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#### Recommended Citation

Cruz, Vasti, "The Favela Blossoms: Voices of Favelas in São Paulo, Brazil" (2024). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 2355.

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**THE FAVELA BLOSSOMS:  
VOICES OF FAVELAS IN SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR WING  
PROFESSOR VALENCIA**

**DECEMBER 8, 2023**

This project spotlights improvised housing in the peripheral areas of São Paulo, Brazil, better known as favelas. For over a century, the favela has been known as a place of death, violence, crime, and oppression. Paradoxically, the first favelas in Rio de Janeiro were named after a plant that produces flowers. However, today, these communities are rarely compared to their beautiful, symbolic-of-life namesake. Instead, this prejudgement is rampant not only globally, but also within the proper city– which perpetuates social division. When favelas are discussed in the media, they often reference those in Rio de Janeiro; however, favelas are present throughout Brazil. Favela culture in Rio is different from that in São Paulo, which is usually absent from the conversation– even in the academic world. This project, a digital zine, demystifies the favela and argues that the favela, in São Paulo specifically, is a self-sustaining birthplace of resilience and an exporter of culture to the rest of the country, and the world at large. Through interviews, I will answer the main questions: What aspects of culture does the favela export to Brazilian society? How does this social divide affect inhabitants of the favela? How is the favela a place of resistance?

The idea to amplify the voices of the favela through a zine was conceived naturally. Media studies is a multidisciplinary area of study; it critically studies processes of production and reception, has debates about whether media are primarily for the transmission of information or for ritual practice, the creation of social collectives through communicative practices, or is simply a fundamental way to understand the world. One of my goals is to tell stories through art in a way that would be accessible to the anglophone, lusophone, and italophone communities, and as a zine that exists digitally and physically, it will be easily distributed to the mass audience– anyone with an internet connection will have access to the zine. Although there are many scholarly articles on favelas, they lack perspectives from within. Most information written

on favelas is in Portuguese, with articles portraying the favela as a charity case, overlooking the richness of its art and culture. There is a need for a bridge between art and scholarly storytelling in multiple languages.

This project is in conversation with Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image*. In this essay, Barthes explores the connection between the image and its content, more specifically, the connotation and the denotation and the relationship between the signifier and the signified, which come from semiotics or signs. In this exploration, Barthes uses an advertisement of Panzini pasta to provide a framework for extracting and communicating symbolic messages in an image. Here, the signifier is defined as the form that the sign takes, whereas the signified is the concept to



Panzani Pasta Ad, Barthes, 1968

which it refers. He gives power to the image by stating that images are not passive, but rather active and rich sources of cultural and ideological messages (Barthes 153). In the pasta advertisement, Barthes identifies three categories of messages when analyzing images: the “linguistic message” (153), the “symbolic message” (153), and the “literal message” (154). Here, the linguistic message is the denotation. In the case of the image, the linguistic message is the written text: ‘Panzani’. It gives the power to elucidate or expedite an idea in a direct manner. In the case of the advertisement, the name denotes the product brand, but also the “*Italianicity*”

(154) of the product. The connotation in the advertisement is what Barthes refers to as the “coded iconic message” (154), that is, meanings that are connoted by the image apart from its literal meaning. These are elements of the image that give context clues subtly. In the Panzani advertisement, Barthes describes these context clues as the “tricolor hues of the poster” (Barthes 34), representing the Italian flag, and the symbols for Italian culture such as the tomatoes and the pasta.

Aside from these twofold messages, Barthes also adds that the linguistic message has two functions: anchorage and relay (156). Since images are prone to have many interpretations, the anchorage is used to focus on one meaning, to direct viewers to a specific meaning. It keeps them from getting lost in their own connotations. Barthes states that anchorage is the most common function of the linguistic message and is commonly found in press photographs and advertisements. In relay, on the other hand, text and image are in a complementary relationship wherein texts supply meaning that is not present in the images themselves, and the unity of the message is realized at the level of the story (157).

Although Barthes used the example of advertisements, these theories also apply to diverse mediums. In my project, I use Barthes’ frameworks to transmit a message on several levels, most notably the literal message and the symbolic message. The term ‘favela’ itself carries significant symbolic connotations with a multifaceted narrative. As aforementioned, the favela was named after a plant that produces flowers, native to northeastern Brazil. Before the late nineteenth century, the only connotation of the favela was the plant; however, the term as we know it today stems from a watershed event in Brazilian history. According to historians Lilia M. Schwarcz and Heloisa M. Starling in their book *Brazil: A Biography*, veterans from the War of Canudos (1896-1897) from the northeastern state of Bahia migrated south to Rio de Janeiro.

When the government did not provide them with housing as promised, they settled in the peripheral hills of the city, forming occupations by building shacks and other forms of informal housing (Schwarcz and Starling 378). Over time, these housing arrangements expanded all around the nation, with low-income residents occupying the suburbs of major Brazilian cities. The favela, which had once been associated with vitality and nature, began to obtain the connotations as a place of poverty, rejection, and later, violence. It has not been until the twenty-first century that the favela has taken measures to position itself publicly through media and claim its vitality back as a form of resistance. This historical distortion of the favela's image coincides with Barthes' notion that images can be subjected to a rhetoric, dependent on cultural, social, and political contexts (Barthes 153). On the inside of favelas, one may not see these places in the same manner as from the outside. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word 'favela' is defined as "a settlement of jerry-built shacks lying on the outskirts of a Brazilian city" (Merriam-Webster). Although the denotation of favelas may be universally objective, the connotation is subjective and is dependent on the viewer. What is a place of danger to some, is a safe space for others. Anthropologist David Nemer describes the duality of favelas as, on the one hand, "sites of violence and drug trafficking. [Outsiders] think of their residents as favelados—uncivilized, poor, low level of education, culturally sterile... and a source of danger and instability to their neighboring cities." (Nemer 29) . While on the other hand, residents see the favela as "working together as a people and solving problems in solidarity... Neighbors help one another... and simultaneously strengthen ties that bind them together and form the spirit that they refer to as community (comunidade)" (15). It is precisely this difference in connotation that I investigate in this project.

The objective of my project is to dispel prejudice against favelas and present them as centers of resilience and cultural significance. This aligns with Barthes' notion that images carry connotative implications. Through interviews with favela inhabitants and mixed media collages, these zines challenge the common conceptions associated with favelas and show that although there are dangers, the favela has life that emanates from its people. The favela is a living, breathing, place, not solely characterized by adversity. It is a community of resistance, cultural dissemination, and artistic expression to the rest of the world. The production of this zine is a combination of mixed media collage and text, inspired by the works of dadaist Raoul Hausmann and artist Romare Bearden, who both used the practice of photomontage to make a political and social commentary on the world they saw during their respective times. I used Procreate and Adobe Photoshop to make the collages, and Adobe InDesign to put the pages together. There are three versions of this zine: the original in Portuguese, then translated versions to English and Italian. All three will be shown in a gallery exposition as physical copies. In addition to the presentation copies of the zines, there will be postcards of the graphic collages for viewers as take-aways. The pages of the zines alternate collage and interview pages. By harnessing the perspectives of active members of favela communities, the viewer has access to primary sources they may not have access to otherwise. Distributing these zines, both physically and digitally to the masses, is in alignment with liberatory practices the favela is working hard to obtain. This project is an opportunity to give a voice to the silenced and marginalized minority groups of Brazil not by speaking from their perspective, but creating space for their voices to be heard.

The decision of translating zines into English and Italian exemplifies the relationship between the image and written discourse, as explained by Barthes; I am working with a clear intended message. The inclusion of translated textual content in both English and Italian serves

to boost the accessibility of the zine and expand its potential audience. This aligns with Barthes' perspective, since it recognizes the capacity of images to convey meanings that extend beyond their immediate visual context. Using text will allow me to draw out key points I expect the viewer to understand about favelas. It is what Barthes calls “anchorage” (156), the coded language represented in the image. Explicit text is at times necessary to direct the viewer's attention towards the key arguments emphasized, which are manifested as powerful statements in the collages. Images possess rhetorical power and are effective participants in meaningful discourse surrounding language and culture. In the zines, I use both photographs of interviewees as well as individual elements; the latter edited to create dreamscapes retaining to the topic discussed in each interview. Images have the ability to transcend text, and to tell a story when words fail. However, as seen with Barthes, the harmonization of text and images creates a beautiful work which allows for effective communication.

When thinking about communication from one language to another, translation, and its challenges, comes to mind. In Keya Majumdar's essay “Appropriating the 'Other': Some Challenges of Translation and its Theories”, the author explores translation as a form of communication. In Majumdar's text, translation is nuanced and loosely defined. According to her, language is “inherently dialogic. Language and words made sense only in its orientation of intercommunication directed towards an 'Other'” (Majumdar 168). Therefore, translation is inherently communal. It cannot exist within the self.

When one translates from one language to another, they are doing an act of service to the world; translators are role models for global citizens (169) as they are using their skills for a purpose existing beyond the self. Through translators, the spreading of messages across the



world through various languages has become easy. It is an acknowledgement of the other, and being in conversation with them.

The conversation surrounding agency translators exercise is recent; the translation process has changed over centuries. What was once word-for-word “carry over” (163) is now an “intellectual activity” (163). Today, translators have much more autonomy than in the past, as they consciously and subconsciously bring their personal background into their work. This is where the translator comes out of the background and into the foreground: they have the agency and responsibility to translate not only literal words, but tone, feel, and cultural nuances as well. These translations happen in a sort of transactional manner, trading one word for another even when they do not perfectly match up. It is their choice to decide whether to trade *saudade* for “longing” or leave it in the original Portuguese, for example. One is not better than the other, it is a choice we have to make. We know it is not adequate, but we make do. No single option will convey the exact meaning of the word, but this messy imperfection is what makes translation a beautiful art. There is something fundamentally human in the inability to produce a translation with full precision and allow both for what is missed and what is added. Perhaps what is revealed through this exactitude becomes most important. Along with translating words and emotions, we are also expressing cultures and values. Translation is transformation and transposes cultures– it is impossible to transfer words from one language to another without accounting for cultural differences or nuances. Therefore, to translate is to create new realities.

Another point of translation occurred transcribing words from audio files into text, deciding whether or not to lengthen shortened words like *tá* to *está*, for example. Here, adding the two extra letters changes the register of the speaker; it formalizes the informal. A final point

of conscious translation in this project was a deeply personal one: translating ideas expressed in these interviews into collages to serve as visual representations of the themes in each interview.

In my project, I understand that when I translate from Portuguese to English, and from Portuguese to Italian, I create new possibilities, since they are interpretations according to my past experiences. As a native speaker of English and Spanish, Portuguese and Italian are foreign languages to me. I cannot simply write words without paying attention to gender or variable agreement. Regardless of how long I have been studying, words do not come as easily as English. It was important to keep this in mind as I created my zines, especially since the first zine was written in Portuguese. Not only was the text in Portuguese, but so were the interviews and research. As seen in this personal example, every translator carries their own personal and cultural background. Even reading and research is translation, according to Majumdar (167). It is translation because it is synonymous with interpretation. Reading is the act of interpreting what is written by the other and translated by the self, into a comprehension that makes sense to the latter.

This practice is not about right or wrong, or producing the perfect translation. The act of translation gives ideas and emotions a new life. There is something about the simultaneous attempt to represent something truthfully, together with the way it will never be perfect, that produces this liveliness. What matters most is that the translator is invested in producing an earnest translation in their own way; they sprinkle a touch of themselves into their work, humanizing language and creating community. They accept the impossibility of a seamless translation and instead embrace this imperfection and take joy in sharing their attempt at the impossible because even this has the power to impact lives. Translation is an art that benefits

humanity — it is a practice of love, amplifying voices, and bridging connections. Translation bridges the gap between cultures and peoples. It is a sign of progress, of development.

To understand this project is to understand the current climate of favelas. As stated previously, favelas have been presented negatively in the media for decades. It has not been until recently that positive representations of the favela have come into the light, mainly due to artists from favelas gaining popularity nationally and internationally. However, even so, most of the attention is on favelas in Rio de Janeiro. There is a lack of information and recognition on São Paulo's favelas, which have distinct differences to those in Rio. Although the cultures are different, the issues inhabitants face are similar, which inspire similar art from these two cities, protesting rights and demanding recognition. The artists and organizations that have inspired me are mostly from Rio de Janeiro, including collage artist Del Nunes and non-profit organization RioOnWatch. In my research, I have not found any zines on the topic of favelas, in Portuguese or much less in English. Zines in Brazil are difficult to find, especially in the United States, but the format of my zine is loosely inspired by Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Codex Espangliensis*. Gómez-Peña weaves text and images together to create meaningful collages, which I also did.

For this project, I looked back to theories and historical research to guide my creative process. Recognizing that translations would not produce flawless work, this project taught me to embrace the idea of imperfections, as inspired by the Majumdar core reading. Barthes' concept of anchorage led me to select a word for each interview, aiming to leave the viewer with one key word surrounding the favela. Feedback from Professor Wing and peers played a key role in shaping the project. Through work-in-progress presentations, meetings with Professor Wing, and peer group discussions, I was able to refine my work.

Looking back on the project things, did not unfold exactly as planned. Originally, I had ten interviews scheduled. However, as time went on and schedules became busier, not all ten interviewees were able to schedule a Zoom meeting with me. Losing two interviewees meant that I had eight perspectives to work with. Initially, I was nervous about this change, however, the perspectives were diverse enough that the zine does not feel incomplete. Designing the layout turned out to be more intricate than anticipated; ensuring consistency across three copies required extra attention. The translation process also took longer than expected, especially when approaching idiosyncrasies, slang terms, and expressions. I found myself asking for assistance from native speakers to ask what specific words or phrases meant in different contexts. While my core ideas remained unchanged throughout this journey, the project taught me perseverance and adaptation. One significant aspect of this experience was sharing work with my peers—an act that made me feel vulnerable at times, but in the end, proved rewarding. This process of openness and vulnerability not only bolstered my confidence, but also allowed me to foster a supportive community around me. Presenting works in progress during discussions with classmates became an opportunity for growth despite any reservations or concerns.

There are many ways this project could be iterated in the future. Moving forward I plan to include more interviews with diverse community roles to gain an even better understanding of how favela communities operate. Additionally, I am interested in creating more zines on other favelas in other major Brazilian cities, including Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and Brasília. This project's completion signifies the end of my senior thesis, but opens up exciting possibilities for new endeavors shaped by theoretical insights, historical contexts and the valuable lessons learned along the way.

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