

Book Review: Defiant Geographies: Race and Urban Space in 1920s Rio de Janeiro by Lorraine Leu

In Defiant Geographies: Race and Urban Space in 1920s Rio de Janeiro, Lorraine Leu explores how the urban reform initiatives of 1920s Rio de Janeiro were underpinned by racial displacement and how black and poor white immigrant communities sought to defiantly resist these processes. This is a welcome and accessible contribution to Brazil's anti-racist urban theory and will be a fundamental read for anyone interested in race, urban space, urban renewal and displacement, writes Laura Santos Granja.

Defiant Geographies: Race and Urban Space in 1920s Rio de Janeiro. Lorraine Leu. University of Pittsburgh Press. 2020.

After the abolition of slavery, 60 per cent of Brazil's population was black. Over 70 per cent of black Brazilians lived in self-constructed, mostly informal housing by the 21st century. Racial segregation in Brazil occurred through urban reform initiatives and not through explicit segregation laws. The Brazilian state's vision of modernisation from the early twentieth century onwards did not include black urban spaces. Instead it supported European immigration, urban renewal projects that implemented a European-inspired modern ideology and a national construction of the 'Brazilian race' that worked to invisibilise the black population.

Lorraine Leu's book, [Defiant Geographies: Race and Urban Space in 1920s Rio de Janeiro](#), is about how 'race makes space' (5) in a country where the culture of racial intermix, racial harmony, racial democracy and colour blindness has prevailed over decades despite evident structural racism and racial segregation.

The book focuses its narrative on the city of Rio de Janeiro during the 1920s. Rio de Janeiro was Brazil's capital at the time, and the perception of it being a black city was incompatible with the elite's urban renewal projects. Leu describes the modernisation processes in Rio in the 1920s, with Mayor Carlos Sampaio in power. The exponent of the modernisation process was the Centenary Exposition, an international mega-event in Rio that aimed to showcase Brazil's modernity. The exposition was designed to reflect the white bodies and spaces that represented modern conceptions of universal freedom, justice, legality and equality. As a result, the site chosen to host the exposition, the Castelo neighbourhood, had its black and poor white immigrant population displaced.

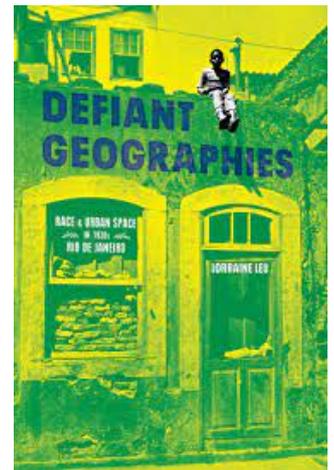




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Urban renewal projects in Rio aimed to change urban geography to invisibilise, displace and place the black population in informality. The poor white immigrants who occupied the same spaces as the black population were often 'blackened' and also targeted in urban renewal projects. Leu describes the spaces occupied by those who fought for their existence, challenged domination, marked their presence and understood the city through a decolonising spatial logic. These are the spaces that Leu calls 'defiant geographies'.

Leu examines the naturalisation of whiteness in Rio, establishing the lost connection between race and urban space and historically describing the elite's strategies to justify the removal of raced bodies in the name of progress and order. Leu argues that city officials justified the demolition of Castelo's neighbourhood due to public health and sanitation concerns. However, the real concerns were modernisation, beautification, productivity and real estate speculation due to Castelo's central location. The experience of the Castelo neighbourhood in 1922 was not an isolated case in Rio. Nearly a century later, [Vila Autódromo](#) had a similar fate. Leu argues that these are not spaces of exception: 'they were already produced as illegal and perceived as rightful victims of the deterritorialization and violence meted out by private/public consortia' (13).

Defiant Geographies is divided into four chapters explaining different critical aspects of how race makes urban space. Although all aspects intersect, each chapter focuses on one of the following: discourse; visuality; spatial practices; and built or material form. Leu shows how these aspects work to naturalise race and space throughout the book and explores how subjects defy this process. To do so, Leu portrays scenes from 1920s Rio through different cultural texts, images, characters and Brazilian novels that vividly describe places and people, giving the reader an idea of Rio's culture at the time.

The first chapter starts with a description of a scene involving three individuals. Two workers from the centenary reform project, José Vieira, an Afro-descendant, and Cícero Pereira, northeastern from the interior, found the dead body of Manuel Jesus Gomes, a homeless Spanish immigrant. The body was buried while Gomes slept on the demolition site for [Pereira Passos's urban reform](#) project. Rio de Janeiro's Mayor Passos aimed to create a European-style boulevard (Avenida Rio Branco) between 1903 and 1906, the first urban renewal project in Rio's city centre.

The description of this case puts us in the moment of the urban reforms and connects the dots with Leu's previous argument on how race and ethnicity intersect with urbanisation. A white immigrant displaced from his home ended up homeless at a moment when homelessness was being criminalised by the Penal Code of 1890. The Penal Code affected Afro-descendants disproportionately, but poor white immigrants that coexisted with the black population in difficult and impoverished conditions, or those who represented a threat to the government with their militancy and discourses of social revolution, could be 'blackened' and have a similar fate. 'By 1920, immigrants constituted 20.65 percent of the population of the capital, and city officials saw them alternately as agents of and impediments to the modern' (58). However, Afro-descendants remained the majority in the city's poorest neighbourhoods and had no possibility of working their way out or up. In her book, Leu shifts the analysis of informal areas in Rio from a class to a racial lens. She argues that race should be a structural principle to analyse space and sociocultural relations in Rio.

The racialised production of space tried to exclude black bodies from the city centre, but not without resistance. Throughout Chapter Three, Leu describes her 'defiant geographies' or geographies of resistance. According to Leu, carnival associations, street vendors and capoeira fighters were the main actors in occupying the streets and local area and showcased Afro-descendants' culture as an exercise of power, courage and strength.

One specific example mentioned in the text is the carnival of 1922, when one of the floats criticised the plans to demolish the Castelo neighbourhood, titling their float 'Fico' ('I'm staying'). These groups conferred value to these spaces and made their own collective geographical knowledge and identifications. Although the transformation of these spaces into battlegrounds was temporary, it produced collective alternative geographies. It empowered Castelo's residents to participate in the city's political scene, notably through protests.

Despite all the efforts to demolish the Castelo neighbourhood hillside, city officials and developers could not flatten all of the neighbourhood in time for the Centenary Exposition. The presence of part of the hill close to the exposition somewhat disrupted the aimed visual image of modernity, suggesting an exposition of Brazil's colonial past for visitors. The state, the municipality, the elites and developers failed in their idealisation of a place for real estate speculation. The lack of investors' interest did not bring the expected revenue for the city and left Rio in a housing crisis. The Centenary Exposition pavilion was demolished in 1978, an act that represents the reform's failure as an urban renewal project. As Leu argues, it signifies 'what Beatriz Jaguaribe calls "the fragility of former utopian projections" that while positing themselves as new, inevitably presage their own demise' (153).

Overall, *Defiant Geographies* is a welcome and accessible contribution to Brazil's anti-racist urban theory. Leu shines a light on the importance of race in urban spaces, defying class theories that undermine structural racism in the formation of current geographies of exclusion and segregation. The well-detailed case study of Castelo's neighbourhood and the Centenary Exposition is a suitable choice for discussion since the way Brazilian elites imagined the nation and the way the black population was put aside in the 1920s still reverberate in today's society and space. For this reason, *Defiant Geographies* is a fundamental read for anyone interested in race and urban space as well as urban renewal projects and displacement.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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