

Adam Talbot, *Resisting Olympic Evictions: Contesting Space in Rio de Janeiro*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781526156297 (cloth); ISBN: 9781526156280 (ebook)

Before Rio de Janeiro was selected to host the 2016 Olympics, Vila Autódromo was an informally constructed, working-class favela that was home to over 600 families. By the start of the Olympics, Vila Autódromo had been reduced to a single street of 20 white cookie-cutter homes fabricated by the municipal government, tucked along one edge of the new Olympic Park. For the 20 families who remain in these new houses—and for their network of former neighbors, supporters, and communities fighting displacement in Rio and around the world—Vila Autódromo is also a symbol. It is a symbol of a community that stood in the way of the speculative real estate desires of a powerful coalition of local and global actors, and which still stands “in the way” today, smaller in size and population but looming large in the annals of resistance.

In *Resisting Olympic Evictions: Contesting Space in Rio de Janeiro*, Adam Talbot provides a rich ethnographic account of the most intense year (2015-2016) of Vila Autódromo’s fight against removal. He argues persuasively that residents’ struggle to remain physically in their neighborhood was simultaneously a discursive struggle over the nature of favelas like Vila Autódromo. Dominant narratives reproduced by government officials and mainstream media outlets frequently portray favelas as dangerous, impoverished, and illegal places. These narratives, in turn, frame favela removals as a necessary public good. Talbot documents how Vila Autódromo’s residents and supporters “showed a version of their community that defies the myth of marginality” (p.10), transforming the physical space of the favela into a hub of cultural celebrations and exchanges, even as demolitions littered the neighborhood with rubble. Decades of memories and relationships in the favela fueled residents’ initial determination to stay. But the book traces how—as the Olympics approached—a strategic series of resistance events from festivals to soccer tournaments allowed both residents and supporters from across the city to cultivate and affirm a more broadly held sense of the favela as a vibrant, friendly place where inhabitants held and nurtured deep roots to the land. Talbot argues that activists were able to

spread this sense of place to distant audiences through news and social media in order to draw global attention to the city's violence, to build networks of solidarity, and to sustain residents' energy through the drawn-out fight against displacement.

Ultimately, as Talbot writes, this "is a story about power, about who decides what and who urban space is for" (p.8). As such, the book will be of interest to readers beyond Rio, particularly scholars, planners, community organizers, and anyone confronting displacement, racialized state violence, and/or the speculative pressures driven by global mega events.

Like Talbot, I accompanied the struggle of Vila Autódromo before and after the 2016 Olympics. At the time, I worked for the NGO Catalytic Communities and its local reporting platform, *RioOnWatch*. (Talbot analyzes our efforts to advance more nuanced, resident-centered reporting on favelas like Vila Autódromo in Chapter 5.) The possibilities for resisting displacement and building power to challenge top-down planning in the context of stadium construction and mega events have remained a core theme of both my research and my community organizing work in Los Angeles, which is slated to host the Olympics in 2028. In short, I have been excited for Talbot's book for a while. And I was not disappointed.

The book is a model of reflexive ethnographic research and writing. Ethnography always challenges the researcher to make sense of their own role and biases in the field, without unwittingly decentering the principal protagonists. Talbot is present as a character in each chapter, as he recounts lively anecdotes that demonstrate an impressive attention to detail in his fieldnotes. He writes openly of his emotions and interpersonal connections: the sense of loss as he watched homes demolished, the joy of the friendships he forged, and his initial fear that accepting an invitation to play football in the community's "Liberation Cup" would result in certain embarrassment. Crucially, he uses these personal reflections in service of his arguments about the construction of the favela as a vibrant, welcoming space and about the development of a potent shared sense of place among both residents and supporters. With rich descriptions of the actions, statements, and personalities of individual Vila Autódromo residents, Talbot succeeds in his stated goal to make the characters in his book "leap out from the page" (p.12). I doubt I will be the only reader to feel shivers when Talbot describes Senhora da Penha sweeping the floor of

her home when she thought it might be demolished the next day, smiling while she told him that “they can destroy my house, but they can’t destroy me” (p.94).

Talbot explains that he uses the term “community” interchangeably with “favela” (following common Brazilian parlance) and notes that a fuller theorization of “community” is beyond the scope of the book. Although I sympathize with the impossibility of theorizing every relevant concept, I believe deeper engagement with the term “community” (*comunidade*) would further enrich the book. After all, in the construction of a shared sense of place, there is also a construction of a community who holds and spreads that shared sense—the construction of a community forged to defend the space and place of Vila Autódromo. What does it mean to forge a new community out of residents and supporters when the community of former residents has been scattered? If we write of “a community speaking on its own terms” as Talbot does (e.g. p.127), we are no longer using “community” to refer to a place but to an amorphous group of people. When the vast majority of residents are no longer actively participating in Vila Autódromo’s struggle to remain, we must ask who counts as the community that gets to speak and consider potential exclusions from that category. Interrogating “community”—and the possibility of rebuilding it in spite of destruction and separation—provokes rich additional directions for Talbot’s work and for movement strategizing.

Antipode readers may appreciate the profound connections between Talbot’s work and the journal’s recent Symposium on “Housing Movements and Care”, edited by Fields et al. (2024). In particular, Jessi Quizar (2024) shows how Detroiters fighting evictions employ “a logic of care”, insisting that stewardship, relationships, and well-being should outweigh market and legal logics when it comes to keeping people in their homes. Talbot’s book similarly traces how Vila Autódromo’s residents foregrounded the care relationships they nurtured with each other and with their land to assert their right to remain. The cultural programming Talbot examines echoes the programming Quizar documents in Detroit, and offers additional examples of what Summers and Fields (2024) call “speculative urban worldmaking”. Meanwhile, we can find parallels in Vila Autódromo’s efforts to build new networks of support and care as former residents are scattered across the city, and in Rodriguez’s (2024) account of how Atlanta’s tenant associations built new “housing movement geographies” following the destruction of public housing. These

patterns are a powerful testament to the “surge of housing movements globally” (Fields et al. 2024) and the accompanying surge of logics of care, whose critiques of housing and land as investment vehicles are transcending national borders. That said, the divergences between the US and Brazilian contexts are revealing, too. Talbot centers the primary role of the state in Vila Autódromo’s displacement, which has more parallels with earlier eras of urban renewal in the US rather than with current US trends of developer-led displacement (which is nonetheless facilitated by government policies and state violence in service of property rights). Talbot’s book offers us a crucial look at state-led dispossession in the contemporary era of digital media.

In discussing Vila Autódromo’s use of social media to attract media attention and build local and global networks of support, Talbot notes that its effectiveness was facilitated by the particular conditions of the Olympics’ media moment and the favela’s proximity to the Olympic Park. The obvious question for those of us committed to supporting similar struggles against displacement, then, is how others who lack those conditions might create alternative sources of visibility, attention, and leverage. Talbot cautiously outlines a handful of elements of Vila Autódromo’s struggle that may be exportable, including the favela’s alternative or “popular plan” for redevelopment, and residents’ emphasis on cultural programming in the space of the favela to “undermine the justification for eviction” (p.153).

The book’s penultimate chapter explores the creation of the Evictions Museum (Museu das Remoções), a collaboration between Vila Autódromo residents and supporters. The museum testifies to residents’ commitments to preserving their memories and to supporting other working-class and poor communities’ struggles over territory. Talbot’s book matches these commitments, contributing to the archive it theorizes. The knowledge documented and produced through the book has a role to play in current and future anti-displacement struggles, from the favelas of Rio to the neighborhoods of Inglewood and South Central Los Angeles, in California, where tenants are already feeling the heat from rising real estate speculation as the 2028 Olympics loom.

References

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