

Thiago Santiago

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil¹



"My nickname is Locko. I chose it myself.

I saw 'Loco' on the internet and added a 'k'."

explains Thiago Santiago, a tall thirteen-year old boy with dark curly hair and large brown eyes, who lives in one of the world's most beautiful cities, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Overlooking Guanabara Bay with its many small islands, Rio has coastal mountains and the Atlantic rain forest creeping up the sides of the steep hills that divide the city into many distinct neighborhoods. Thiago lives on one of these mountainsides in an area stripped of forest in one of Rio's most infamous favelas, Rocinha (Figure 3.1).

A favela originally meant a settlement on a hillside but now signifies a poor community anywhere in Brazil, built somewhat haphazardly, often with scavenged building materials, almost always with the land squatted, not owned



Figure 3.1 Thiago lives in a crowded *favela*, built illegally by squatters on steep hillsides. Note the child on the roof corner with the water containers in the foreground.

by the residents. Since colonization by the Portuguese five centuries ago, people have flocked to Rio because of its beautiful location by the Atlantic Ocean and its economic opportunities. However, the government has never had an adequate program to provide decent housing for the millions of people who need it. Even though Rio was one of the first cities in the world to have a public sewer system, rarely are there sewers to carry human waste out of the favelas. In a heavy rain, the streets carry a horrendous mix of debris and sewage down the mountainsides towards the sea.

Thiago's neighborhood

Rocinha settlers first built with wood illegally cut from the Atlantic forest, and now mostly use honeycomb bricks made of local clay to build always higher up, one room on top of another, as land is minimal and flat spaces nonexistent. In many parts of Rocinha, the streets are only narrow passageways of stairs carved into the rock formations of the mountain. In the higher areas, people carry cement for long distances on their backs in order to build their houses. Electric wires trace the sky in a mish mash going from poles to shops to apartments, many of them installed illegally. Rats walk the wires at night between buildings.

Rocinha has a reputation for its size of over 250,000 people and its violence. Rio lies at the heart of the export of Columbian cocaine heading to Europe, and the drug traders find refuge in the twisting, turning favela alleyways that create a confusing maze and make it hard for police to track them down. The illegal drug traffic brings with it many high-powered weapons and gun battles between rival drug dealers and police with resulting loss of life among the young people who engage in this dangerous business.

Rocinha straddles a main road that goes over the mountain of Gavea and links two wealthier neighborhoods on Rio's waterfront. The road looks like a

moving, twisting puzzle of buses, cars, and trucks delivering goods and people to local businesses, and motor scooters carrying entire families that weave in between the other vehicles (Figure 3.2). Traffic fatalities are high. In the curves of the road trash is perpetually piled up in stinking mounds. There is money to be made in recycling plastics, metal and cardboard, but the rest of the trash just sits and rots.



Figure 3.2 Rocinha's main street is congested with traffic, dirty and unsafe.

By recent estimates, 60 percent of the population of Rocinha is 18 or under. Children get involved in the drug trade at a young age, employed to watch for police cars entering the neighborhood. When the police approach, they set off fireworks to alert adults working in illegal activities.

"It's very violent here, very violent," Thiago emphasizes.

"People do it, sell drugs, for the money, and they all have guns."

Lack of employment and educational opportunities to prepare people for reasonably paid work, and the ease of making money fast entice youth into this dangerous drug world. Many people who live in Rio are afraid to go to Rocinha. On the other hand, international tourists pay to go on guided tours there, led by Rocinha residents.

These guided tours take tourists to places and programs for children that provide educational havens from the dangers of the streets. Often tourists feel inspired to give donations to these programs in the hope that a better education will keep children from entering criminal activities. Sometimes tourists buy arts and crafts made by the children's mothers.

Despite the danger caused by the drugs and arms trade, people continue to settle in Rocinha because it has cheap housing and easy access to public transit. New immigrants coming from northeastern Brazil, the origin of many in Rocinha, want to live near people with similar backgrounds, as they enjoy the same music, dance and foods. Culture involving the arts and food plays a central part in the life of all Brazilians.

Most available jobs pay no more than minimum wage: under \$200 a month. The women often work as maids in Rio's rich neighborhoods and the men as laborers and janitors, deliverymen and waiters. Their level of education is very low, if they went to school at all. People struggle to get a roof over their heads and some food on the table. They watch out for each other, and like all parents, want better opportunities for their children. As a result of this desire to improve the future of children, the community boasts ten community daycare centers for little ones too young for school.

Thiago's family, volunteer work and school

Thiago's parents moved separately to Rio from Ceará, a northeastern state with severe unemployment caused by chronic drought. They met and married in Rio. His mother, Goretti, came to Rio as a domestic maid to a middle-class family, then got a job in a daycare center when Thiago was only two so that she would not have to leave him behind when she went to work. Thiago's parents have been divorced since Thiago was four because his father drank too much. Thiago lives with his mother, and they have a close, loving relationship (Figure 3.3).

Thiago very rarely sees his father. He has older siblings, but doesn't know them well, because they live more than two thousand kilometers away and come from prior marriages of his parents. Thiago and his mother are on their own in Rio.

"I want a rabbit and a bird," Thiago confides, "but my mother won't let me because our apartment is too small."

The daycare center where Goretti worked when Thiago was a toddler gave both mother and son strong roots in the community where they continue to



Figure 3.3 Thiago with his mom.

live, work and volunteer. Named Alegria da Criança (A Child's Joy), it provides care for working mothers' children from four months to age four.

Thiago began volunteering at the center when he was only ten years old. He comes three days a week after school and plays with the four-year-olds for two hours. He teaches them games and songs, supervises painting and art activities, and plays with them in the playroom and toy library (Figure 3.4). When asked why he does this volunteer work, he replied

"There are many children for the teachers to care for, and usually they don't have time to play with the kids, so I play with them. I like to see them laughing, having fun; they paint, they sing, they play games, it makes me happy to see them happy."



Figure 3.4 Thiago reading to children in the daycare center where he volunteers after school.

The daycare center received some grant money from the city to upgrade its facilities, and has tiny toilets and sinks and showers for the toddlers. The airy, light filled dining room has long tables and miniature chairs, and the littlest children wear big bibs to the table. Downstairs at the main entry there is a crafts room where mothers and grandmothers make things for sale. This unusual daycare is a stop on a tour for the international tourists who come to Rocinha (Figure 3.5).

Thiago receives many hugs from the women who run the daycare and from the children. His warm affectionate nature, his contagious smile and his caring way with people of all ages have endeared him very much to this community he chooses to serve.

Goretti, defying all odds, managed to go to a university while working and raising her son by herself. She got a basic degree in education that she hopes to

augment to a higher degree in the coming years. (Only one percent of Brazilians have university degrees, and far most of those are in the upper and middle class). During the day, she works for a non-profit organization that helps people in Rocinha get legal title to their homes which were built without permits. Many of these buildings have stood for quite a few years, wooden structures have been



Figure 3.5 Path to daycare center where Thiago volunteers.

replaced by bricks and mortar (Figure 3.6), and residents are getting legal rights to own them with the help of the NGO where Goretti works.



Figure 3.6 Over time, Rocinha's residents build more durable structures. Note the steep, eroded hillside.

Five nights a week she also supervises three other teachers and teaches in an adult literacy program, with only a small stipend for her time, as most adults cannot afford to pay for classes. Goretti feels called to serve the illiterate adults of her community for she knows what a difference it makes in the life of a parent. The government does not pay for these programs, despite a large adult illiteracy rate.

Goretti's dedication to education has helped Thiago get a good start in his own schooling. From the daycare he attended as a toddler, Thiago went to a public school in Rocinha. Many public schools in Rio and other Brazilian cities have poor academic standards, overcrowded classrooms, under-trained teachers, and minimal resources. But Thiago took a competitive exam when he was nine years old to enter Rio's oldest and most prestigious public middle and secondary school, Dom Pedro II.

"I came in second out of 350 applicants. Only fifteen people entered," Thiago explains.

Many of Brazil's leading doctors, lawyers, engineers, judges, and government officials attended Dom Pedro II and proudly share this information. Thiago finished second in the entrance exam with 350 applicants for fifteen openings. If he continues to do well, he will attend until he graduates from high school, with a good chance of winning a place in one of Brazil's universities, also entered by competitive exam. Coming from such a disadvantaged community, Thiago has beat many odds to enter such a good school.

Goretti felt very proud when her son entered Dom Pedro II, especially considering that most of the other children had attended private schools and taken special preparatory courses to pass the difficult exam, Thiago entered without this extra help.

"But I cannot afford all books required by the school. Its library does not keep textbooks for students who do not own them," Goretti laments.

Thiago must do his written daily assignments on a computer. At school he only has access to a computer once a week for one class period, so he has to go to an internet/computer business where he can use a computer and

print out his homework, costing about \$1.20 per hour. These private businesses that make internet available to the paying public are sprinkled throughout Rocinha. There are also a few non-profits that offer computer training and access within Rocinha, but Thiago has not yet connected to any of these small computer programs for youth and adults, as they are not in his immediate vicinity. It is dangerous to go into parts of Rocinha that are not your own neighborhood where people know you--especially for a young boy or man, who might be confused for someone from a rival drug group.

Home

Thiago's mother has a lot of concern for her son's safety. She found a small rental apartment in a quiet one-block street, too narrow for cars. Most apartments have a few potted plants outside on the windowsills that green and soften the narrow alleyway of cement and plastered bricks (Figure 3.7).

Their tiny apartment leaks in the hard, tropical rains. It has a narrow entry hall where they hang laundry and where Thiago studies (Figure 3.8).



Figure 3.7 Thiago coming home from school. The door provides the only natural light inside. Rats use the power lines overhead to cross from house to house.



Figure 3.8 Thiago does his homework in the entryway, which leaks during heavy rains.

The front-door window is the only source of natural light in the apartment. Off the entryway lies a tiny kitchen with a small stove fueled by bottled propane and a sink for dishes and laundry (Figure 3.9). Sometimes Thiago does his homework at the miniature table where they also eat. The kitchen opens on one side to a small bathroom with a shower where an electric showerhead provides the only heated water. On the opposite side, the kitchen opens to a room with a single bed that serves as the bedroom for both Thiago and his mother. They sit on the bed to watch a black-and-white TV in their rare moments of relaxation at home (Figure 3.10).



Figure 3.9 The tiny kitchen doubles as the laundry room.



Figure 3.10 Thiago and his mother watch TV in their small bedroom.

A small stand-alone armoire holds their few clothes, which they handwash in the kitchen sink and iron in the hallway. Goretti and Thiago like their little apartment because their street is relatively safe and quiet. They worry they may have to move because the owner wants to sell it.

"I don't want to leave here because of my friends, we play in the street—only on his tiny little alley way, but we can play soccer here. I like my friends and the local radio station. My dance class is nearby."

Thiago loves to read. He keeps his books on a shelf in the entryway. He has won Harry Potter books as prizes at school. Books in Brazil are very expensive and a rarity in the homes of people who earn minimum wage. Thiago and his mother go together to a Catholic church on Sundays, and all through his childhood, Thiago has been a frequent reader of the daily lesson. His church attendance has dropped off somewhat since becoming a teen, but not his passion for reading good stories.

Thiago's weekly schedule

On school days Thiago gets up at 6am, grabs some coffee and bread that he eats as he runs to catch the public bus. It takes 30 minutes to reach his school. He has a student bus pass that is valid on weekdays as long as he wears his school uniform, but not on Saturdays when he also must go to school. He has classes six days a week from 7am to noon, and he usually stays longer to study or take an extra class. His favorite subject is French. When given a new book in French, he immediately sits down to read it, dictionary in hand.

"I love reading and speaking French. When I am a grown-up I want to go to Paris to live. I have seen pictures and it is so beautiful there," Thiago announces with a big grin.

Three days a week, Thiago volunteers at the day-care center from 2pm to 4pm. Then he goes home to do homework, while his mother is still at work. On the two days he is not volunteering, he does chores at home, studies, and sometimes plays soccer with friends in his narrow street. Sometimes he goes to a friend's house to listen to music. Thiago and his mother do not often have dinner together, as she teaches at night and he goes to his dance, theater and music classes.

On the weekends Thiago sometimes walks with friends to the beach. São Conrado, where the current mayor of Rio lives and the closest beach to Rocinha, is about a 2 kilometer walk. All the beaches in Rio are free. People of all ages, and all economic and social classes often go there on Sundays to swim and play volleyball and soccer.

The arts in Thiago's life

Several dedicated people and non-governmental organizations offer programs for children and youth in Rocinha as a sanctuary from the dangers of the street. In the evenings, Thiago attends a dance program three times a week (Figure 3.11), and theater classes as well as flute once a week. The young woman who runs a miniscule studio in Rocinha gives local children the chance to



Figure 3.11 Thiago during a dance lesson.

learn dance from ballet to hip-hop. She raises the money to run the program herself, and is grateful that someone has paid the rent for the second-story two-room studio.

During the teen class, about ten girls and five boys crowd the narrow floor and partner for the lifts and dips. As sweat pours off them after an hour of rehearsal in the tropical heat, their dedication to improving their moves shows in their willingness to keep on rehearsing on their own when their teacher gets distracted by a visitor and pauses to talk. During the day, when Thiago waits for his time to work with the children at the daycare, he practices his pirouettes. Dance, drama and music enter his play with the younger children. These arts provide him pleasure and discipline. He takes pride in the many public events in which he has performed. They offer him experiences beyond his own neighborhood and bring smiles to others.

Thiago's mother is very concerned about her son's well-being in a community that is very violent. The children and youth of Rocinha live daily with the sight of armed men walking the streets. They know that a stray bullet can kill anyone. They know that during a police raid, the only place to head is indoors and as far from an exterior wall and window as you can get. They know what street corners to avoid.

Thiago is sure of himself, though, despite the dangers.

"There are people who use drugs, do bad things, but I have a conscience of what is bad, and I am not going to do that. I don't think I will fall into that at all. I have seen kids at school using drugs and bringing alcohol to school to drink, but I don't. I don't go where they sell drugs—I know those corners, those places, I avoid them."

Thiago, when asked if he could change anything about his community, answers quickly:

"I would stop the violence. We need more jobs for the adults so they all have a way to earn an honest living, and more schools for the children so that they are not on the street. We need more and better housing, too."

Thiago, if he could change anything about his community, would stop the violence. He would provide more and better housing, too. His formula includes more jobs for the adults so they all have a way to earn an honest living, and more schools for the children so that they are not on the street. In most of Brazil, school lasts only half a day. Some children go to school in the morning, others in the afternoon, and others yet go at night until 11pm. When children are not in school, they often have nowhere to go but the street. If their parents are working, there is no one at home to supervise them. Young boys, particularly, often gravitate to older adolescents who have money from the drug trade. Some organizations provide after-school programs, but many children do not have adequate daily educational and recreational activities.

Thiago has grown up with his mother's example of helping others to learn and he sees its importance for his own activities. Giving happiness to others brings him pleasure. He does not worry about himself. He knows who he is, where he comes from, what his values are and that nobody can make him do something he does not want to do. He has learned to navigate between the worlds of his friends who go to a very exclusive school and his friends in his own neighborhood. *"I have a conscience of what is right and wrong,"* he says as he flashes his huge smile.

Endnotes

1. Edited field report prepared by Illène Pevec. Photographs by Illène Pevec