






## The challenge of decolonizing knowledge: the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary*


### El desafío de la descolonización del conocimiento: el *Diccionario de favelas Marielle Franco*

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**ABSTRACT** Dominant social groups describe favelas based on negative stereotypes, which are increasingly being challenged by various collective actors. Originating from a collaborative effort carried out by academics and favela residents, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* is an online platform that aims to spread alternative narratives regarding these territories and their populations through collective knowledge building. This article discusses the common ground and points of contention regarding the different forms of knowledge held by academics, activists, and favela residents. Furthermore, we reconstruct the trajectory of the Dictionary's creation, and in so doing overcome certain tensions and incorporate other languages and registers able to support the production of memory in favelas.

**KEY WORDS** Favelas; Urban Area; Decolonial Studies; Brazil.

**RESUMEN** Los sectores dominantes de la sociedad describen las favelas a partir de definiciones negativas a priori, que han sido cuestionadas por diversos actores colectivos. A partir de una iniciativa conjunta de la comunidad académica y quienes residen en las favelas, se crea el *Diccionario de Favelas Marielle Franco* como una plataforma en línea que, a través de la construcción colectiva del conocimiento, busca difundir diferentes narrativas sobre estos territorios y sus poblaciones. En este artículo, discutimos cómo se produjeron los acuerdos y divergencias entre el conocimiento de la comunidad académica, activistas y habitantes de barrios marginalizados; y presentamos la trayectoria de la construcción del Diccionario, que busca superar tensiones y así incorporar otros lenguajes y registros capaces de sustentar las producciones y memorias de las favelas.

**PALABRAS CLAVES** Favelas; Espacios Urbanos; Estudios Decoloniales; Brasil.

## INTRODUCTION

The process of knowledge production is almost always permeated by obstacles, from languages and forms of expression/manifestation of thought to power relations perpetuated by the colonization of knowledge and groups. Therefore, reality and its subjects are produced – and disputed – through the common ground and points of contention among stories and narratives. In this sense, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* ([www.wikifavelas.com.br](http://www.wikifavelas.com.br)) was born from encounters that made evident the points of contention that, as part of the reproduction of social relations and the economy of symbolic exchanges, are socially imposed upon the production of knowledge and political practices. As a particular case and an ongoing experience, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* is part of a process of collective production of knowledge. Fundamentally, it deals with the common ground/points of contention among researchers who study different aspects of the urban experience and are activists for human and social rights of citizenship and favela leaders who claim their place as subjects in the production of knowledge and emancipatory practices. In a mixture of both denouncement of the objectification and subordination to which favela residents have always been submitted by academia and the affirmation of their power and knowledge, relationships of trust were built that supported alliances and coalitions, without overlooking the persisting social gaps. Therefore, this work analyzes and reflects upon a still ongoing process, so as to learn and offer contributions from the experience.

We recognize that the prevailing fragmentation in academic production breaks knowledge into multiple disciplinary areas that make it impossible to understand complex social phenomena such as the reality of Brazilian favelas and peripheries, in this case, studied from urban, historical, anthropological, sociological, public policy, economic, and linguistical perspectives, among others. On the other hand, the hierarchization of

knowledge builds a pyramid in which lived experiences, popular knowledge, social practices, and even academic production from cultural centers in the favelas are hierarchically inferior due to the limitations to their circulation and dissemination in intellectually recognized environments such as universities.

The recent spread of information technologies has led to the contradictory situation of democratizing access and allowing for a rich production of audiovisual materials while increasing the intergenerational and interclass technological divide. This contradiction occurs since these technologies circulate in the market with scarce government regulation and provision. The last public policy aimed at favela territories and populations in the state of Rio de Janeiro, the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) [*Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*], became a process of militarization<sup>(1)</sup> where the police used technology for social control and residents used it to report police officers' abuses.

Paradoxically, the military occupation of favelas generated spaces for the circulation of people and discourses, allowing for new encounters among activists of different causes and the recognition of the insurgencies manifested by a great variety of collectives and local organizations that fought for citizenship rights and did not accept the place society had assigned them.

Recognizing this process of subjectivation, of subjects expressing their discourse, led us to consider the need to create an instrument that, despite the points of contention mentioned above, would allow different discourses to come together and confront one another in a virtual, collective, common space. With no pretention of overcoming these discrepancies, but rather to offer a space for subjects to express themselves, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* emerged.

In this article, we seek to explain the theoretical-philosophical foundations that guided the construction of the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* as an experience under development, although identifying such foundations was only possible *a posteriori* since this is a process of collective production that is, by

nature, unfinished. Identifying these foundations was necessary in order to put them in conversation with the practice, which allowed us to observe different stages in the construction of the dictionary. In this sense, this article presents what we can, today, understand as stages of implementation of this experience. This effort is also an example of the challenges of the collective production of knowledge.

The first section sets out the assumptions that guided the *Favela Dictionary* project and how it materialized on a wiki platform. Then, we look at the first stage of this process, the implementation of the *Favela Dictionary* – WikiFavelas – in which the assumptions were confronted with the difficulties found in practice. In the second section, we outline the challenges, advances, paradoxes, and contradictions faced, which reveal transversalities and tensions imposed by the social reality. The third section addresses how the confrontation of these tensions stimulated the search for alternatives, which constituted a second stage, focused on the mobilization, production, and dissemination of knowledge. We sought to find forms of expression of the collectives that originated in the favelas suited to the Internet, which required changing the platform's technology in order to incorporate, in addition to written text, images and videos, music, and poetry, bringing the dictionary closer to the oral tradition that prevails in the favelas. At the same time, we strengthened the dictionary research team's active search for content produced in the favelas. The fourth section presents the third stage dedicated to SARS-CoV-2 in the favelas. This section details how the project came to focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, describing how the pandemic and the demands of the actors from the favelas affected the *Favela Dictionary* and inverted the research team's efforts, towards the organization of the material produced and sent from the favelas. In this ongoing phase, the *Favela Dictionary* extends beyond the platform and starts to have political intervention and influence through live broadcasts on social media where leaders from favelas talk about how

they face the pandemic and what daily life is like for favela residents. These activities required greater investment in communication, dissemination, and production of data, maps, and cartographies, from which new alliances, coalitions, and articulations emerged. Therefore, in the final section, the conclusion, we reflect on the political content of this process and its sustainability.

## FOUNDATIONS FOR A PROPOSAL OF DECOLONIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Since the mid-twentieth century, discussions about favelas as a specific field of study have been present in the literature of social sciences and urbanism. However, this knowledge is fragmented, and the knowledge produced by populations living in favelas and peripheric regions remains largely unknown. The dispersion of knowledge about favelas and the fragmentation of this knowledge into numerous disciplinary fields were the initial stimuli for a project conceived of initially by Sonia Fleury in 2014, that would be able to bring together not just the academic production – theses and papers that rarely made it back to those interviewed in the favelas – but also other forms of knowledge produced by the populations living in these territories.

The project was called the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* as a tribute to Franco, a city council member from Rio de Janeiro who was savagely murdered along with her driver Anderson Gomes on March 14, 2018. More than three years after this brutal crime, society, her family, and her constituents and voters still do not know who killed her or why. Among the few certainties, it is known that this was a political crime. Elected with 46,502 votes in 2016 at the age of 37, she had the fifth largest number of votes among all city council members and the second largest among women council members. Marielle's political influence did not begin in the Rio de Janeiro City Council, nor did it end after her death. The *Favela Dictionary* has an entry that describes Franco's life and political trajectory.<sup>(2)</sup>

In the preface to Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre<sup>(3)</sup> addresses colonization, stating of the relationship between colonizers and colonized that "the former had the Word; the others had the use of it." The objective of the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* is to seek a plural and horizontal space, where different producers of knowledge about the favelas could make use of the word. Someone sought to silence Marielle, who represented the hope of new political practices that would allow the representation of black women, favela residents, and LGBTQIA+ people. Therefore, valuing these voices is another way of preserving her legacy.

The proposal to decolonize knowledge about favelas is guided by the search to overcome the compartmentalized world, breaking the dividing lines established as territorial marks of domination.<sup>(4)</sup> In this article, we chose to consider the concept of "decolonization" to represent the historical process of overcoming colonialism in its classical sense and to suggest an attitude of transgression toward the coloniality of knowledge and power, which is in place even in the post-colonial period.<sup>(5)</sup> The demarcation "asphalt" (non-favela)/favela, for example, implies a permanent strategy for the exercise of power defined by Foucault<sup>(6)</sup> as *governmentality*, to refer to a "very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technological instrument."

Therefore, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* creates a virtual space that is not demarcated by the dividing lines of non-favela/favela, associated with other polarizations such as order/disorder, legal/illegal, white/black, included/excluded. Thus, it refers to construction of the other not as compartmentalization, but following an ethics of plurality and alterity framed within the struggles to construct a democratic and inclusive society.

As the population of favelas and peripheries is mostly Black and *pardo* [mixed race], it is necessary to understand how the element of race operates in the process of subalternity

and exclusion, potentiating the issue of territory. Power relations are reproduced by associating the idea of race with forms of labor control and exploitation, coloniality that Quijano identifies as originating in the Americas: "This foundational element of colonial exploitation allowed the imposition of a racial division of labor" [own translation].<sup>(7)</sup> Thus, the issue of race is central in the production of the *Favela Dictionary*, understanding, as Guerreiro Ramos proposed, that Brazilian sociology will only cease to be colonized when it connects with its reality, assuming its Black becoming as a central issue of research.<sup>(8)</sup> Mbembe explains that race is an iconic currency, which appears as a commerce of the gaze:

It is a currency whose function is to convert what one sees (or what one chooses not to see) into a species or symbol at the heart of a general economy of signs and images that one exchanges, circulates, attributes value to or not, and that authorizes a series of judgments and practical attitudes.<sup>(9)</sup>

Making visible what is hidden, such as the structural racism of Brazilian society, is a decolonizing perspective that validates knowledge based on social relations that are evaded by the dominant epistemology.<sup>(10,11)</sup> The division of the city between formal city and favela is a racial division, which results in the symbolic and coercive ban on the circulation of Black people in the formal city, outside of the labor circuit. Black bodies will always be suspect when they break outside these boundaries.

However, in the process of domination, other transversalities are imposed that encompass the populations and territories of favelas and peripheries. For Lélia Gonzales, the explanation for the persistent inequality in Brazilian capitalism, which is a territory of coloniality, has to consider the economic exploitation combined with racism and sexism. The author observes that "the lowest levels of participation in the workforce, coincidentally, refer precisely to women and the Black

population” [Own translation].<sup>(12)</sup> In other words, one cannot decolonize without depatriarchalizing.<sup>(13)</sup>

The naturalization of domination through sexual division is part of a symbolic violence that materializes in bodies and *habitus*. Bourdieu<sup>(4)</sup> sees sexism as an essentialism like others – racism, ethnicity, or classism – that attributes historically constructed social differences to biological nature. He therefore sees it as an essentialism more deeply ingrained and more difficult to change.

In this way, we built the theoretical framework that underlies the praxis of elaboration and implementation of the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary*, positioning ourselves in the debate on the process of decolonization of knowledge. However, the mere development of an instrument that allows the dissemination of the discourses of favela residents cannot provoke a process of transformation in the subjectivity of these populations. The subject precedes the word, the subject exists before the discourse, even though the individual is constituted through practices and material and symbolic struggles, asserting their consciousness in that permanent tension between social determination and the affirmation of individual and collective freedom.<sup>(15)</sup>

The creation and feasibility of the *Favela Dictionary* can be understood as part of a more general process – which we can observe and share in research carried out in favelas and in recent literature – that D’Andrea<sup>(16)</sup> calls the emergence of the peripheral subject. It is about the affirmation and positivization of the identity of a portion of youth from the favelas and peripheral areas, built around the polarization between their needs and potencies, a place from which, through cultural and aesthetic manifestations, issues of class, race, and gender are problematized. Such issues appear in different struggles and cultural expressions, such as song lyrics and in their own aesthetics (hip-hop and funk, poetry, and dance), as manifested in the *slam* and dance battles, among others.

### **Building an open, free, and common environment: WikiFavelas**

The *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* was officially made available to the public for collaboration in April 2019 through an inaugural event held at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation Library in Rio de Janeiro. The launch brought together a group of researchers and social leaders to discuss the possibilities opened up by a network that seeks to group and share the knowledge produced about and by the favelas in a collaboration mediated by digital technologies. The event was marked by tributes to the Rio councilor, available in the dictionary.<sup>(17)</sup>

In technological terms, the *Favela Dictionary* is organized based on a digital *wiki* platform, accessible through the website [www.wikifavelas.com.br](http://www.wikifavelas.com.br), which defines the rules for access, collaboration, and indexing of its content, among other things. Wikipedia, a technological inspiration for the *Favela Dictionary*, is seen as a free and collaborative encyclopedia where anyone can contribute. However, Esteves and Cukierman<sup>(18)</sup> explain that the voices of different actors have different weights, and the criterion that organizes the hierarchy is that of the forum itself; unrestricted editing can be regulated by participants with different privileges.

Considering the limitations arising from the rules of Wikipedia, it was decided to create a separate wiki for the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary: WikiFavelas*. Unlike Wikipedia, whose texts by multiple authors are presented as consensual, the *Favela Dictionary* is characterized by the plurality of points of view, with authored text and identification of controversies and divergences, within rules of respect for democratic values. However, these politically justifiable options represent enormous challenges for the information technology team, requiring original solutions.

The previous existence of an informal network bringing together researchers dedicated to the study of favelas and political and cultural leaders from the favelas and peripheries of Rio de Janeiro allowed these intellectuals to come to the favelas to jointly discuss

the *Favela Dictionary* project. An editorial board was institutionalized as a body responsible for defining participation rules, formulating strategies, and mobilizing participants. The editorial board has a balanced composition of intellectuals, members of favela organizations, and academia. The constitution of a multidisciplinary team of researchers was carried out with a group specialized in information technology responsible for the WikiFavelas platform and another group of social scientists responsible for the entries, defined as authored manifestations about the favelas and presented as open pages of an online platform.

In addition to interdisciplinarity and technological challenges, issues related to authorship and content preservation were topics of the first meetings. With respect to authorship, for example, the *Favela Dictionary* uses a Creative Commons license and thus does not establish individual authorship rights. It is understood that an entry is a collective construction and cannot be reduced to a single author. However, the editorial board established that authors who start an entry will be mentioned as “original author” in the text header, and others with the role “registered contributor” may add new sections to the entry or start a discussion, through which they can present their questions and considerations. A registered collaborator is any user who, free of charge, registers their data on the platform and may create entries and/or initiate discussions. As a platform open to the public, even unregistered users have free access to entries. Registration is important precisely in order to collaborate with the collective production of knowledge.

The major issues faced in this first phase were related to the paradox of proposing a new epistemology that included the knowledge produced both by academic researchers and by favela residents, through a technological instrument that is not exempt from the validation of the knowledge produced, as it is mediated through the hegemony of written as well as technical language. Great efforts were made to mobilize potential collaborators in the favelas and peripheries, who were

enthusiastic about the proposal, but had difficulties producing texts within the established rules and inserting them on the WikiFavelas platform. Despite the horizontality theoretically proposed in introductory workshops presenting the platform in a number of favelas, the relations between the research team and residents remained hierarchical and tutorial. This was further complicated by the command of writing and information technology required within a platform whose rules had been previously defined by a select group. Beyond individual efforts and personal relationships, the academic context imposes a framework that intimidates and puts in a position of subalternity those who reside in favelas. During the conception period, the first location of the project’s office in the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration of the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV-EBAPE) was a challenge for engagement of members of the editorial board. The school, increasingly focused on business and finance and distanced from issues related to the favelas, was an intimidating environment for participants due to its architecture, security measures, and aesthetics that translated into an elitist educational project. Proposing a collaborative, plural, and horizontal production in a highly hierarchical institutional and technological context generated great discomfort. Favela representatives on the editorial board requested to change the location of the meetings to the favelas, which prompted team members to present the project at various meetings with residents in different cultural centers in these territories. When the project’s office moved to Fundação Oswaldo Cruz – located close to the favelas of Maré, Alemão, Manguinhos, and Jacarezinho – this problem was partially alleviated, as the institution already had several projects in collaboration with neighboring favelas.

The mobilization of collaborators in the first part of the project occurred through invitations made by working groups, meetings in favelas, and workshops so that potential participants could learn to use the platform’s instruments. Scholars, favela residents, activists, and public administrators were invited

to write entries based on a list of proposed topics. In 2017 and 2018, 386 people from different social backgrounds were invited to propose topics, and in April 2019, when the *Favela Dictionary* was officially launched, the platform had 178 entries on various topics within the proposal's scope. Currently, in 2021, there are approximately 1000 entries on the platform.

Despite the success achieved in the initial phase, it was clear that the dynamics of mobilizing collaborators were still limited to our networks of contacts and interests, which meant that the content was openly biased. Unfortunately, this showed that the *Favela Dictionary* team had not achieved an exponential growth in collaborators, from favelas or universities. Although it was possible to incorporate a significant list of entries into the dictionary, there were clear limits to both the academic production and that based on lived experience, and it was necessary to find ways to overcome the constraints evidenced in this first phase. The existence of the platform as a device at the disposal of favela populations would only be relevant if we asked ourselves about the subjects and how they intervene in the construction or deconstruction of devices<sup>(19)</sup> as a network of social relations among those who produce information, those who allow circulation through technical devices, those who intervene to facilitate its dissemination, and those who appropriate the information.

It was also possible to identify from the start discursive appropriations, and the circulation of these narratives through the instrument of the dictionary amplified denunciations and protest. For example, the list of entries on "*chacinas*" (massacres) stands out, which began to tell the stories of those who lost their lives, in general, young Black people who were victims of police brutality. The organization of victims' family members and the need to vocalize, denounce, and keep alive the events through demonstrations, words, signs, and images represents "more radically ... [their] manifestation in the form of an epiphany,"<sup>(9)</sup> since it prevents a second death, which is the death of the identity

of those young people, who the police call criminals killed in action.

## MOBILIZING ACTORS FOR THE PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

The WikiFavelas platform proposes breaking paradigms of knowledge production, valuing the plurality of knowledge construction in a format that is free, interdisciplinary, and open to the public. However, this attempt to break the hierarchies of knowledge production has faced barriers, from the technical difficulties previously mentioned to other challenges related to expression within the repressive regime of colonialism and racism.<sup>(20)</sup> Who will really share their memories on an open platform? Who will consider this knowledge as legitimate knowledge? It is useful to consider Spivak's<sup>(21)</sup> line of questioning: Can one speak from the place of subalternity? Furthermore, can someone else speak for the subaltern? How can a viable space be created that does not reproduce the narrative, epistemological, and symbolic violence that awards institutions and modern science a notion of superiority? These are challenges that, in the face of political and epistemological dispute, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* has had to address.

The production and reproduction of knowledge are framed in cultural and political contexts in which the coloniality of knowledge and power transcends the particularities of historical colonialism and does not disappear with decolonization. "Epistemicide,"<sup>(10,11)</sup> for example, is a phenomenon that occurs daily through the lowering of self-esteem that racism and discrimination provoke in Black and peripheral youth, both in schools and research institutions. This phenomenon is connected to a denial of Black people as subjects of knowledge through the devaluation, denial, or concealment of the contributions of the African diaspora.<sup>(22)</sup> This is the reality of a significant part, if not the majority, of those who live in favelas

and peripheral areas throughout Brazil, who could not, therefore, appropriate their own stories and could not share them, effectively being silenced.

Through a decolonial perspective, the *Favelas Dictionary* problematizes the knowledge considered hitherto as scientific – centralized in universities – and its own memories, which often remove the involved subjects from the field of action to objectify them through other versions. The production of the city itself – fruit of knowledge and power arising from modern practices – also relegates the knowledge of subalterns and those who live in favelas. The right to memory and to the city are fundamental principles to be conquered through valuing the epistemology of favelas and peripheries. In addition to recovering epistemologies of the south, since these regions were European colonies in the past and are the periphery of capitalism in the present, revisiting the epistemologies of the peripheries of modern cities is part of the struggle for citizenship.

The strategy initially adopted for the production of entries was based on the definition of dimensions of analysis based on the reality of favelas and peripheries. These dimensions were organized through working groups – State and Market, Sociability and Culture, Associativism and Memory – that invited collaborators and conducted workshops in different favelas and peripheries to define and write entries. The organization in working groups was useful to create a collective debate about choices and rules, even though the topics are often transversal to these groups. However, the fact that there was a working group created specifically to gather leaders from favelas (Associativism and Memory), while there was another formed of scholars specialized in public policies (State and Market), reveals the difficulties in overcoming *epistemicide* and the hierarchization of academic scientific knowledge.

Cultural centers and organizations from favelas that had participated in the *Favela Dictionary* since the formulation of the project participated in the Associativism and Memory working group. They started producing the entries about such favela territories as

Complexo do Alemão, Santa Marta, Cidade de Deus, and Complexo da Maré, in Rio de Janeiro. Then the *Favela Dictionary* established partnerships with other territories, inviting coordinators and authors to produce entries in the favelas of Rocinha, Borel, Manginhos, and Acari, also in Rio de Janeiro, in addition to researchers from other regions of the country. In short, a ripple effect, like that formed by a stone in a pool, was created.

The priority topics and the choice of individual or collective authors were established under the leadership of coordinators responsible for cultural centers in each of these territories. The coordination had complete freedom to manage the production of entries through individual designations or collective production, with the possibility of offering workshops to help with writing.

Although the relationship between the team of researchers from the *Favelas Dictionary* and the leaders within the territories was built before the project, generating an important level of trust for the work, this differentiation of functions – project team and favela leaders – was always present as an unavoidable critical tension regarding power relations and latent hierarchies. Meetings among favela representatives before the general meetings and plenary sessions indicated the need to remain united in an environment that differentiated them and, as was sometimes questioned, put them in a position of subalternity. The increasing presence of members of the *Favela Dictionary* team in events promoted by the collaborating favelas was a natural way for knowledge to flow back and forth, respecting the singularities inherent in each context.

Even with the growing number of university students in the favelas, which is a result of local initiatives offering courses to prepare the population for the Brazilian higher education entrance exam, and the adoption of quota systems for admission, there are still semi-literate adults, young people with little command of writing and a preference for other forms of cultural demonstrations. Most young people use videos and photos to record their cultural expression or report



police abuse, thanks to expanding access to smartphone-type cell phones. Faced with this reality, the *Favela Dictionary* expanded its scope to other expressions and languages, making room for poems, photographs, interviews, and videos produced and shared on the platform.

In this second phase, which prioritized this expansion, the *Favela Dictionary* started to actively search for productions from collectives of young people that expose their actions on social media. For example, the *Favela Dictionary* team surveyed materials and data from secondary sources, other media, institutions, databases, Wikipedia, platforms, or even blogs already recognized for their work on this topic, such as RioOn-Watch. Thus, other potential partnerships were considered.

The recognition of the *Favela Dictionary* as an open space reveals an opportunity to connect collectives and groups that, for decades, have been building community organization in their territories. To give visibility to different actors, collectives, organizations, and social movements, they are invited to share their narratives, manifestos, films, and discourses, enabling the construction of new dialogues. Politically, the platform proposes an instrument available to the community, open to its different forms of expression. However, to what extent it really disputes the hegemonic narrative about those who live in the favelas is still a pending question.

The *Favela Dictionary* has fostered interactions on social media as a way to get closer to the experiences of those living in favelas and peripheries in the production and recording of their epistemologies, as well as to educators and researchers capable of producing and reflecting on shared knowledge. The Internet is also a space of constant dispute, both through commercial media and through the repercussion of hate speech amplified by the current democratic crisis. It is important to point out that the Internet is not equally available to all, with an unstable distribution in the favelas and peripheries. We could see, for example, that the vast majority of users

who access the platform do so through cell phones.

Due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, since March 2020, social media has become the only possible space for interaction and expansion of the scope of the *Favela Dictionary*. Focusing on discourse and communication, the mobilization for the collective construction of the platform advanced on social media, adding new languages to reach different audiences and their interests, which required the expansion of the research team to include professionals dedicated to better disseminating the platform's content and increasing its visibility.

The replacement of the initial dynamics of face-to-face working groups by the mobilization of collectives through social media increased the interactions with and visibility of the *Favela Dictionary*, reaching new participants and new partnerships. However, it also meant a shift of power towards the project's research team that could be felt in the editorial board. In the periodic meetings, the results of the team's work are presented, but this new form of organization has left members of the board without space for wider participation.

### **GOING BEYOND THE PLATFORM: COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION TO FACE THE PANDEMIC**

As previously mentioned, the *Marielle Franco Favela Dictionary* appears in a context of affirmation of the identity of the youth living in favelas and peripheries. This context is marked by the "by us for us" discourse in which leaders and collectives affirm the need for those in favelas to lead the fight for their own rights, which include not only the right to life but also to voice and memory. Different groups have been joining efforts to try and include in the public debate, more and more widely, representations of favelas that go beyond those presented by the government, the mainstream media, and outsiders such as researchers, who offer images of these territories

that do not resonate with a large part of the populations living there. The name of one of the collectives, *The Favela Will Not Be Quiet*, expresses this search for the favela to speak for itself. The number of favela communicators who use different means and formats to produce communication from within the territory is remarkable.

In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the “we for us” discourse gained even more strength. In March 2020, the pandemic arrived in Brazil, and vulnerable populations suffered devastating impacts reinforced by Brazilian society’s structural racism. Faced with the government’s failure to combat the spread of the pandemic in the favelas, several groups of residents organized themselves to deal with the effects of the economic, health, and social crisis generated by the spread of the disease. They worked to distribute food and cleaning materials, sanitize the favelas, register families, and collect data, among other activities.<sup>(23)</sup> The situation also required a wide dissemination of these activities to obtain internal and external support and resources for their continuity.

The dissemination of activities had to be conducted mainly online, through social media and existing virtual channels. The collectives therefore requested use of the Wiki-Favelas platform to publicize their actions and networks, thus reversing the direction of collaboration demands regarding the platform. In dialogue with project partners, an area was created on the *Favela Dictionary* platform to map the impacts of the pandemic in the favelas and peripheries, thus allowing for greater dissemination of the actions occurring in these territories. The section “Coronavirus in the Favelas”<sup>(24)</sup> disseminated websites with information about financial support, news from mass and community media about the pandemic in the favelas, audiovisual materials about the coronavirus produced by and for the favela, analyses and proposals for collective actions and public policies produced by the favelas, a survey of the collectives and action fronts to fight the pandemic, epidemiological panel data on coronavirus in the favelas, and more.

In this context, new challenges emerged for the *Mariella Franco Favela Dictionary* given its proposal to build an instrument to help amplify the voices of those living in favelas. This happened in three ways. First, the *Favela Dictionary* team started to map and insert information on the website: how to help residents; news produced by the commercial press and community media; informative materials made by the collectives, such as manifestos, proposals and action plans; panels with incidence and mortality data, etc. Next, favela groups started to suggest the inclusion of their actions in the *Favela Dictionary*. Finally, some groups started to create and edit pages directly on the platform, which evidenced a significant change in the way favela groups started to interact more actively on the platform, presenting demands rather than simply responding to what was requested by the staff, as had occurred more often before the pandemic.

These movements defined a third phase in the *Favela Dictionary*’s development. The dictionary started to be used more intensely to connect different groups from the favela and academia. In the framework of the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, the platform connected leaders from Complexo do Alemão, Cidade de Deus, Complexo da Maré, Rocinha, Santa Marta, and researchers from Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, the Pontifícia Universidade Católica-Rio and the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Together, these actors elaborated an action plan to confront COVID-19, focusing on the specificities of favelas. Subsequently, under the supervision of Observatório das Metrópoles in partnership with the *Favela Dictionary*, data on public services and the impacts of the pandemic in favelas and peripheries were collected through an online questionnaire. The information collected serves as a basis for political advocacy and defense of human rights with the Public Defender’s Office of the State of Rio de Janeiro. The results of this survey are available in the *Favela Dictionary*.<sup>(25)</sup>

When analyzing connections and collaborative productions like the dictionary, Telles et al.<sup>(26)</sup> highlight the existence of a chain of

practices, mediations, and connections that are established as types of urban capillarity among activist collectives and networks, transforming them into powerful agencies that produce information, knowledge, and modes of knowledge about territories and their populations.

It is a “collaborative epistemology,” mobilizing researchers, specialists (and their various expertise), collectives of activists, men and women in their life contexts, activating practical knowledge and knowledge about places, practices, and everyday circumstances affected by the pandemic, and by state violence in its various forms. These are collaborative epistemologies, or perhaps epistemopolitics that are anchored in the life of the city itself and its socio-technical networks, its networks of exchanges and interactions, and also of encounters, connections, convergences, and partnerships, socio-political forms built long ago and now updated under the emergency regime of the moment.<sup>(26)</sup>  
[Own translation]

As part of this “collaborative epistemology,” during the pandemic the *Favela Dictionary* started to mobilize researchers, specialists with various expertise, and activist collectives not only to work on the platform but to also go beyond it. Favela residents, community leaders, and researchers debated issues such as the right to education; the right to religious and spiritual expression; emergency aid and citizenship rights; mental health in the pandemic and domestic violence; unemployment and hunger; mobility and the right to the city: favela dwellers circulating around the city; urbanization versus displacement; police violence in the favelas; state violence and racism in the favelas and peripheries; the right to memory in pandemic times; culture and politics. All this material, recorded on video, comprises a unique collection of testimonies and political positions on how the pandemic affects the experience of favelas and is available to the public in the *Favela Dictionary*.<sup>(27,28)</sup>

This initiative during the pandemic made it possible to expand the participation of members of the editorial board. Made up of leaders from favelas and researchers well-known by the favela movements, the board members exercised their capacity to summon and dialogue with invited collectives, allowing the reflections elaborated in this space to be transformed into entries based on testimonies and analyses about how the pandemic was experienced in favelas and peripheries and how the structural problems faced by their populations were potentiated in this critical context. The space of debates or *epistemopolitics* wove sociotechnical connections and networks based on the experiences and struggles in the territories, unleashing collective reflections and proposals for joint actions.

The *Favela Dictionary* took on a dynamic that went beyond the platform as a possibility for storing and producing knowledge about the favela and acquired a firm dimension of mediation among political subjects who dispute meanings in the struggle for hegemony. Laclau<sup>(29)</sup> proposes that the central concept to understanding hegemony is that of articulation or practices capable of establishing equivalences among disperse meanings and a given signifier. The possibility of social change is found in the potential to attribute other meanings to a signifier that seemed to be definitive.

This understanding imposes an additional task: not just producing and storing knowledge in the form of entries on the platform, but facilitating the dissemination of this knowledge. Therefore, an effort was made to attract more visitors to the *Favela Dictionary* and spread the content produced by favela residents beyond the platform, investing in communication and intensifying the content’s publication on social media. In this way, the strategy for disseminating the content produced by collaborators on the platform was strengthened. It was possible to expand the reach of initiatives and forms of organization in the favelas and increase support from collectives to help fight the pandemic in these territories. More intensive

use of social media – Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp – strengthened communication and dissemination, in addition to the articulation of collaborations which increased capillarity and materialized the proposal of a collaborative epistemology.

This materialization took place through instruments such as the construction of a map of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, identifying the initiatives of different groups, and resulting in more donations to support the initiatives. The map can be accessed in the entry “Help the favelas fight COVID-19.”<sup>(30)</sup> In addition to dealing with the shortages, we participated alongside institutions that are also engaged in mapping actions to combat the COVID-19 in the favelas and peripheries, resulting in a unified production of data on the incidence of cases and deaths underreported in official statistics.

The force shown by collectives from favelas in the organization of space and collective actions, in the search for support and in denouncing the absence of adequate policies, even led to the production of epidemiological panel data, the methodology of which was progressively unified among the network of participating favelas. With the normalization of the pandemic situation, in general, and in the favelas and peripheries in particular, a significant reduction in the support that the collectives had been receiving can be observed. The start of the pandemic placed the entire society in a condition of vulnerability, leading to a situation of interclass empathy and solidarity. The normalization tends to dilute this effect, progressively reestablishing the social distance between the formal city and the favela.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *Marielle Franco Favelas Dictionary* can be understood as a device inserted in a web of social relations of power with the capacity to change them, in as much as it defines the rules for the production of discourse and the circulation of ideas. As it is not neutral, the imposition of this order will always be an

important part of the struggle for the ability to speak about the favela and the process of construction of the subjects who live there. The *Favela Dictionary* is an ongoing collective project that, by definition, is unfinished. It depends on the project’s design, whose theoretical and material bases have been elaborated and materialized throughout its trajectory, based on common ground and points of contention with egalitarian and horizontal principles in a society where rigid rules of hierarchy and exclusion prevail. This tension is permanent and leads us to face the contradictions imposed to create dialogic spaces based on an ethics of alterity, i.e., on the recognition that communication takes place among different people, politically equalized in the condition of respectability.

Confronting the models of colonial knowledge production challenges the powers that be and contributes to the decolonization and valorization of subaltern and peripheral knowledge, putting into dialogue the constellations of knowledge arising from the most different of social experiences, without hierarchies or discrimination. This dialogue, for example, expands with the arrival of “ex-objects” into the world of academic research.<sup>(31)</sup> The social and racial dynamics of Brazilian society and academia – the main institution responsible for the production and socialization of knowledge legitimized as scientific – considered Black people and favela residents only as objects of scientific research for many years. Affirmative action policies implemented in the last decade, in turn, opened a new field of epistemological and political tension with Black people and favela residents passing from a non-hegemonic to a counter-hegemonic place, disputing not only these spaces but also science itself.

In such spaces, where those subaltern were (not passively) silenced, postcolonial intellectuals, including the subaltern themselves, propose centering the perspectives of oppressed groups.<sup>(20)</sup> Therefore, based on their own experiences and subjectivities, new researchers reconfigure the hegemonic discourses about themselves, about history, and about any other aspect of everyday reality.

We understand the *Favela Dictionary* as a mediation, as an information technology that is not neutral and may be appropriated to participate in symbolic disputes of power, allowing for approximations and estrangements, coalitions, and confrontations. In the same way, we understand that the actions of the favela collectives related to the fight against the pandemic, in the form of denunciations or cultural production, are potentially political, because they imply a rupture with the place of silence that was reserved for them.

The emergence of insurgent citizenship in favelas and peripheries is attributed by Holston<sup>(32)</sup> to the existence of disjunctions in democracies that do not manage to guarantee the full array of citizenship rights to all its inhabitants, especially with respect to those

living on city margins. The polysemic manifestations of this subjectivity show that there may be an ongoing reconciliation process between the self and the subject,<sup>(9)</sup> a condition for the construction of memory. However, it is still too early to know to what extent relationships of subordination are being transformed into relationships of oppression, increasing agonizing conflicts, as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>(33)</sup> The conditions of production of the subaltern's memory and voice<sup>(34)</sup> would necessarily experience this process, and therefore the *Favela Dictionary* is both a social technology available for appropriation as well as a political actor engaged in the struggle for the emancipation of the populations of the favelas. Immersed in contradictions, our device navigates this reality and reconstructs itself.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no ties or commitments that that can be understood as a conflict of interests and may condition what is expressed in the text.

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