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Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil by Keisha-Khan Y. Perry (review)

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

This book presents a detailed description of the evolution of a grassroots organization in the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood in Salvador, Brazil, and the crucial role performed by the women of such a place in the birth and development of this organization. These events took place in the context of the "land grab". This expression refers mostly to cases where the neighborhood dwellers (usually poor people) do not have property titles of their homes even though they and their ancestors have been occupying the place for several decades. This is an important public policy issue that matters for the majority of Brazilian cities, and leads to conflicts whenever public authorities try to redevelop these areas.

The first chapter provides an overview of Salvador and a description of the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood, in which land conflicts are exacerbated by the rugged landscape of Salvador that leaves almost no other alternative than redeveloping parts of the city. In particular, given the steep slopes, the only path that could be followed by the Contorno Avenue is through the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood. Furthermore, this avenue is one of the few connecting the Cidade Baixa to the Cidade Alta areas. Thus, a rally that closes it disrupts the entire city and is major news.

The following chapter outlines the life-histories of several other similar neighborhoods and their experiences with state agencies and their redevelopment policies in Salvador. The governmental agents are usually very authoritarian and not open to discuss redevelopment plans with the affected residents. There are few minor problems with the factual information provided, for instance on p. 37, "The construction of Contorno Avenue by the technocratic military regime in the 1950s and 1960s was crucial in making..." Yet, the military regime started only in April of 1964. However, such small errors do not compromise the author's important work.

The first key contribution of the book begins in the third chapter where the author provides a very detailed description of the emergence of the Associação Amigos de Gegê dos Moradores da Gamboa de Baixo (Grassroots Organization of Gamboa de Baixo's Residents). This is an invaluable contribution because it characterizes the dynamics of the Gamboa de Baixo community and the circumstances that led women to take a central role in this process. By telling the stories of Ana Cristina, Maria, and Rita, the readers are exposed to a rich account of the challenging transformations faced by the community and why these individuals took on leadership roles of the resident's association.

In the fourth chapter, the land conflict involving Gamboa de Baixo residents is laid out in detail. It started with the sale of some adjacent land previously owned by the Catholic Church to one of the largest Brazilian construction companies. The conflict arose due to ill-defined borders between this lot and the Gamboa de Baixo houses. Moreover, the construction company planned an apartment building for wealthy people that included building docks led to more conflicts with the Gamboa de Baixo's fishermen.

The impact of violence in the community is analyzed in the fifth chapter. The author reports how some criminals use the neighborhood as a hiding place and a selling point for illicit drugs. The disrespectful and, most of the times, illegal means used by the police when entering Gamboa de Baixo and approaching its residents is also carefully documented. Interestingly, during the time frame of the analysis, there was a major increase in crime rates and police violence in Salvador and this led the population (both rich and poor) to try to protect themselves by raising walls, placing bars on windows (p. 117 and Figure 12). Perhaps, this could be the reason behind the large wall built by the apartment building to separate its residents from Gamboa de Baixo: segregation and prejudice is not the only explanation for that barrier.

The final chapter contains the second key contribution of the book: a deep investigation of some of the determinants of women's participation in politics. The author does a remarkable job of describing the emergence of women as leaders of the Associação and the challenges faced by them. By reporting an actual meeting of...

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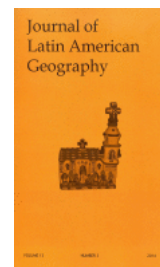
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