

Adriana Kertzer. *Favelization*

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Review of

Kertzer, Adriana. 2014. *Favelization*. New York: Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

322 pp: illustrated throughout, English and Portuguese, E-book, \$2.99.

In the early 1990s, Brazil claimed a spot in the international catalogue raisonné of luxury design, bringing with it an off-beat, sometimes derelict aesthetic purportedly drawn from the visual and intellectual culture of the nation's poorest neighbourhoods. These settlements are referred to as *favelas*. In *Favelization*, design historian Adriana Kertzer problematizes this "use of references to Brazilian favelas to market luxury products to a primarily non-Brazilian audience" (2014: 3). She argues that North American and European perceptions of Brazilian identity are a manifestation of postcolonial exoticism. *Favelization's* systematic critique of the role of design in shaping national identity adeptly raises ethical concerns over the apparent marketability of some of Brazil's most disadvantaged citizens.

Favelas, defined in Kertzer's text as "the informal squatter settlements that grow along the hillsides and lowlands of many Brazilian cities" (2014: 4), are the intellectual points of departure in *Favelization*, though Kertzer does contextualize her approach within Brazil's socio-economic landscape. Over the course of three chapters, each chapter a case study addressing film, fashion, and furniture design (respectively), *Favelization* explores how the construction of Brazil's distinct brand of exoticism ("tropical, fun, musical, beautiful, and lawless; its inhabitants sexual, gregarious ... and darker-skinned" (2014: 6)), is a form of domination born from postcolonial interpretations of favelas and their residents. These "interpretations" assume the form of designed objects that are then marketed as authentic representations of Brazilian culture.

The first chapter of *Favelization* examines favela-focused films. Kertzer points out that these films are objects designed to appeal to American and European audiences rather than to portray the realities of living in a favela. The second chapter examines the ideological implications

of (Brazilian design luminaries) Fernando and Humberto Campana's works, particularly their collaboration with Lacoste. Here, Kertzer's examination of the altruistic marketing of favela-branded goods gains momentum. The third chapter, building on notions of consumption as a form of charity, delves into the role of marketing rhetoric and furniture design in shaping global perceptions of Brazilian identity.

Throughout her text, Kertzer enriches her discourse by considering the lineages and lifestyles of the designers in question; many of them no longer live in Brazil or perhaps lived there for only a short period of time. Yet, in the global marketplace they identify themselves as Brazilian. Kertzer does not draw any moral conclusions about the designers themselves. She does, however, posit that understanding the relatively privileged perspective of these individuals further elucidates the notion that Brazilian identity is manufactured by an elite demographic unfamiliar with favela life, but entirely aware of exoticism's traction in the marketplace.

Kertzer's sensitivity to Brazilian identity is informed by her own experiences: raised in Brazil by a "Bessarabian father" and "Texan mother," she came to the United States in 1998. Her sense of displacement bleeds into *Favelization's* text: Kertzer does not provide her own definition of favela culture or Brazilian identity. The reader is left to wonder what it means to be Brazilian. Perhaps this is the point: exoticism, whether you are living within or without its confines, is disorienting.