

Book Review

Bezerra, Kátia da Costa. *Postcards from Rio; Favelas and the Contested Geographies of Citizenship*. Fordham UP, 2017.

If the name “Rio de Janeiro” often conjures images of a tropical paradise, *Postcards from Rio; Favelas and the Contested Geographies of Citizenship* by Kátia da Costa Bezerra sets out to question the stereotypical images and official discourse that exclude the city’s complexities as well as a large segment of its population that resides in the city’s slums and peripheries. Calling for different kinds of representative images or “postcards,” which would be inclusive of all the city’s spaces and citizens, this is a book that not only alludes to the stark divisions of Rio de Janeiro, but also offers an important contribution to how to challenge these divisions and find ways for a more inclusive gaze and form of governance. By analyzing mostly visual contemporary cultural production (such as photographs or videos) from Rio’s favelas, Bezerra points to ways in which favela residents themselves provide rich material that challenges the portrayal of their communities in the mainstream media, where they are often criminalized and marginalized. Written with the backdrop of the city’s preparations for hosting the FIFA World Cup, Olympic and Paralympic games, *Postcards from Rio* is also a testimony to the detrimental effects of the commodification of space that occurs when the state prioritizes a city’s brand image over its citizens.

The book is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter One focuses on an itinerant photography exhibit of favela residents titled *Moro na favela*, and a photography book, *Imagens do povo* (2012) showcasing photographs by twenty-five community photographers. Exploring how photographs of favela residents by local photographers give a more nuanced and humane face to subjects who are usually criminalized by the mainstream media, Bezerra explores the way visibility is mediated by power relations. Chapter Two, “Videos, Favelas, and Childhood,” analyzes three videos centered on the daily lives of children in a favela: *Picolé, pintinho e pipa* (2006), *Seja bem-vindo à nossa Tavares Bastos* (2009), and *Tempo da criança* (2010). Here, Bezerra

compellingly shows how a hegemonic paradigm of children excludes less fortunate children who live in the peripheries from the very category of childhood because they don't "fit into an imaginary that persists in associating childhood with a period of innocence, playtime, and fun" (47). In Chapter Three, Bezerra reflects upon the short story, "Maria Déia," by Lia Vieira, and the video *ImPACtos* produced in 2010 by the collective multimedia group Favela em foco, which interviewed residents evicted from their homes to make room for urban renewal projects in preparation for the FIFA World Cup, Olympics and Paralympic Games. Chapter Four includes an in-depth portrayal of the cable car project in the Complexo do Alemão favela, and an analysis of how favelas are being utilized as "part of a city brand strategy" (95) in ways that erase their complexities. It also examines the photographic project *Inside Out: Morro da Providência* and two videos (*Providência: 115 anos de luta*, and *Morra da Providência em transformação*) to challenge the "spectacularized image of the city" (96).

The book's proposal of looking at cultural artifacts produced in the margins in order to "[unveil] and articulat[e] the silences within dominant discourses" (93), and to reinsert favela residents in the city differently from how they are usually portrayed, can be repetitive at times, but is nevertheless a necessary and powerful contribution to a study on Rio de Janeiro through the lens of contemporary cultural production. Within this critical endeavor, one of the most impactful moments is Bezerra's description of the cable car project in Complexo do Alemão, through which Bezerra demonstrates the impact of a neoliberal form of urban intervention. Through her careful analysis of the project, Bezerra reveals how a discourse of progress and social inclusion is used to implement social cleansing, and how concepts of security and integration are actually employed to legitimize processes of expropriation. The state may have framed the cable car initiative positively, as an implementation of progress, yet it was undertaken at the expense of a population that was evicted in order to create more postcard opportunities that misrepresent the city. Indeed, if the picture-perfect scene from the cable car includes the favela, it is so that tourists may obtain "a voyeuristic glimpse of life in the favelas" (91) within a narrative created by the state which silences and objectifies favela residents.

In Bezerra's noteworthy attempt to make room for marginalized voices, one area that could have been expanded upon further is the way that many of the

projects and cultural artifacts analyzed are, in some form or another, co-productions or collaborations between favela residents and outsiders. Funded by banks or NGOs, supervised by journalists, professors or university students, the works are hardly uncontaminated or pure “favela-productions.” Chapter One provides an informative section on government and corporate funding, and the historical connection between the state and Brazilian cinema; however, there is an absence of commentary on the power dynamics behind the creation of the works that are discussed in the book. One example is the short film, *Seja bem-vindo à nossa Tavares Bastos*, which was created during a two-month workshop in filmmaking organized by the NGO Viva Rio and the New School University in New York. The video was actually edited by graduate students (57), yet there is no discussion of how their editorial intervention may have affected the work or its status as a “favela production.” If, as Bezerra argues there is a difference between work created by a favela resident and an outsider to the favela—“[t]he difference in the works produced by favela-based photojournalists lies in the fact that their work retains the right to self-define themselves and their communities” (36)—it would be necessary to acknowledge the power dynamics that are inherent to these collaborations, and how they may affect or alter the work that is produced, or even put into question the category of “self-definition.”

In conclusion, *Postcards from Rio* is a commendable undertaking, giving space to contemporary cultural production from the peripheries, and unsettling and bringing to the fore crucial questions of citizenship. Moreover, with its highly theoretical framework, this book is an excellent pedagogical tool for any study of Rio de Janeiro, as well as a vital contribution to the field of urban studies and visual culture.

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