingers like this [snaps fingers], because this is a less noisy way to show their appreciation for the music. Others, such as David Hendy, for example, have written about how a sense of militancy about noise can often have a strong note of racial and class prejudice. Similarly, in upper class neighborhoods such as Copacabana here, the neighbor's tolerance to noise, or at least to some kinds of noise, tends to be much lower.

Bless and Solta argue that the **aural architecture** of a place has a social meaning. They establish concepts such as acoustic arenas, which are regions where listeners share the ability to hear a sonic event, here in Copacabana, it's very easy to hear the **aural** architecture of this bar. The

owner uses the samba music, his angry rants, and the audience's clicking of fingers to determine who gets included in the acoustic arena and who doesn't.

Aural architecture is the consequence of social, economic, and cultural forces. With the mega sports events, the oral personalities of different places in Rio are changing. Since the pacification program and Rio's winning of the two bids, the costs of renting and real estate have increased in absurd proportions in many many areas, and many people believe that in a few years only the very wealthy will be able to afford to live in Rio.

In a post for this blog, Nicholas Knouf asked, "What does finance sound like? Does it sound like the beeps made by cash registers? Does it sound like the shouting of offers to buy or to sell?" Well, you will now hear the sounds of Rio's popular market, Saara, which takes up several quarters in the city center. Loudspeakers, street vendors-they sell everything here: DVDs with evangelical music, fruit juices, clothes, shoes, nail varnish. The Sahara Market seems fairly untouched by the changes that the city is going through.

However, not very far from there, at Rua da Carioca, a traditional commercial street located in the city center. The situation is very different. As I walk along the street, I can see several protest banners. They say "No to unemployment! We have families!" The society Friends of Rua da Carioca, SACA, in Portuguese has started a petition against the purchase of historical buildings by an asset management firm, which has a record of corruption and money laundering, with the rising prices, shopkeepers who have worked there for their entire lives are now threatened of eviction. Also, in the city center at Huasin José, I spoke with Maria Dos Camelos. She has a stand there which sells clothes. She is also part of the popular committee for the World Cup and the Olympics, a network of local advocacy groups. When asked about the impact of the mega sports events, Maria said,

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[In translation] "The day when they decided that the World Cup and the Olympics would be hosted in Rio was like 9/11. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing. I knew that there would be no benefits for us. Those who benefit from it are the governor, the mayor, and Akiba Chista, a Brazilian billionaire, because the city is being sold to him. We won't have the right to work. We won't have the right to see the games. The tickets are too expensive, and we won't have the right to live in our own city."

Maria is not alone. What you are hearing are the debates promoted by the popular committee for the World Cup in the Olympics. They have launched a report on the human rights violations committed during the preparations for the mega events. These include the arbitrary evictions of

impoverished communities, a lack of transparency, the privatization and the gentrification of the city and of sports.

The privatization of the Maracanã Stadium epitomizes this. The government has been criticized for spending over 500 million dollars of public money to renovate the stadium, and then handing out its concession to a group of private companies that will manage and profit from the stadium for the next 35 years. Additionally, many people criticize a process of elitization of Brazil's most popular sport, football.

The gentrification has also affected many of the city's pacified favelas. This has happened in Favela da Providencia, for example, which one of Rio's oldest favelas with an estimated 116 years of existence. Mauricio Ora, who's a photographer and a resident of Favela da Providencia, took me to the top of the hills. Mauricio shows me the cable car, which is being constructed at Favela da Providencia. A few meters from it, we can see open sewers and leaking plumbing pipes. On the top of the hills, we can see kids play with a broken teeter-totter. And what's worse, several houses are marked for eviction. Mauricio then tells me that he is not against these developments, but he thinks that Providencia has definitely other priorities.

There are many more urgent, cheaper things that could be done here. Many of the interventions that are being imposed on favela residents manifest in the form of suppression of sounds. The pacification police units sometimes do not allow parties to be held on the streets. Residents need to ask them for permission for everything. The community's autonomy, which manifests sonically, is being threatened.

This seems to be the case here at Favela da Providencia. Things are really quiet, as you can hear. In the beginning of this podcast, I mentioned Complexo da Maré, which has been covered by a wall. Many believe that the aim is to make Maré invisible. I wanted to see and listen to Maré closely, so I went there. Maré is an interesting case because it has not been occupied by the police pacification units yet, in what ways are the soundscapes of a non-pacified favela different from those of a pacified favela, for example?

As soon as I approach Huateshera Hiberu, I'm struck by why the participants in my previous research in a favela in Salvador referred to as a **sound salad**, there are many loudspeakers playing all kinds of music. At some points, it's impossible to identify where one rhythm begins and the other ends. This is a sound salad because many rhythms and many sounds are completely mixed.

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This soundscape indicates that, as opposed to the ways in which much Western literature tends to treat listening as an individual and private phenomenon, in the favelas, listening is often a collective and a public activity, as the Brazilian author Catarina Farias de Oliveira suggests. Inside

the homes of Maré, besides the mixture of music, one can hear the shouting of evangelical pastors from the neighboring churches, the sounds of children playing and crying. Neighbors communicate with each other by shouting, each from their own homes. If compared to my experience at the bar in Copacabana, the boundaries between public and private are so much more blurred here. As Mark Smith put it, in Maré, noise is a powerful symbol of vitality, industriousness, progress, community.

In fact, in the favelas, silence can often have a very sinister connotation. A song called "O Silêncio Que Precede o Esporro" by the band O Rappa, which can be loosely translated as "The Sound That Precedes the Blast" illustrates this. First, one can hear the sound of firecrackers. They're fired to warn the drug dealers that the police have entered the favela and warn the residents that there will be shootings. What follows is a suffocating silence. People turn off the music and whisper to each other. Then this oppressive silence is followed by the sound of gunfire, the sound of people running, people screaming as the police chase the drug dealers. Once the favelas are pacified, the soundscapes change significantly. The sounds of shootings, for example, become less frequent. But the pacification also implies silencing the sounds of street parties, and from the perspective of favela residents, these sounds are associated with the spontaneity of community life. Renata Souza, a resident of Mariana, a PhD student at Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, explains

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[Translation] The favela has two enemies: the rival gangs who want to control the drug-selling spots, and the police. Once the pacification unit is installed, the rival drug dealers no longer try to enter that favela, but the drug kings that were there previously will stay. The pacification units do not end drug dealing in the favela. When the favela is pacified, we hear less sounds of shootings and gunfire, which make us all nervous. The problem is that the pacification units don't bring services like health, education, job opportunities. They only come in as the new owners of the place. Their logic is that of a military dictatorship, because they forbid everything.

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A few days after I left Brazil, the voices of dissent became much louder. Initially, the protests were against increases in the prices of public transport in São Paulo, but soon they escalated into big waves of protests, which swept a large number of cities all over the country. Brazilians are unhappy about what they consider a wrong set of priorities. Costly mega sports events should not come first. What do they want? Better infrastructure, public transport, and public services. Less corruption, less violence, more transparency. To start this podcast, you listened to the sounds of sports-loving crowds cheering the grandstands. And to conclude it, you will listen

to the sounds of the streets, because the streets, as one popular protest sign says, are Brazil's greatest grandstands.

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