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'Je Suis Favela' – Bringing Brazilian Books to the French

By A. D. McKenzie

PARIS, May 9 2015 (IPS) - Long before the attack in Paris that inspired the slogan "Je Suis Charlie", a young French publisher had released a collection of stories titled *je suis favela* about life in Brazilian slums.

In an ironic twist of history, sales of the collection have taken off since Jan. 7, when gunmen targeted the offices of satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, leaving 12 people dead.



French publisher Paula Anacaona

Some readers apparently thought the *je suis favela* stories were an attempt to shed light on the situation of marginalised communities in France, but instead they learned about marginalised populations in South America, where similar forces of exclusion may push young people into crime.

"We can all learn from what is happening elsewhere in the world, because we're all affected by similar social and economic issues," says Paula Anacaona, the publisher of *je suis favela* and founder of Éditions Anacaona, whose mission is to publish Brazilian books in France.

Educated as a translator of technical texts, Paris-born Anacaona, 37, became a literary translator and publisher by chance. On holiday in Rio de Janeiro in 2003, she happened to start chatting with a woman who revealed she was a writer and who promised to send her a book.

Back in Paris, Anacaona received the book two months later and "loved it", as she told IPS in an interview. She translated the work, written by Heloneida Studart and later called *Le Cantique de Meméia*, and managed to get a Canadian company to publish it.

Studart, who died in 2007, was also an essayist, journalist and women's rights activist, and the book caught the attention of French-speaking readers in several countries.

Other writers got in touch, and Anacaona found herself becoming a literary translator. But by sending out the works to publishing companies, she was also

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taking on the role of agent, a time-consuming task.

"With all that was involved, I thought why not publish the books myself?" she recalls. She set up Éditions Anacaona in 2009 and decided to focus initially on literature from and about the ghetto or favela in Brazil, because "no one else was doing it."

The first published book under her imprint was *le Manuel pratique de la haine* (Practical Handbook of Hate), a very violent and dark work set in the favela and launched in 2009.

Two years later came *je suis favela*, published in 2011. Anacaona selected the writers for the collection, choosing authors from both the favela and the "middle class" and translating the works written in Portuguese into French.

Her motivation, she says, was to try to change perceptions of those considered to be living on the fringes of society. The cover of *je suis favela* features a young black woman sitting on a balcony and doing paperwork, possibly homework, with the city in the background.

"As you can see, she's not dancing, so this isn't about stereotypes," Anacaona says.

The book has since been published in Brazil, with the title *Eu sou favela*, giving Anacaona a certain sense of accomplishment. "In Rio, twenty percent of the population lives in the favela, so the book is relevant to many readers," she says.

In France, where there has been national soul-searching since the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks – with Prime Minister Manuel Valls calling the social exclusion of certain groups a form of "apartheid" – the book provides insights into the reasons and consequences of marginalisation, albeit from a distance of 8,620 kilometres.

"French readers have responded to the book because people really are trying to understand the space we all share and the reasons for radicalisation," says Anacaona.

Now representing more than 15 authors, she has widened her company's scope to include "regionalist" authors such as the late Rachel de Queiroz and José Lins do Rego, from the northeast of Brazil, who wrote about characters outside urban settings.

"To understand the favela, you have to understand the grandparents who came to the cities from rural areas, often with nothing and unable to read or write," Anacaona says.

Her company's contemporary writers include the award-winning Tatiana Salem Lévy, named one of Granta's Best Young Brazilian Novelists, and the stand-out Ana Paula Maia, who began her career with "short pulp fiction" on the Internet and now has numerous fans.

Both writers were part of the contingent of 48 Brazilian authors invited to this year's Paris Book Fair, which took place from Mar. 20 to 23.

Billed as "un pays plein de voix" (a country full of voice), Brazil was the guest of honour, and the writers discussed topics ranging from the depiction of urban violence to dealing with memory and displacement. Anacaona had a central role as a publisher of Brazilian books, with her stand attracting many readers.

She has translated and published two titles by Maia – *Du bétail et des hommes* (Of Cattle and Men) and *Charbon animal* (Animal Coal) – which focus on characters not normally present in literature. Maia writes about a slaughterhouse employee and a worker at a crematorium, for instance, in an unsentimental manner with minimal dialogue and almost no adjectives.

"She really can't be categorised," says Anacaona, who adds that despite Maia's fashion-model appearance, the writer identifies with those living on the margins because she grew up among people who did not fit into the mainstream.

Both publisher and writer bear a resemblance and even have a name in common, and Anacaona acknowledges that she is attracted to Brazil and its literature because of her own mixed background – her French mother is white and her South American father is of African descent.

"In Brazil, it's possible to be both black and white, and that's something that is important to me," she says.



Cover of 'je suis favela'



Brazilian writer Ana Paula Maia. Credit: Marcelo Correa

As for the books, she has recently published a boxed set of 14 Brazilian plays, with the translation sponsored by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, in an attempt to make Brazilian theatre more known in France.

There is also a second favela collection, titled *je suis toujours favela* (I am still favela), that includes literature as well as journalistic and sociological articles about the slums.

Between the first and second collections, Anacaona says she has found that the "favela has changed so much", which she credits to the impact of policies to diminish inequality, launched by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – perhaps a lesson for France and other countries.

Edited by Phil Harris

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