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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Spectacular Favela: Violence in Modern Brazil* by Erika Robb Larkins

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Source: *Etnofoor*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Security (2015), pp. 185-187

Published by: Stichting Etnofoor

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43656026>

Accessed: 09-12-2016 10:03 UTC

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The Spectacular Favela

Violence in Modern Brazil

Erika Robb Larkins. Oakland: The University of California Press, 2015. 256 pp.

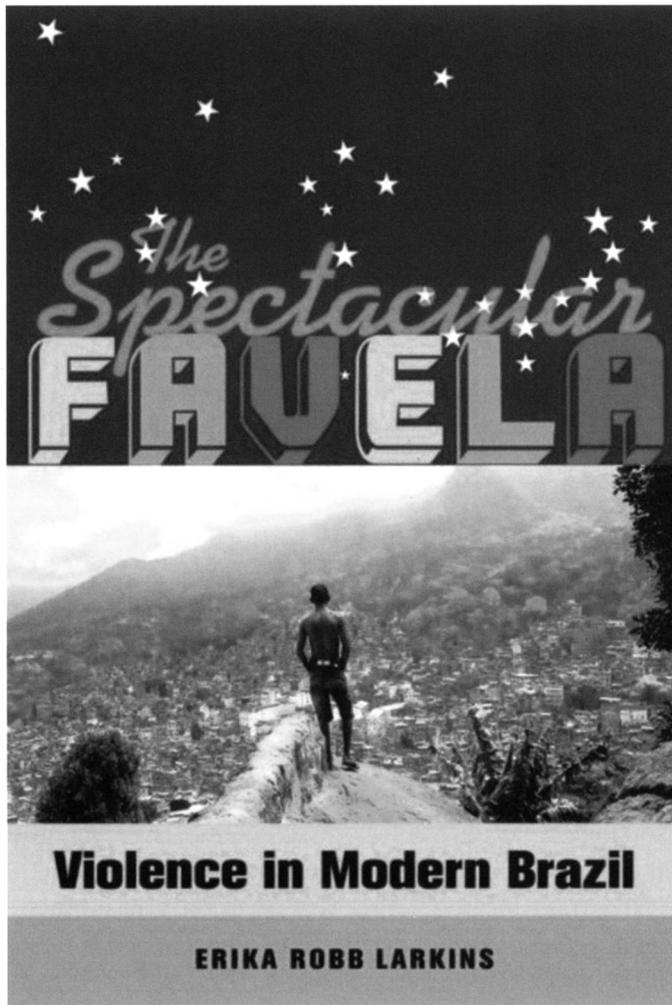
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Be it through dramatic news reporting by foreign correspondents, or colourful snapshots posted on slum tourists' social media outlets, spectacular depictions of Rio de Janeiro's notorious favelas circulate globally. Within this travelling imagery, informal hillside settlements are sensationally featured as realms of perpetual urban warfare, romanticised cradles of samba-dancing vivacity, or both. The collection of images and narratives that produce the favela (as) brand, made available for embodied and disembodied consumption, is explored by Erika Robb Larkins in the enthralling *The Spectacular Favela: Violence in Modern Brazil* (2015). Drawing from extensive ethnographic research in a Rio slum, as well as from analyses of mass media and consumer culture, Larkins unpacks the commodification of violence, as well as the violence *inherent* to

commodification. She sheds light on how violent spectacle is made central to the entangled order-making practices of state and non-state actors, and marketable – most often by outsiders for outsiders –, through exchanges that both solidify and occlude the structural inequalities that separate the tourists from the toured.

Centrally located within Rio's material and symbolic landscape, Rocinha is the book's 'spectacular favela' of choice. In chapters one and two, respectively, narcotraffickers and policing forces are situated within its localised governance structures. Through Larkins' rich ethnographic vignettes, performances of authority by the 'trafficker state', and the 'penal state' hang together through their common use of highly visible, and visual, violence. These repertoires are not only shared, they are highly dependent on one another. The sensationalised

Etnofoor, Security, volume 27, issue 2, 2015, pp. 185-187



ruthlessness of Rocinha's narco-state renders the violent incursions by state police into the favela justifiable. The commodification of this mediated conflict, as well as of the images and narratives that pertain to the favela's romanticised strain of community-oriented bootstrapping, is subsequently unpacked. While chapter three

explores the virtual and global imaginaries that compose what Larkins names 'Favela Inc.', chapter four problematises forms of embodied consumption made possible by the proliferation of favela tours.

The favela's profitability as *commodity* is interwoven with its potential as a mass of formal *consumers* – facets that are closely related to the militarised efforts deployed towards the pacification of Rocinha. Under the somewhat ironic title 'Peace', chapter five shows how the described scenario, in which ostensive public security has more to do with spectacle than with enhanced enjoyment of rights and safety by residing citizens, is aggravated by what the author names 'the Olympic exception'. As Larkins argues, the fast approaching 2016 Summer Olympics raise the stakes in the commodification of Rio's urban landscape, and catalyse reconfigurations of state security implicated in the taming of favelas, and in their subsequent insertion into real estate and consumer markets.

Conceptually, the coining of 'Favela Inc.' – a heading deployed by Larkins to name the constellation of commodified images that circulate internationally and compose the favela brand – is among the book's contributions. At the same time that it joins cultural analysis debates that engage contentious politics of representation through the products they result in, the notion also adds to our understanding of the unequal structures within which this production is embedded. Violence, as the author demonstrates, is not only replicated as content, but inherent to the power asymmetries that characterise virtual and embodied exchanges between producers, consumers, and consumed. Echoing Agamben's 'state of exception', Larkins' introduction of 'the Olympic exception' is also elucidative of how symbolic

and structural violence are entangled: the mega-event-induced urgency of crafting the Olympic Rio brand authorizes the targeting of its urban poor. As 2016 draws closer, spectacles of inclusion and modernisation obscure exclusionary processes that pertain to capitalist production of space, and are reshaping the city's centrally located favelas – both materially, and virtually.

In *The Spectacular Favela*, differentiated access to mobility emerges as a key indicator of the socio-economic disparities between the traveling bodies of tourists, and the favela lives they long to witness, experience, and take home as souvenirs. However, international mobility is not a privilege enjoyed solely by slum tourists. Those who flock to the city's informal settlements to conduct social science research are also commonly found among their highly mobile visitors. Unlike many of the favela-based anthropological accounts that preceded it, the book in question does not shy away from engaging the power-laden mobility of researcher, when contrasted to that of researched. The candour of Larkins' self-reflexivity extends into the role of ethnographies such as hers within 'Favela Inc.': as the author states, by putting Rocinha into global circulation, the book is an inescapable contribution to the constellation it critiques. Her concluding reflection on the unequal global structures within which the ethnographic enterprise is embedded is a welcome contribution to the ways we think through anthropological research in a favela setting – as its virtual consumers, but particularly, as active producers of these narratives. Even though ethnographic researchers dedicated to Brazilian cities come to mind as its most obvious audience, the book at hand should appeal to those grappling with urban inequalities – and

their traveling imaginaries – from an array of different disciplines and geographical locations.

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