With the help from the Queen Mary University’s Expeditions fund, I was able to visit some of the favelas (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and to get to know a bit more about their musical phenomenon of funk carioca (a.k.a. favela funk). Here is a summary of how it all went.

THE IDEA

I am a second year undergraduate Hispanic studies student, so naturally I have a very strong interest in Hispanic and Latin American culture and language. I am specifically drawn to Brazilian music, film and literature; particularly to the growing musical phenomenon of funk originated in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. I have been watching lots of videos on youtube and doing a lot of research on the subject. One thing that caught my attention was the growing number of female favela rappers. Funk was originally a male-dominated territory in the Brazilian slums; however, the recent great commercial success achieved by female rappers such as Anitta, Ludmilla (MC Beyonce), Tati Quebra-Barraco (Tati Home-Wrecker) and Valesca Popozuda (Big-butted Valesca) is changing the face of the Brazilian Funk. Their lyrics are sometimes as crude (if not more) as of their male counter-parts. Some Brazilian scholars argue that this is being used as a feminist liberation movement within the deeply patriarchal and machista Brazilian society. This idea made me even more intrigued, and determined to find out more.
THE PLANNING

Fortunately, I speak fluent Portuguese, so the planning of the trip was of no great concern to me. My main apprehension consisted in securing the necessary funds to achieve my goal (2 weeks in Rio de Janeiro). So with the help from some family members, friends, student overdraft, credit cards and the Queen Mary’s Expeditions fund; I managed to book my flight, pay for my accommodation and finally go on this adventure!

THE ARRIVAL

The main thing that caught my attention when arriving was the overall excitement and preparations for the (then) upcoming 2016 Olympic games hosted in Rio de Janeiro.

Unfortunately, I missed the event as the air tickets and accommodation prices were considerably more expensive during the games. But since my focus in going to Rio was the favelas and the funk music, this made no difference to me. I was still very happy to see all the new venues and the party mood that was going on everywhere in town. In order to save money, I also stayed in the north zone of Rio (a.k.a. subúrbio carioco). The suburbs are where the working-class cariocas (people from Rio de Janeiro) generally live. Because the north of Rio is far from the beach, the prices are considerably lower than the south of Rio, which is where most of the touristic beaches are located (such as Copacabana and Ipanema). Luckily for me, the north part of Río is where most of the slums are located, and I stayed very close to one of the biggest slums in Rio de Janeiro: The Complexo do Alemão slum (with a population of over 69,143).

THE EXPERIENCE

In order to truly experience the carioca slums, I had to stay away from the regular tourist traps and try to blend in with the locals as much as possible. In order to do this, I talked to as many people as possible and made as many friends as I possibly could. The main favelas I visited were: The Complexo do Alemão and the Morro do Barbante (a.k.a. Vila Juiança), both located in the north zone of Rio. I made friends with the locals and visited those places almost daily. In order to experience the real funk carioca, you have to attend one of the baile funk (funk ball) that happens on weekends. When deeply analysing the lyrics from the female rappers such as Tati Quebra-Barraco or Valesca Popozuda, I could notice that the content was beyond X-rated. As some milder examples I can cite: ‘Fama de Putona’ (Known as a Bitch) by Tati Quebra-Barraco where she says: ‘Não adianta de qualquer forma eu esculacho, Fama de Putona só porque como seu macho’ (It doesn’t matter, I am the greatest no matter what, I am known as a bitch just because I am having sex with your man).

Talking to some local females from the favelas, they explained to me that this song is pointing out how unfair it is in a deeply machista society, that when a man has sex with many women, he is considered to be the ‘man’, whereas if a woman is having sex with more than one man, she is shamed and called ‘a bitch’. Another controversial song is: ‘Tá pra nascer homem que vai mandar em mim’ (The man who will boss me wasn’t born yet) by Valesca Popozuda. In this song, the girl power flag is waved from side to side prompting women to stand for themselves and to never accept being ‘bossed’ by any man. The cruder lyrics I found during my visits to the slums range from political feminist stances to healthcare awareness campaigns disguised as ordinary funk music. An example of that is the song ‘Injeção’ (injection) by Deize Tigrona, a song that invites young women to regularly check their ‘pepitas’ (vaginas); meaning that they should visit their gynaecologists regularly and always practice safe sex.

When I questioned some women from the favelas if the crude sexual content of these songs were really necessary, the answer was almost always: Yes!

One of them said: ‘Sex sells, it gets attention from people. Male rappers are always boasting about their sexual prowess and showing girls in bikinis on their music videos. This is true not only to Brazilian rappers but to North American ones as well. They get a lot of attention and make loads of money this way. If the female rappers want to get as much media attention as the male rappers, we should use their own methods’. In a way, I understand where these women are coming from. After all, we live in a post-modern digital world where media has an almost limitless power to reach people from all social backgrounds and age groups. With the ease created by the internet, anyone can publish videos and songs online in a matter of minutes. What these female rappers seem to be doing is using an explicit sexual discourse as a means to shock and attract attention to their message of feminist self-liberation. The same sexual alluring tools has been widely used for many decades by the male rappers, and to some extent, even by the advertising companies to sell products. So in order to blame these female rappers and label them as ‘inappropriate’, we would have to do the same to many other forms of media that precede them.
THE IMPRESSIONS

Although the quality of life in the favelas are conceivably much lower than in the United Kingdom. I did not see extreme poverty or violence. Everyone had a smartphone on their hands and were quick to ask you for your WhatsApp number or your Instagram link, from the children coming home from the local state schools, to the adults coming home from work in the over-packed buses. The widespread presence of the polícia militar (military police) is also very noticeable in the slums since the 2010 military occupation of the favelas. However, this does not mean that the slums are 100% safe. I have heard from many locals that gunfire between the police and the drug dealers still happen every now and then. Since I only visited the favelas during the day and accompanied by locals, I felt very safe and I did not experience any incidents. Overall, my impressions were very positive. Rio de Janeiro is an extremely sexualised city (perhaps because of the hot climate, the tiny clothes that everyone wears and the sexy samba music); and whereas this attracts many tourists and turns the city into a constant party-like atmosphere, the negative impacts of all the partying and sexual dancing can be noticed in the increasing number of teenage pregnancy. I also noticed that prices for electronics and other goods are considerably higher when compared to Great Britain, to me this did not make any sense seeing that the average income in Brazil is of approximately 15,690 USD if compared to 41,159 USD in the United Kingdom. This was easily explained by the heavily overtaxed Brazilian VAT of 42% (compared to the 20% VAT charged in the UK). In regards to the female funk rappers and their music being used as a possible feminist movement discourse, my final impression is that this is really what is happening. Brazilian women are more and more aware of their rights and their struggles, therefore, taking control of their own sexuality is of extreme importance. In that manner, the use of musical discourse to further expand awareness to other women about their own rights is a valuable tool being used by the female rappers in the favelas. This is because the upper-class Brazilian females are more prone to fight for their rights due to their conceivably ‘easy’ access to higher education and their resulting greater political consciousness. However, women in the slums are less likely to get university degrees (although this is also changing). So the use of social media, television and radio are of great value to expand their horizons and to politicise young females from poorer backgrounds. And this is exactly what they are doing. Well done to them!

* In order to know more about the artists cited here or to listen to their music, click on the hyperlinks provided