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Book Review: Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil

Catherine Ogunmefun

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Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil. 2013. Keisha-Khan Y. Perry. Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 978-0-8166-8324-6

Reviewed by Catherine Ogunmefun¹

The book examines the need for international solidarity with grassroots movements in Brazil and throughout the African diaspora. The author, Keisha-Khan Y. Perry, presents an anthropological journey, which is intertwined with the everyday happenings of a social movement currently underway in Brazil. She conveys an in-depth sense of the women who drive the community movement in the neighbourhood of Gamboa de Baixo in Salvador (Brazil), from the perspective of someone who knew them and shared their friendship and their ideals. Through the narratives of these women, Perry highlights how land evictions and displacement work in the racist, sexist, and classist urban contexts of Brazil and how the complex process of galvanizing resistance against land expulsion operates.

In chapter one, Perry describes the neighbourhood of Gamboa de Baixo in Salvador's city centre. Gamboa de Baixo is located underneath Contorno Avenue, along the bay, and is popularly described as situated "below the asphalt street"; thereby conveying the neighbourhood as a separate urban world, marked by immoral illegal activities of black men and women that are obscured from public view by busy Contorno Avenue.

According to the author, the majority of black women in Gamboa de Baixo work as domestic servants for middle- and upper-class white families in the city of Salvador. These women are also key leaders who fight for land rights for poor blacks. The gendered racial and class hierarchies created by the spatial demarcations of the city streets, therefore resulted in the creation of a black female-led social movement to combat inequalities in the city.

Chapter two illustrates how a technical aesthetical improvement to the city of Salvador, through the construction of Contorno Avenue, resulted in the invisibility of Gamboa de Baixo and its residents, both spatially and socially. According to one elderly woman in Gamboa de Baixo, the neighbourhood "was marginalized by the passage of Contorno Avenue, bringing to the residents oblivion and even discrimination in relationship to the rest of the city". In addition, the construction of the avenue led to the division of Gamboa de Baixo into two sectors- lower and upper; thereby serving to uphold hierarchies of racial, social and economic differences in the city of Salvador. The invisibility of Gamboa de Baixo also made the neighbourhood vulnerable to displacement in the decades that followed.

Perry demonstrates, in chapter two, how history has become a commodity for public consumption and tourism in Salvador, as urban renewal focused on preserving physical and cultural aspects of Brazil, including present-day spatial memories of colonialism and slavery, such as São Paulo Fort in Gamboa de Baixo. Places where black people once lived have, therefore, become commercial sites for the consumption of black experiences and cultures without the people who produced that culture.

The restoration of the urban centre, Pelourinho, in Salvador was also only driven by the symbolic valorisation and preservation of the historical product, distant from present-day reality,

¹ Independent researcher in demography and development studies, Johannesburg.

which erased the memory of slavery and racial and gender violence. Urban renewal, in Salvador, involved social abandonment by the city government and the subsequent deterioration of historic buildings, followed by the forced displacement of local residents during and after renovations. Spatialised-racial restructuring within the city of Salvador, hence, fuelled the political process of fighting for permanent residency and land rights in Gamboa de Baixo.

In chapter three, the author gives an account of the history of the Gamboa de Baixo community movement against urban renewal programmes and for access to material resources, such as urban land and housing. Perry describes how women activists mobilise their neighbours in defence of permanent residency, land ownership, and adequate housing. She also shows how organising the Gamboa de Baixo neighbourhood in a collective struggle against expulsion also involved confronting images of the neighbourhood as socially and politically disorganised, as well as a space where people reproduced poverty, immorality, and marginality. Thus, mobilisation as a cohesive community unveiled deep racial, gender, and class tensions.

Furthermore, in Salvador, black communities focus on material issues, such as water, that are not always recognised as racial issues, as these communities are the main agents pushing toward more-inclusive urban redevelopment policies. These policies have a positive impact on the lives of the black people and the places where they create and preserve their culture. Hence, black women grassroots activists expanded the definition of the black movement to include the masses who are engaged in direct-action protest for infrastructural changes.

In chapter four, Perry, explores how “*o muro*”, the wall, is a metaphor for understanding the gendered racial and class inequality that governs Brazilian cities. For instance, black women represent the largest segment of unemployed workers; hence, finding a hole in the wall, or even attempting to climb over it, becomes a lifelong struggle for poor black women. In Gamboa de Baixo, actual concrete walls signify racial boundaries, legitimate and illegitimate ownership, and segregation. Thus, walls, whether physical or symbolic, push black women to the margins and create disposable subjects. According to Perry, walls are the first visible sign of the disposal of black coastal neighbourhoods during urban development.

The author also focuses on how increased visibility of Gamboa de Baixo as a target of urban removal, and as a politically organised neighbourhood fighting expulsion, has made it susceptible to increased policing, and as a result, police abuse. Arbitrary police invasions involve illegal searches and seizures, extortion, beatings, psychological terror (shouting racist, sexist and homophobic epithets) as well as pointing firearms directly at residents and randomly shooting at them and into their houses. Even though public perceptions are geared towards the fact that the police are cleansing the area of criminals, as part of the process to socially improve the urban landscape, local residents believe that they do not deserve such inhumane, violent treatment. Thus, the black-women led struggle for citizenship does not only constitute an urgent demand for racial inclusion in development discourses and practices, but also a need to tackle urban grassroots antiracism strategies, such as fighting police abuse.

Chapter five illustrates how the police routinely commit violent acts against poor blacks in Gamboa de Baixo, and how the black urban communities led by black women internalise and contest the violence. The author shows that the space of the neighbourhood itself and the police’s treatment of it, are crucial aspects of ongoing state efforts to expel the residents of Gamboa de Baixo from the coastal lands during the redevelopment of the city centre of Salvador. Police terrorism in poor black urban neighbourhoods is both routine and extraordinary, employing the most sophisticated techniques of urban warfare.

In spite of these challenges, black women in Gamboa de Baixo neither wholly accept nor are able to wholly accept the violence they experience. In addition, everyday and structural forms of violence shape their political consciousness, their gender and racial sensibilities as well as their actual ability to organize their community and resist the violence. Since they have to confront the violence within their community and from the state, they visualise fighting violence as a key aspect of preserving their right to occupy the urban landscape. However, violence on the part of residents tarnishes the positive image of Gamboa de Baixo that activists have worked hard to construct for the public above Contorno Avenue. Thus, violence is detrimental to the overall struggle for black permanence on coastal lands and in the city centre.

Sexist and racist notions have generated the global perception of black women's inability to produce political knowledge and lead political organisations. In chapter six, Perry reveals how the poor black women in Gamboa de Baixo defy these notions and expectations of their roles as workers, mothers, fisherwomen, and activists by occupying a dominant political space in meetings, and protesting as leaders of their communities as agents of social change. Even though the black women represent the largest numbers in domestic work, and are viewed on a daily basis by Salvador's elite whites as subservient, submissive and obedient, the neighbourhood association in Gamboa de Baixo gave them an important political space for black women to assert their local power and leadership. Thus, the black women's participation in politics challenges disparaging stereotypes of poor black women and forces their consideration as important agents of social change. In addition, as leaders of the neighbourhood association, these black women bring to the forefront their unique ideas and methods of social protest, which expands knowledge of racial and gender consciousness at all levels of society.

The author also shows how through the Gamboa de Baixo neighbourhood association, the black women's political actions constitute a continuation of their everyday acts of community building. As domestic workers, they are key to the development of female leadership as a result of the knowledge gained as "outsiders-within". However, they choose to organise their association as residents of their neighbourhoods rather than as workers, because there is understanding that the dominance of domestic work, oppressive at its core, should not be preserved. Thus, in their social movement to improve their neighbourhood, they demand improvements in their social conditions, primarily for access to education that will prepare them for other areas of employment.

In the concluding chapter, Perry focuses on the need for engineers and architects to maintain a balance between developing modern spaces and implementing new technologies, on the one hand, and not destroying existing homes and cultures, on the other hand. According to the author, Gamboa de Baixo's political work illustrates that community participation must be a component of urban renewal projects, as local governments often fail to consider and incorporate the specific needs of poor black people. For instance, there was an agreement in 2007, between the state navy and the mayor's office in Gamboa de Baixo, to transfer the land to the city government, who would then have the power to transfer collective land titles to the Gamboa de Baixo neighbourhood association. However, the agreement only regularised land owned by the state for local use and control. Thus, six years later, the Gamboa de Baixo's community continued to face the possibility of spatial displacement. As a result, black women activists Gamboa de Baixo continue to participate in solidarity with other communities, around issues of urbanisation and land rights as well as the right to live with dignity and freedom.

The book, *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*, is a good reading material for those interested in social movements and black women's leadership

and participation in neighbourhood and political associations. It is also suitable for gender/feminist scholars, who focus on black women's struggle against enslavement and racial domination in modern-day society. Those who are interested in urban renewal would also benefit from the book.