The first words I heard people in my community speak of COVID-19 were, “Isso é doença de gente rica (this is an illness for rich people).” I live in Rocinha, the largest favela in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, and by some estimates, in Brazil. As many people know, favelas are low-income Brazilian neighborhoods that are largely informally constructed and often neglected by the government. I am a PhD student in Latin American Studies, and I moved to Rio in July of 2019 to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on citizenship, identity, and the commodification of favelas and their residents. I moved to Rocinha specifically because my husband is from this community. Observing the local chronology of the coronavirus narrative and the responses that followed have become an unintentional, but necessary, addition to my research.

The local narrative moved quickly from “this is an illness for rich people” to “Os gringos estão carregando essa doença (foreigners are bringing this illness).” Though I had been living in Rocinha for several months, I became concerned that I might be associated with the virus. I was quickly reassured by conversations with neighbors that I was not the “tipo de gringa (kind of foreigner)” that was concerning to people – it was specifically foreign tourists coming into the
favela that were considered the problem. Since the popularization of favelas and favela tours in the early 2000s, Rocinha has been one of Rio’s largest tourist destinations, receiving hundreds of thousands of foreign visitors per year. Favela tourism is a controversial topic worthy of its own discussion. For the purposes of this article, however, I will simply state that these tours were a staple in Rocinha before the pandemic. Until recently, I typically saw dozens of tourists from my window daily.

In early March of this year, Rocinha’s community association publicly announced that tours were forbidden. This was initiated by Rocinha’s drug traffickers, who believed that evicting the foreigners was the only way to avoid the coronavirus, thus protecting the community. Historically, the community association has been the body that communicates the will of the traffickers. Without justifying or glorifying trafficking or drug violence, it is important to note that most favela communities lack municipal law enforcement, and it is common for traffickers to take control over and manage some aspects of community conduct. Though commonplace, the pandemic drew attention to this fact, which was disseminated and caught the interest of journalists internationally. One story from the US was entitled, “Brazilian Gangsters Impose Strict Rules and Curfews in Favelas as President Bolsonaro Ignores the Pandemic.” While headlines such as this are problematic for simultaneously simplifying and sensationalizing reality, there are some truths to this story. No, men donning black trench coats or bandanas over their faces were not wielding rifles to corral the favela’s huddled masses indoors. But yes, while the president of the country was claiming that COVID-19 was a “media hoax,” Rocinha’s traffickers did take initiative; they ordered all businesses to reduce their hours and all bars to stop operating after dark. “Bailes Funk” (huge dance parties in the favelas that drug traffickers help
organize) were suspended for the first time in decades. Nonetheless, funk artists continued to use their platform to attempt to influence favela residents’ behavior and protect them from the coronavirus; artists from the favela Complexo do Alemão created and used social media to circulate the “Funk do Coronavirus” (a funk song describing how to avoid contracting the illness), and the famous rapper MV Bill came out with a music video, “Quarentena”, detailing which behaviors can reduce the spread of COVID-19 in favelas.

While I watched from afar as my friends and family in the US isolated themselves in their homes, stocked up on months of groceries, and teleworked, we were living an extremely different reality. It is important is to note that “quarantine” in favelas does not emulate the common conceptions of quarantine in the US. Social distancing inside a favela is impossible; this is the epitome of “cluster living,” with extremely high population density.
Figure 1: The main entrance of Rocinha (Jessica Glass)

Rocinha is brimming with small apartments stacked atop one another, connected by narrow alleyways.
Many businesses in large favelas, like Rocinha, operate around the clock to accommodate the busy and often erratic work schedules of their residents, so there is constant activity. You cannot walk down any street without coming into close contact with other people: some are not wide enough to provide more than 1 or 2 feet distance from others, and many frequently used becos (alleyways) require people to be shoulder-to-shoulder. It is also not uncommon for households to have several people living in the small one- or two-bedroom apartments. Additionally, unlike common quarantine practices in the US, "stocking up" is not really an option for most residents living in these communities. Even if they had the space (which most apartments do not), few
people have access to transportation which would allow them the opportunity to move large quantities of goods needed to support long stints of quarantining in their home. Most people make trips to the store ever few days to purchase what they need and can carry home on foot. Home delivery of groceries and other goods are not an option in Rocinha. Furthermore, staying home from work and/or working from home is a privilege that most people who live in favelas do not have. Favelas are primarily low-income neighborhoods, and many residents work in the informal economy or service jobs, all of which require traveling outside their homes and communities.

Despite all these challenges, Rocinha’s response to the pandemic has been inspiring. Huge, hand-painted “FIQUE EM CASA (stay at home)” signs have been displayed at the entrance of the community since mid-March.
“Ignore *o Presidente* (ignore the president)” signs were posted on several lampposts near my apartment.
Some residents have homemade signs hanging from their windows with messages to encourage public health practices, such as “USE MASCARA, SALVE VIDAS (wear a mask, save lives)” and “PROTEJA SUA FAMÍLIA, LAVE AS MÃOS (protect your family, wash your hands).”
There are “panelaços” every few days: collective popular demonstrations of protest that, in this case, involve people banging on pots and pans outside their windows just after dark. These are intended to protest the lack of government attention to the community’s needs. Both foot and car traffic have significantly decreased (even during the day when people must travel to/from work), and many businesses have altered their practices, attempting to protect themselves and their
customers. Several childcare and community centers have taken on the responsibility of providing masks and food for community members who are struggling financially, and I have seen people on the streets handing out waterless sanitizer for people who might not always have access to running water. There have been fewer violent conflicts between drug dealers and the police during this time, which has allowed for more fluid movement throughout Rocinha not only for residents, but for emergency vehicles, as well. I have lived in Rocinha for almost a year and spent a great deal of time here on and off since first visiting Brazil as a master’s student in 2013. I had never seen or heard evidence that ambulances ever came here until last month. Since then, I have heard many.

Rio’s favelas emerged in the late nineteenth century as a response to the abolition of slavery, rural to urban migration, and lack of affordable formal housing for a significant portion of the population. So ultimately, Rocinha’s response to COVID-19 is not surprising, as it falls in line with its history: residents are turning to their experience of struggle and organization in what is only the most recent threat to their lives and livelihoods by providing for themselves what they need. Since the birth of favelas in Rio, when the municipal government gets involved in “favela problems,” it brings its own political agendas which are not aligned with the needs, desires, or priorities of the residents. When outside NGO’s get involved in “favela problems,” they often project their own ideas about what the communities need, while they, themselves, are disconnected from the communities, and out of touch with what those needs actually are. Jorge Selarón, the artist responsible for Rio’s iconic Escadaria Selarón (Selarón Staircase) famously wrote, “Living in a favela is an art…”, and he was right. To thrive in a scenario in which you are actively stigmatized and neglected requires resilience, resourcefulness, creativity, and collective
collaboration. Unsurprisingly, it is with these qualities that Rocinha is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.