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Favela Tourism

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Interviewer: Alison Naturale

Senior Lecturer of Sociology at Getulio Vargas Foundation (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Bianca Freire-Medeiros was a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe) at Lancaster University. She has published extensively in several languages on Urban Sociology, Mobility Studies and Visual Culture. Since 2005, she has investigated tourism activities in different segregated spaces. Her latest publication is the book *Touring Poverty* (Advances in Sociology Series, Routledge, 2013).

When did you first become involved with mobilities research?

I would say that I was doing mobilities research before knowing that I was doing mobilities research, because the title of my PhD is *The Travelling City*. It was already about the representations of Rio de Janeiro circulating around the world, through different meanings. But I became much more aware of mobilities from 2005 onwards I would say, when I actually started reading more on people like John Urry and Mimi Sheller.

What does mobilities mean to you?

I think it's about something that is actually happening empirically, but it's also a way of thinking theoretically. And once you get introduced to this kind of thinking, it's hard to go back to the more conventional ways, but it's also very challenging, because with mobilities thinking comes the question, how can you actually work as a social scientist and researcher on a mobile world?

How do you use mobilities in your research?

My research is about how the way the Favela has become a trademark and a tourism destination. So it has a lot to do with this whole phenomenon of poverty as a tourism attraction. And because this subject is already something that goes on internationally, I had to be mobile myself – in terms of going to different places. But not only that, but the fact that my “subjects” were mobile. For example, tourists would come and stay for three hours in this touristic Favela, and I was developing different methodologies to follow them around. Not only shadowing, but also following them afterwards.

I’ve published a couple of things about this and there is a book that came out earlier this year, which is called, *Touring Poverty* (2013), and I discuss some methodological issues concerning mobile studies. And this is really theoretically challenging, because my whole argument is that there was this exotic representation of poverty from the global South to the rich North and that’s the target. These rich people would come and be in touch with something that they are not aware of, which is poverty, and they would have this first-hand contact with something that is very mediated. But that’s not totally it anymore. In this particular case it’s quite interesting that this *Teleferico do Alemão* cable car is providing a different experience, which is quite inclusive even of the Favela residents, who are going to this particular place and enjoying the ride. But this is what I need to research further, because I think it’s much more about the ride than the Favela itself for the domestic public, for the non-international tourists. And it’s also kind of tricky because this is an even more detached experience than the other kind of Favela tourism, because even though it was very short in time, at least it was people on the

ground. And now this is completely from above, completely from heights, and with a very limited interaction with the population.

But when I started researching this topic, I didn't know it was a global phenomenon. I didn't know it was *that* big in Rio itself. I was asking stupid questions and I think this is the research process. What I've really appreciated throughout the years is that we came up with this whole network of people who are interested in this phenomenon. People from Germany, people from South Africa, people from India, we are working together and that's quite exciting.