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Constructing and De-constructing Communities: Tales of Urban Injustice and Resistance in Brazil and South Africa

In the 1950s and 1960s the community of Lady Selborne, a township near Pretoria, South Africa, was destroyed by the Group Areas Act, a piece of legislation within the apartheid regime. Mixed groups had lived there since it was created in 1905, an urban community reclaimed from marshes and floodplains. A series of government-sponsored initiatives scattered its residents according to their "ethnicity" and forcibly removed them to a variety of remote homelands. Jane Carruthers gives us the story of the creation and destruction of Lady Selborne in a poignant narrative, describing the vivacity and the resistance of the community.[1]

On the other side of the Atlantic, Rio de Janeiro's government was also busy with social engineering or, more exactly, with the remaking of communities according to a concept of ideal urban space as held by the administration. It was not an apartheid regime; ethnicity had little to do with it—at least at first sight. But with around 40 percent of the urban population of Rio de Janeiro living in favelas or precarious housing, most of them Afrobrazilians, the local administration embraced slum removal with enthusiasm. It was a common enough policy for Latin America in the 1960s, as Mike Davis reminds us.[2] Some of the favelas were in prime real estate areas, such as the *Favela da Praia do Pinto* (Pinto Beach slum), near the world-famous Ipanema beach. While the government did build new communities for the displaced population, rumours circulated about mysterious fires, intimidation, and even body disposal in the waters of the nearby rivers whenever the enticement of property titles in another location was not enough. While the rumours were never proven, there was little actual investigation of government actions after the 1964 military coup and the takeover of Brazil by a dictatorship.

So it was not surprising that when a large flood swamped Rio de Janeiro in 1966, government planners seized the opportunity to remove large chunks of the poor population from the favelas in the hills or in the riskier areas to the newly built (and not yet quite

1 Jane Carruthers, "Urban Land Claims in South Africa: The Case of Lady Selborne Township, Pretoria, Gauteng," *African Historical Review* 32, no. 1 (2000): 23–41.
2 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006).

habitable) neighbourhood of *Cidade de Deus*—City of God. The housing project had been planned to promote the development of the western borders of the city. The future residents would provide labour for a middle-upper class neighbourhood about 10 miles away (which at that point existed only in the minds of land speculators and real estate visionaries), serving as maids, construction workers, doormen, gardeners, and so on. The 1966 flood, however, changed the schedule. The rains had caused landslides in the hills where the poorest population lived in makeshift shacks. The final toll of the flood was over two hundred people dead and thousands without shelter. It was a traumatic event for the city—but it was also an occasion on which Rio's administrators used the so-called natural disaster to attempt some social engineering of their own with the population of the favelas. The heavy rains are a feature of the tropical region of Rio de Janeiro, and really nothing new. However, social inequality, the lack of responsible housing policies, the rural exodus, and the rampant urbanization that characterised the mid-twentieth century in Latin America turned what was simply a rainy season (occasionally inconvenient at most) into periodical catastrophes. Removing the affected population seemed to be the easiest solution.

In the following year, 1967, a new large flood struck Rio de Janeiro. The system of transferring part of the favela population to City of God had worked well the previous year and it was repeated in 1967. It established a pattern. Floods in the following three decades would also bring new waves of displaced communities to City of God. They also created waves of growth in the area: there were those who had arrived with the 1967 rains, and those of the 1978 rains, and then again those of the 1988 rains. It was not only the community that changed with each flood but the landscape as well. Eventually the neighbourhood reproduced many of the central city's vices. There was social and gender inequality within City of God, there was drug use and drug trafficking, and there was a predatory relation with that new landscape, which was quite foreign for most of the residents born and raised in the streets of Rio. Located at the border of the rural and urban, the region was surrounded by three rivers and a fair amount of wildlife. When the first families arrived there, mothers feared their children would drown—while the kids delighted in swimming and fishing near their homes. Five years later the rivers were completely contaminated; mothers no longer feared drowning, but waterborne diseases. After 10 years, little of the original fauna could be found there (with the exception of the resistant caimans), and after 20 years City of God itself was a flood-stricken area, the river beds and margins having succumbed to uncontrolled garbage disposal and lack

of water treatment. In 2014, with almost forty thousand residents, City of God is one of the most contaminated areas in Rio de Janeiro City and has one of the lowest Human Development Index scores of the region.

Putting Lady Selborne and City of God side by side, we can see that on one side is the destruction of a community while on the other is the construction of a new community. Yet the two cases may display many similarities (besides romantic names). We may find crucial insights on urban history, and new ways to look at urban injustice.

The first shared insight from these two narratives is that injustice may be legal, and popular among certain influential groups, and is often connected to the actions of the state. Lady Selborne survived several interpretations of apartheid laws, slipping through one loophole after another, until it was eventually included in the new interpretation of the Group Acts—with the full support of the National Party. City of God was part of a policy of slum clearing, official state policy supported by the righteous people of Rio de Janeiro, who were concerned with the encroaching of favelas into the hills and into areas with significant real estate value. The death toll of the 1966 flood gave this policy a moral legitimation in their eyes—but in essence, it was simply a policy of removing people from visible and valuable areas without investing in housing or equality strategies.

The second commonality concerns inequality—both legal and social inequality. In both cases the communities were poor, vulnerable, and had the least access to state resources. Their residents were either of the wrong colour (or ethnicity) or they lacked the knowledge and financial resources to access the law. In the Rio case, the technical assessment of risk and the scientific language in which it was formulated were also beyond the understanding of this population, and the information provided was biased in favour of the state's plans. It does not follow that these risk assessments were untrue. However, a fair number of wealthy houses in Rio were also in high-risk areas and illegally occupied public lands—yet these wealthy owners were not harassed. The key factor was that these poor areas did not fit into an idea of the city, just like a coloured, mixed community surrounded by white areas was anathema for a state that thought in terms of Group Area Acts.

But what is more instructive in both cases is the action instigated by the communities. Carruthers tells us how the Lady Selborne township fought against legally-enforced re-

moval from the start, and how this made it an important centre for opposition to apartheid restrictions and laws in general. In the case of City of God, resistance was more subtle. Dumped into a remote area with little infrastructure and even fewer public services, far away from their workplaces and with few transport options, many new residents simply left and went back to their slums after the 1966 flood. Others tried to reinvent their previous communities. A keen game of identification and labelling went on in social gatherings or simply in the common spaces of coexistence such as schools and markets, a game in which the experience of women was particularly important. Women asked each other who was from which favela and who had lived where. In so doing, they sought to recreate social networks. Other women created new networks, bonding over the experience of surviving the flood. Families abandoned the houses the government had put them in and took possession of others' houses in areas that were more congenial to their vision of community. Making sense out of common experiences was also a fundamental strategy for creating these networks, and every new wave of residents was aware of it. For instance, new residents named sections of City of God after their former communities: Rocinha Two was created by former residents of the larger slum Rocinha, removed to City of God after a flood in 1980. City of God may have begun as disposal area for flood victims but soon the residents forged their own history, which was, for better or worse, quite different from what city politicians had imagined. It has a clear identity, an active neighbourhood association, and it has carved its own place in the history of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Neither narrative has a happy ending. Lady Selborne was finally lost as a community, and while there is talk of reparations for the injustice done, compensation does not turn back the clock. City of God still grapples with the same inequality in which it was originally founded. It is now infamous as one of the most violent areas of the city, as the movie of the same name highlighted—although there are reasons for cautious optimism.[3] But perhaps, as historians, we can revisit the past and acknowledge its injustices, amassing support for a new struggle. We can honour those voices and their strategies for survival in tough times. Perhaps studying their memories and how they construed their relationship with the urban space is the best way we have to examine ongoing and historical urban injustice.

3 Else R. P. Vieira and Fernando Meirelles, *City of God in Several Voices: Brazilian Social Cinema as Action* (New York: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2005).