

SLUM CITIES

Avril Benoît is a CBC Radio host and documentary producer based in Toronto. A native of Ottawa, Ontario, and Mont-Tremblant, Quebec, Benoît first joined the CBC in 1986. She has filed stories from Haiti, Germany, Kenya, Burundi, Brazil and India. Last year she was the Knowlton Nash Fellow at the University of Toronto, where her research focused on human rights, governance and development. This led to a series of radio reports from slums around the world, and the feature television documentary *Slum Cities: A Shifting World* on CBC Newsworld.

Perhaps it's a quirk of having worked in radio for so long, but I tend to recall places I've travelled to more by their sound than how they looked or smelled. Walking on the squishy "flying toilets" (feces-filled plastic bags) in Kibera slum in Nairobi would be plenty distracting to most people, but for me the dominant memory is the chorus of preschoolers squealing "How are you? How are you?" to the lone *muzungu* (white person) walking through their community of almost one million people.

In Rocinha, the biggest *favela* or shantytown in Rio de Janeiro, the crackle of gunfire between a narcotics gang and police sounded like a samba squad free-styling on tin pots. The drug dealers stayed hidden on high ground, maybe on the upper floors of one of the seven-story buildings that defy our notion of what a slum is supposed to look like. The gunfight was followed by the tender sounds of a ballad played over loudspeakers in the market, as dozens of us stood breathless, listening for the "all-clear." All the while, a nearby construction worker hammered away—as if it was pointless to be bothered by the daily violence.

And in Mumbai, home to six million slum dwellers from all over India, it was the sheer cacophony. The

non-stop racket! It's a wonder anyone can sleep at night. For me, that din came to symbolize what it means to struggle, day in and day out, just to survive outside the fringes of the formal economy.

Perhaps the greatest hubbub I came across in a year of popping in and out of some of the world's worst slums was in the city-within-a-city called Dharavi. It's the biggest slum not only in Mumbai, but in all of Asia, with more than 800,000 people living on roughly two square kilometres.

On a sunset stroll, with the Muslim call to prayer bellowing from rooftop loudspeakers that distort more than amplify, I met some men running a back-alley movie theatre, with tinny audio that sounded like it was recorded with the microphone of a mini-camera, giving it that Bollywood bootleg authenticity. A short distance away, a Sufi saint decked out in billowing green satin, Aladdin-style, black makeup smudged around his bugged-out eyes, bestowed blessings in a low voice, gently conking me on the head with his staff. He accepts cash donations. A barber sitting cross-legged on a plank of wood by the roadside chatted incessantly as he shaved, with a straight razor, the face of the customer sitting in front of him.

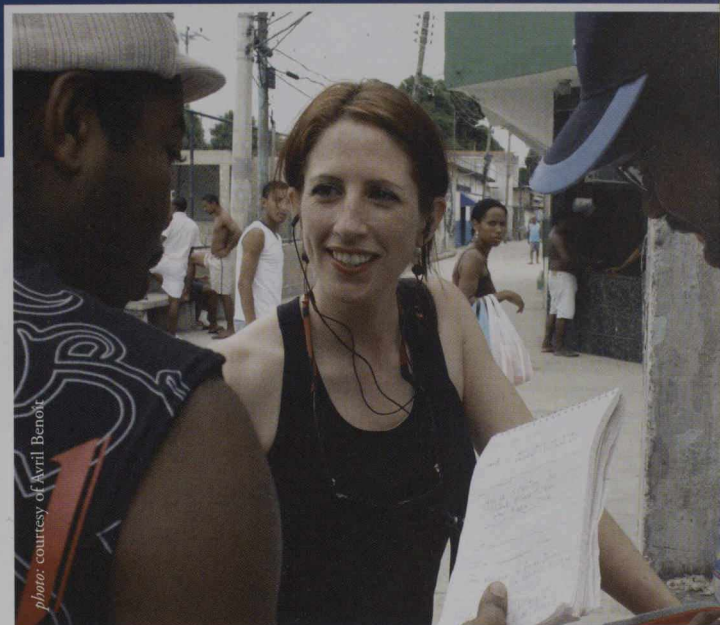


photo: courtesy of Avril Benoît

There are many ways to make a rupee or two. And India's poor seem to have figured them all out.

The next morning on the outskirts of the slum, I noticed a gas station that seemed to be working in reverse, one taxi after another pulling in for the teenage attendant to empty their tanks rather than fill them up. The cab drivers, one presumes, sell the fuel without the assent of the owners, simply returning to the dispatch centre with less gas than they left with.

It sounds like mayhem, I know. And there's more on the way. By 2020, fully 40 percent of the world's population of 9 billion people will live in overcrowded urban slums without adequate sanitation, public services or, most importantly, title deeds to the wee parcels of land they've built their shacks on.

But buried just beneath the surface is the irony that these slum dwellers are among the most entrepreneurial people on earth. Amid all the filth and noise, you will rarely hear anything sounding remotely like defeat. ♣

Sounds of the slums: Avril Benoît interviews musicians in the Rio de Janeiro shantytown called Vigario Geral.