

ACTIVISM UNDER FIRE: VIOLENCE, POVERTY, AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN RIO  
DE JANEIRO

A dissertation presented

By

Anjuli N. Fahlberg

to

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

The parallel rise of democracy, inequality, and urban violence across Latin America in the last fifty years has created significant obstacles for democratic engagement among the urban poor. Overwhelmingly, the extant literature suggests that police brutality, gang violence, and scarce resources prevent the urban poor from mobilizing to demand the civil, political, and social rights guaranteed by law. These challenges are especially pervasive in Rio de Janeiro's "favelas," where drug gangs control local political networks and stymie democratic participation among residents. During three years of ethnographic and survey research in the City of God, one of Rio de Janeiro's most dangerous "favelas," I found that residents were in fact extremely active in making organized claims for their rights. In my dissertation, I document three models of non-violent collective action in favelas: (1) Transformative *assistencialismo*, wherein community-based organizations use service provision as a mechanism to politicize favela residents; (2) Community militancy, in which activists make direct demands on municipal and state actors for neighborhood development; and (3) Cultural protest, wherein favela activists use artistic expression and engage in social and political movements across the city to demand broader governmental and social reforms. I argue that these groups subvert violent gangs and their political allies by remaining small, avoiding local political networks, and constructing non-threatening "feminized" narratives around non-violence, social services, and art. At the same time, favela activists are effective in demanding change by leveraging political resources outside favelas, including allies in urban and transnational movements and officials in the municipal and state governments. Ultimately, my research contributes to the literature on social movements and violence by arguing that while violence and inequality constrain democratic engagement, they also engender a politics of non-violence that strengthens the struggle for citizenship rights.

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world another story of the City of God that many of them wished someone would tell, and that should be told.

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# **Introduction**

## **Open Microphone**

“Come closer, everyone!” Natalia<sup>1</sup> gesticulated enthusiastically with her free arm inviting passersby to join the circle. In her other hand she held the microphone. She leaned into it: “Testing, one two three...one two three...” Though the evening sun had set a few hours earlier, the park lights lit up the center of our circle and the police cabin behind us. The hairline of its sole police officer was barely visible as he sat behind the bullet-proof glass panes. On the opposite side of our circle, a cluster of cement tables and seats sat in the dark beneath large trees, though I could make out several makeshift beds on the ground where some of City of God’s homeless population congregated. “Folks,” Natalia said in her low voice, pushing her glasses up with her index finger, “we are here to share our opinions about the recent decision by Congress. If you have an opinion about it, come share it. The favela is never heard, but our voice matters. Mic, anyone? Who wants to go first?” She glanced at the other members of Art Talk, who shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other. Heads popped up from behind the park benches in curiosity. Some got up and moved closer. A group of older men playing cards on one of the park tables farther back turned in our direction. Passersby crossing the small park from the bus station to their homes inside the City of God looked at us, some with interest, others with looks of exhaustion, likely returning from a long day’s work. One or two slowed their pace and stopped to listen in. I had volunteered to make signs to inform passerby about our purpose: “What is democracy? Come share your opinion!” I had scribbled on one poster. “Open Microphone! What do you think of the impeachment?” read the other. After Natalia inspected them carefully and nodded in approval, I began walking around the park, poster on display, inviting people to join our circle.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all individuals and organizations have been changed to protect their confidentiality and safety.

Natalia handed the microphone to Osmar, a 40-some man who offered to read a poem off his phone. The small speaker had been plugged into the police cabin with permission from the UPP officer stationed there for the night. Osmar paused awkwardly as he scrolled through his phone looking for his poem. He found it and began to read it passionately, decrying the injustice of a corrupt political system, pausing occasionally to allow his phone screen to reload. He finished and smiled embarrassed as the few people standing around clapped or nodded in solidarity. Gradually other Art Talk members gained confidence and stepped up to share their views about the latest political scandal, the corruption of their political system, their distrust for their leaders, and the effects this had on Rio's favelas. As speakers became more confident, they raged against the system, which, they claimed, kept *favela* residents poor as rich politicians stole public money. They decried the racism and brutality of the police, the destructiveness of the unequal distribution of urban resources, the state's investments in tourists and the rich at the expense of the poor, and the hypocrisy of war on drugs, which criminalized poor black citizens just as politicians engaged in their own criminal activities.

Feeling emboldened by the discourses of other residents, Maria Rita, whom I had dragged with me to the event, took the microphone to add to the collective diatribe against the state. Though she usually preferred to be an observer in community events, Maria Rita had been infuriated by the recent vote by the House of Representatives to impeach then-president Dilma Rousseff. We had watched the vote on television two days earlier from her living room couch, along with her older sister Esther, her 20-year-old neighbor, Jordana, and her 12-year-old nephew André. The mostly-white-male House Reps had voted into the microphone, one at a time, in favor or against the impeachment offering a range of justifications: "In the name of all that is just and right, I vote AGAINST the impeachment," exclaimed one rep proudly. "In the

name of my grandmother, and mother, and all my brothers and sisters who deserve a better country, I vote FOR the impeachment” claimed another. The running tally was displayed on a score board above the chairman of the impeachment committee, Eduardo Cunha. As the hours-long voting process stretched along the day, the speeches became increasingly impassioned, and increasingly distant from the issue at hand: “In memory of my brother,” “For peace in Jerusalem,” “For the military dictators in ’64’,” “For the renewal of charismatic evangelical Christianity,” “For the end of remunerated laziness,” most of which had no clear relation to the charges that had been brought against Dilma. Jordana joked from her seat on the arm of the couch, “I vote in the name of my cat, Sugar!”

As the proceedings became increasingly animated, the reps in favor of impeachment took to clapping and cheering so loudly after each pro-impeachment vote that they looked like fans on the frontlines of a World Cup final, screaming so loudly their faces contorted and turned red, high-fiving and body-slammimg each other. Some pro-voters were hoisted into the air by their enthusiastic colleagues, crowd surfing along the House floor in their suits. Maria Rita, Esther, Jordana, and André had found the event as entertaining as it was disturbing. Tears of laughter at the absurdity of the reps’ behavior were gradually replaced with solemn silence as the vote swung decidedly toward impeachment. It was not a soccer game, after all. The outcome would have direct effects on Maria Rita and her family. Esther begged us to change the channel and watch the dubbed Food Network instead to relieve them of their collective depression. While none of them were especially fond of President Dilma, they feared that the impending shift to the right would eventually lead to the loss of many of the welfare programs spearheaded by Labor Party leader and former President Lula and maintained by Dilma. They also were repulsed by the fact that nearly every rep voting for Dilma’s impeachment was also under investigation for

fraud, bribery, or money laundering. They had adopted the discourse of the Left, which had begun calling the impeachment proceedings a modern “coup.”

The morning after the vote, I awoke to a WhatsApp message from Natalia on the Art Talk group chat suggesting they organize a public Open Mic night to discuss the impeachment. Natalia was heavily engaged in municipal politics, having organized a branch of the Communist Party in the City of God as an adolescent and was planning to run herself for city council later that year. While Natalia had founded Art Talk four years earlier, its group members were much less politically involved. They were mostly local poets, painters, sculptors, rappers, and singers who expressed their political views through their art, rather than direct engagement in formal political institutions. For the following thirty-six hours, Natalia and other members of Art Talk organized the event, deciding where to hold it and which supplies they would need, creating a colorful virtual invitation, and sharing it widely on Facebook and other WhatsApp groups. By Tuesday night the event had been put together.

Fortunately, there had been no shootouts between the police and drug traffickers the night of the Open Mic, though no one would have been surprised if there had been. City of God residents had witnessed so many shootouts between the police and local drug traffickers over the last five decades that tranquility was the exception, rather than the rule. But the evening seemed calm, as did the police officer sitting in his station nearby, and the Open Mic proceeded as planned. In total, around fifteen people from Art Talk had been able to attend, and they were joined by another dozen passersby. For two hours they took turns speaking their minds into the microphone in City of God’s main park as others clapped, nodded, or grunted loudly in solidarity. While the event was smaller than Natalia hoped, it seemed to fulfill at least two of her goals: to give City of God residents the opportunity to have a voice in the political process, and

to occupy public space with political claims-making. Holding the event in City of God's main park next to the police post and the main avenue which middle-class residents drove through on their journey home was a decision that was both practical and symbolic. For one, Natalia believed the location of the park near a busy area would have visibility and would allow more people to join the open mic. It was also not in the immediate vicinity of a drug sales point, where drug traffickers camped out all night, guns in their belts, selling drugs; they were less likely to get shut down by the police than the drug traffickers. At the same time, holding the Open Mic next to the police post was a statement that the police were not the park's only owner; the park was also a site for mobilization and protest against state injustice, corruption, and aggression. The park was at once a space of violence and non-violence. When Osmar asked the police officer in the cabin to take a picture of our group at the end of the Open Mic and we gathered around and smiled into the camera—and at the military officer behind it—the irony of the situation was palpable. As the institutional legitimacy of Brazil's political system frayed and Rio's favelas suffered the toll of its decades-long over-policing from the war on drugs, residents coalesced in the park to demand change. The contradictions of Brazil's dysfunctional democracy were thrust into City of God's park that night as residents took advantage of political openings in order to protest its closures.

Brazil, like most of Latin America, experienced a tremendous expansion in collective claims-making in the last forty years as its dictatorial regime was replaced by democratic elections and a long list of constitutional rights that guaranteed not only freedom of speech and assembly, but also civil protections and many social rights, including labor rights and universal education and healthcare. Across the continent, labor unions, indigenous groups, landless peasants, and a host of other groups have taken to the streets and organized into non-

governmental organization to demand access to the rights guaranteed by law but often disregarded in practice. However, just as political spaces and social supports grew across Latin America, the drug trade began to proliferate, installing itself primarily in the neighborhoods with historically weak public institutions and few economic resources. Growing economic inequality and the war against drugs, which has resulted in an increasingly militarized police force waging brutal operations against heavily armed drug traffickers, threatened the success of the democratic project from its very beginnings. In the last decade, the effects of these opposing forces was catapulted into the global spotlight as populist politics, endemic corruption, unrelenting inequality, and soaring homicide rates weakened hopes of an effective democratic system and an active and effective civil society.

In the midst of these new possibilities and challenges, participation in social movements has waxed and waned as groups shifted and reconfigured themselves to address the challenges and demands of exclusion from social, economic, and political institutions. While a vast literature has emerged to examine these social movements, we seem to have entirely overlooked some of Latin America's most marginalized people: the urban poor. This is not to say we do not talk about the urban poor. We do, perhaps now more than ever. These conversations, however, are dominated by a narrative of violence and victimization, emphasizing the destruction caused by the police and drug traffickers, rather than residents' organizing potential. There is good reason for this. The urban poor tend to be the most likely to suffer from the brutal conflicts between the police and the drug trade and are the most excluded from mainstream political, economic, or social institutions in the city, leaving them with very few avenues for democratic engagement. If we trust scholarly and public opinion, whatever social mobilization may have existed in poor urban neighborhoods before the 1980s seems to have disintegrated with the

arrival of the drug trade, who not only engaged in ongoing violent fighting amongst themselves and the police but also co-opted local institutions and community leaders. The closures of Latin America's failing democracies have been thrust with full force onto its poor neighborhoods from the top and the bottom. Under these conditions, how could the urban poor find the energy or the resources to do anything more than survive?

And yet, the City of God, one of the most notoriously violent and poor neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro and across Latin America, was bubbling with activists organizing for change when I began fieldwork in 2014. Local residents, most of whom were born and raised in this 60,000-person neighborhood, had found a way to make collective claims on the state and society for their political, civil, social, and cultural rights even as near-daily shootouts, severely under-resourced institutions, and corrupt politicians tore into the social and political fabric of their community. As I got to know City of God's activists, spent time in their organizations, events, and meetings, and conducted extensive interviews with them, it became clear that activism was not a new phenomenon there: non-violent collective action in the City of God was deeply embedded into its history and its present. It was a force constantly pushing back against the threats of economic precarity, political exclusion, social discrimination, and physical insecurity. While City of God's activists had not been able to fully protect fellow residents from the consequences of these, they offered an alternative set of narratives and practices aimed at demanding justice, equality, peace, and inclusion.

Although the fight for safety, justice, and resources in favelas rages despite, because of, and in opposition to state violence against its poor populations, this fight has gone almost entirely unnoticed. This is owed in part to the absence of visible and identifiable political movements by Rio's urban poor on main city streets, in large NGOs, or on mainstream social

media platforms, as these public forms of organization are extremely dangerous for favela residents. Because we cannot see them, we have presumed that they do not exist. Instead, our interest in favelas has shifted to its violent actors. Simply understanding the complexities of the drug trade and its at-times-conflictual at-times-collaborative relationship with state actors and the effects of these relationships on local residents has been a massive endeavor, particularly since the dynamics of politics and insecurity are constantly in flux. Thanks to this scholarship, we know a great deal about the violent political landscape in favelas and the constraints they have created to democratic participation among local residents. However, this focus on violent actors has prevented us from seeing the politics of non-violence that has emerged in opposition to the politics of violence and led us to the flawed presumption that social mobilization cannot flourish in dangerous spaces. Favela activism seems to have disappeared beneath brutal violence and co-opted governance structures.

In this dissertation, however, I will argue that the very opposite is true: extreme violence in fact engenders a strong commitment to non-violence. While extreme violence certainly creates deep constraints to social mobilization, the repulsion to the atrocities that residents witness on a daily basis on their street corners and in their national political institutions has inspired a profound commitment to social change. City of God's activists experienced fear, doubt, disagreement, and despair in their exhausting attempts to make change in the face of so many overlapping challenges, and they all paid a high personal cost for their dedication to social justice. However, they were also creative, resourceful, tenacious, and hopeful, and these attributes enabled them to adapt to the constraints of a violent political landscape, to seek out resources in unlikely places, to rethink traditional social change narratives, and to engage allies and networks beyond the local. With these resources, favela activists organized themselves into

groups motivated by shared political imaginaries and logics of action and worked together to deploy a range of non-violent tools and narratives to improve the social development of their neighborhood, to make demands for civil and social rights, and to protest racial discrimination and other harmful social narratives. Through these mobilization efforts, they have managed to secure important changes and improvements in and beyond the City of God.

There are two reasons favela activism has flown under our radar so far. For one, most scholars of favela politics look at local governance structures, which have been rendered dangerous and essentially useless for demanding meaningful change among non-violent actors. Through this perspective, it seems entirely reasonable to conclude that political action is untenable in this context. In fact, the activists in the City of God did not engage these networks. Instead, many activists disguised their activities to appear apolitical in order to avoid garnering disfavor among drug traffickers and corrupt politicians, rendering them invisible to not only dangerous political actors, but also to scholars of urban violence. Analyses that take local governance structures as their starting point would likely overlook these “underground” efforts.

Secondly, much research on social movements relies on a certain visibility of the movement *before* it becomes an object of analysis. Most activist groups studied by social movement scholars are on the news, in the streets, in NGOs, or on popular social media platforms before making their way into scholarly articles and books. We study them *because* they are visible, and their visibility allows us to apply a range of methods to examine them. But City of God’s activists had little choice but to avoid the spotlight and to restrict their size and power. Large, organized groups in neighborhoods dominated by the drug trade quickly become seen as threatening to the local social and political order, and its leaders are usually threatened or co-opted. Local activists had to keep away from formal governance in the City of God and had

to appear non-threatening in order to survive. As a result, they could not be found by watching the news or through traditional policy or survey analysis. Had I not entered the City of God as an ethnographer, residing with Maria Rita and Esther and participating in multiple community events and organizations, I would not have found them. But once I did, it was immediately clear that while they were not organized into large, institutionalized social movements, they were nonetheless deeply engaged in a project of transformative action and collective claims-making for services, rights, and social change.

In the midst of a global obsession with violence in Latin America's poor neighborhoods, I hope this dissertation will help to reframe the conversation from one of violence to one of non-violence. While it is not possible to talk about activism in the City of God without describing the brutal physical, structural, symbolic, and political forms of violence that both constrain and inspire activists' collective efforts, I hope what readers will remember about favelas after reading this dissertation are not the stories of suffering or survival, but of the ongoing fights for change. Not all of these stories have a happy ending, and most were fraught with challenges, conflicts, divisiveness, and the unavoidable reification of social inequalities even as activists attempted to resist them. My goal is not to romanticize or glorify these efforts, but simply to render them visible and intelligible in order to challenge, complicate and deepen the pervasive narrative that Latin America's poor neighborhoods are simply spaces of violence. They are also core sites for the politics of non-violence. They deserve to be studied as such.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Violent Democracies and Social Movements in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Latin America**

## Introduction

Despite the proliferation of democratically-elected regimes across the globe, both inequality and violence remain deeply embedded within democratic states, raising a number of critical questions about the possibilities and limitations of the populations most affected by these to lay claim to their rights. After three waves of democratization during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enthusiasm over increased avenues for civic engagement, legal accountability, and conflict resolution gave way to serious concerns about the limitations of actually existing democracies. We have been forced to question whether states run by democratically-elected civilian leaders do, in fact, promote political engagement, equality, safety, and justice. Nowhere are the limitations of representative government more visible than in Latin America. Despite the domino-like fall of dictatorial regimes in the 1980s and the near-universal opening of national elections across Central and South America, the region continues to suffer from entrenched economic inequality, the exclusion of black and indigenous populations, and, skyrocketing rates of homicide. At the same time, democratic openings have enabled a proliferation of social movements, as myriad civil society groups mobilized to demand the fulfillment of rights guaranteed by progressive constitutions. The emergence of large, institutionalized, mostly (but not always) non-violent forms of collective action has provoked another set of questions about the effects of violent and disjunctive democracy on social mobilizations. As Latin America's contentious political landscape continues to shift, scholars have set about the important task of examining how civil society negotiates the contradictions of democratic openings combined with deep inequality and escalating violence.

Despite our deep and ongoing commitment to these questions, social science has almost entirely overlooked the forms of collective action in the areas most affected by inequality and

violence: poor urban neighborhoods. The proliferation of violent drug traffickers in the informal settlements of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Caracas, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Cali, and across most of Central America has transformed spaces of entrenched economic and political exclusion into urban warzones, rendering into full relief the dual challenge of inequality and insecurity in the context of an otherwise democratic regime. The urban poor are certainly not absent in scholarly literature: a vast body of research examines the multiple obstacles faced by the urban poor to non-violent collective action, including resource scarcity, political and social marginalization, the physical and psychological destructiveness of extreme violence, and the control of criminal actors over neighborhood political structures. While scholars of urban violence have offered great insight into the multiple constraints to social mobilization, we are left with the assumption that collective action is simply impossible among Latin America's urban poor.

The objective of this dissertation is to demonstrate that non-violent collective action is in fact possible in areas of extreme poverty and violence and to shed light on how activists in these neighborhood negotiate multiple barriers in order to make claims for their needs and rights. While violence, poverty, racism, and other forms of marginalization do in fact constrain organized political action in disadvantaged neighborhoods, I will argue that these forces also engender its opposite: organized efforts *against* violence and *for* social development, citizenship rights, and racial equality. This claim is based on extensive ethnographic and survey research conducted between 2014 and 2017 in the City of God, a poor neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro that became the symbol for urban marginality and violence after the internationally-acclaimed movie by the same name displayed the egregious mechanisms by which drug traffickers maintained control over local residents. Based on my findings in the City of God, I will offer

three case studies of local social movements that operate under distinct political imaginaries and logics of action, but that have emerged in the context of, in spite of, and because of poverty and violence. I will argue that these movements have employed a number of strategies to remain invisible as political movements to local drug traffickers, which both allows them to survive and continue to operate under extremely dangerous conditions, but has also prevented social scientists from seeing them and, therefore, from taking the urban poor more seriously as political subjects. Ultimately, I will claim that by studying the forms of collective action constructed by favela residents, we are able to expand our understanding of not only the challenges, but also the possibilities for collective action under Latin America's violent and disjunctive democratic states.

## Democracy and Social Movements in Latin America

The 1980s and early 1990s were marked by the fall of authoritarian regimes in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, as well as political liberalization in Mexico and the election of civilian presidents in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. As the “third wave” of democracy hit Latin America—along with many African and Eastern European countries—the opening of elections, the expansion of constitutionally-guaranteed rights, and increased possibilities for citizen engagement in the state brought about an important shift in Latin American politics. Political scientists and sociologists set about analyzing these new regimes, generating a wealth of scholarship about what, in fact, constituted democratic governance and whether Latin American states had what it took to attain the lofty, if at times ambiguous, ideals of liberal democratic theory. While there are many definitions of democracy, Terry Lynn Karl, writing specifically on post-dictatorship Latin America defines it as “a set of

institutions that permits the entire adult population to act as citizens by choosing their leading decision makers in competitive, fair, and regularly scheduled elections which are held in the context of the rule of law, guarantees for political freedom, and limited military prerogative” (Karl 1990:2).

With this definition in mind, it is fair to say that although Latin America’s post-authoritarian regimes did not, and still have not, entirely achieved this political form, the transition has offered many more openings to democratic engagement than the dictatorial or single-party systems that preceded them. Among the most important political openings included the political rights to free speech and assembly, increased channels for citizen participation in voting and running for office, and constitutional laws that governed the legal and criminal justice systems. In many countries, this shift to the left also resulted in new entitlements and social rights, such as universal education and healthcare, and protections against racial discrimination. Some limited, but still notable efforts were made to place national armies under civilian control and to hold legislative and executive branches of government accountable to national and regional laws.

Despite these important democratic openings, Guillermo O’Donnell’s provocative analysis of Latin America’s nascent democracies published in 1993 contended that Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and most other Latin American countries were “not only going through a most serious social and economic crisis...[but were] also suffering a profound crisis of their states” (O’Donnell 1993:1357). For one, the European model of economic prosperity through rapid industrialization and privatization was taking its toll on severely overpopulated Latin American cities plagued by increased debt. Economic restructuring programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund called for austerity programs that further depleted resources from already poor

populations and created a debt crisis in many countries. Beginning with Chile, Latin America had served as a ground for experimentation with neoliberal policies, thereby replacing stable employment with precarious and unprotected labor, privatizing national industries, and encouraging consumption through indebtedness (Han 2012). By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Latin America had the worst income distribution of any region in the world (Frankema 2009). A 2004 report by the United Nations Development Programme argued that economic inequality in Latin America was significantly subverting the possibilities for democratic governance and its ability to enforce full citizenship rights (UNDP 2004).

The combination of new political openings and growing issues with economic and social issues gave way to a multitude of social movements and other forms of contentious politics aimed at making demands for unmet constitutional rights and for the expansion of civil protections and social entitlements. These included organized movements for labor rights, land and housing rights, gender and raced-based protections, and indigenous rights (Alvarez 1990; Cepek 2012; Huber and Stephens 2012). Street protests demanding open elections were critical to pressuring the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Feminist movements in Latin America brought attention to the links between “private” issues of sexual assault, domestic violence, child care, and reproductive control and more public concerns around housing, employment, and transportation (Alvarez 1990; Stephen 2010). In Argentina, Colombia and Brazil, feminist movements have also successfully advocated for gender quotas in congress (Htun and Jones 2002).

Additionally, human rights activists successfully used national and international courts to try human rights violations committed under dictatorial regimes (Lutz and Sikkink 2001; Sikkink and Walling 2007). This not only enforced accountability for political crimes but also

contributed to a “norms cascade,” a regional and international shift in views about torture, disappearances, and democratic governance that have coalesced into changes in legal and political enforcements (Lutz and Sikkink 2000). Indigenous groups have not only gained important protections for public land—in particular, major areas of the Amazon jungle and other forested areas—but have mobilized around the unique needs and cultural rights of indigenous communities (Cepek 2012; Yashar 2005). These groups have drawn on a range of mobilization strategies, including street protests, demonstrations, riots, land seizures, rebellions, and strikes, transforming Latin America’s political landscape into what Susan Eckstein has aptly termed a “living museum” based on both historic repertoires of action and new models of contentious politics (Eckstein 2001:10).

Collective mobilization spearheaded by civil society groups have had a profound effect on Latin American democracy. Many movements that began as oppositional groups became institutionalized through the ascension of Left-leaning political parties. The populist leaders that rose to power with the support of indigenous groups and labor rights movements helped to push through progressive public policies that countered neoliberal values and practices, leading to what social scientists have called the “pink tide” and the “post-neoliberal turn” (Escobar 2010; Yates and Bakker 2014). While endemic corruption, the weakening of institutional accountability, and the recent collapse of Venezuela’s democracy have begun to threaten the legitimacy of many states, social movements have played a key role in deepening and expanding the quality and breadth of democratic institutions (Markoff 2015). At the same time, Latin America has also become a critical site for the forging of global social movements. For instance, Brazil has been the site for the World Social Forum, a global network of activists that emerged to challenge corporate-led neoliberal globalization (Becker 2007) and for the 1992 United Nations

Earth Summit, among many others. Transnational activist networks have helped to strengthen movements within Latin American countries while also allowing activists in Latin America to support global movements (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

In recent years, growing attention has focused on urban social movement, wherein groups make claims on municipal government or private actors for participation in urban governance and development, as well as social inclusion. Dramatic urbanization rates across most Latin American cities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century spurred the decentralization of state power to municipal governments in many states and the growing importance of cities as sites for the negotiation of political and economic power. Inspired by the Marxist writings of Henri LeFebvre, who claimed that the city was a site of social and political contestation in which all groups had the right to make claims for their needs (Brenner 2000; Lefebvre and Enders 1976), urban movements emerged in Brazil and Colombia that culminated with the passing of City Statutes, legal doctrines that reaffirmed the central role of cities and mandated participatory political processes (Fernandes 2007). Massive demonstrations also erupted across Brazilian cities in 2013 and 2014 in response to excessive state expenditures on the World Cup and the Summer Olympics and ongoing issues with corruption, poor healthcare and education, and growing urban insecurity (Vicino and Fahlberg 2017).

Despite the explosion of literature on social movements in contemporary Latin America, a notable void remains: studies of mobilization among the urban poor. While working class laborers in underpaid but formal employment have been among the most active mobilizers for economic and social rights in Latin America, the urban poor—those residing in informal settlements with little access to formal employment—remain severely underrepresented in social movement literature. This gap is especially problematic since people in chronic poverty account

for one fifth of the Latin American population. In large part, the simplest explanation for their absence from social movement literature is the absence of large, visible organized mobilization efforts among Latin America's extreme poor. In fact, the lack of collective action around the poor has itself become a topic of study (Walton 1998). As Eric Hobsbawm reflected, "[I]t is remarkable how few riots - even food riots - there have been in the great Latin American cities during a period when the mass of their impoverished and economically marginal inhabitants multiplied, and inflation as often as not was uncontrolled" (Hobsbawm 1967:60).

The most popular explanation for the lack of collective action among the poor is that clientelism and patronage politics forced the urban poor to renounce collective mobilization in exchange for small concessions of services and resources (Gay 2006, 1993). As O'Donnell has argued, the political apparatus in the wake of democratization weakened in poor urban areas, preventing residents of informal settlements from attaining meaningful representation (O'Donnell 1993). Furthermore, the challenges of survival in areas with scant resources are often so great that little energy or time remains for mobilization. The lack of collective action among the poor is not restricted to Latin America. James Scott's widely popular examination of the subtle and individualized forms of resistance employed by Malaysian peasants in the face of so many political and economic barriers to social mobilization have further retrenched the assumption that the urban poor are politically passive (Scott 1987). While some notable studies have examined organized efforts among the urban poor to make claims for land and housing rights in informal settlements (Fischer 2008; Holston 2008), we continue to know very little about the possibilities for collective action among Latin America's most vulnerable population.

The emphasis of social movement literature on organized, visible, and institutionalized forms of contentious politics has provoked a void in our understanding of the urban poor as

organized political subjects. This is problematic for several reasons. For one, one of the major contributions of social movement literature has been on our understandings of how marginalized populations engage and make claims on the state as political subjects. In other words, much of what we understand about politics and democracy is a result of studies of how organized civil society challenges and shapes state structures, laws, policies, and practices. The absence of the urban poor from this literature severely diminishes our capacity to theorize the urban poor as political subjects and to consider the impact they have on democratic governance.

This hinders not only theorizing about contentious politics, but also contributes to an epistemic imbalance: theories of contentious politics rely on the cases upon which they are based, at the expense of producing new paradigms of thought on those excluded from analysis. This issue has become of growing concern to Latin Americanists who fear that social movement theory is too embedded within western perspectives. For instance, the core debate in social movement literature in Latin America has been the relative importance of political opportunity structures (POS) versus reflections of new social movements (NSM) that affords greater explanatory power to identity, culture, and shared meanings (Davis 1999). The decline of class-based labor movements and the proliferation of cultural and identity politics, such as those around racial injustice, gender-based issues, and LGBT rights have further retrenched the dominance of the NSM paradigm. Diane Davis has argued, however, that the basic problem is not the tension between these perspectives, but “that both paradigms are built on ‘Western’ assumptions about modernity and historically specific experiences of democracy, citizenship, and state formation that are more characteristic of Europe and the United States and thus fail to hold true in Latin America” (Davis 1999:597). The “testing” of theories based on western experience has not only limited the construction of knowledge, but provoked an intellectual

imperialism that privileges the theories of western scholars over those in post-colonial areas. As Latin Americanists fight to have original theories from the global south taken seriously in theories of the state and contentious politics, the lack of study about the region's urban poor further exacerbates epistemic restrictions and the neglect of the poor as not only political subjects but as producers of knowledge about the state and collective resistance.

If we are to overcome these limitations, we must both seek to better understand the challenges to collective action among the urban poor, as well as the strategies they employ to negotiate these barriers. Some important work has already begun on the first of these goals. Specifically, scholars have set out to understand another significant transformation that has further alienated social movement scholars from the urban poor: extreme violence. In fact, the proliferation of the drug trade and the expansion of militarized interventions to address organized crime have provoked inordinately high rates of physical violence across the region. Much of this is concentrated in poor neighborhood, where the absence of strong state institutions allowed criminal gangs to insert themselves and their drug operations. While the shift to democracy across Latin America has opened multiple spaces for social mobilization, extreme violence is increasingly tearing at the very fabric of civil society and its political institutions and further eroding whatever possibilities once existed for political and social mobilization among the poor. The explosion of violence in Latin America has prompted a large and growing interdisciplinary field of study concerned with understanding the connections and disjunctures between Latin American democracies and violent criminal actors and the effects of these on the poor neighborhoods occupied by armed actors. As many scholars of violence in Latin America have argued, violence has been so deeply embedded in its democratic institutions that one cannot be understood without examining the other (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Caldeira and Holston 1999).

In the following two sections, I examine the many ties between democracy and violence in Latin America and how these have further exacerbated possibilities for collective action among non-violent residents in poor areas. I then suggest that, despite these barriers, there is reason to believe that collective action is possible in areas of extreme violence. In the second half of this chapter, I draw on my ethnographic research in the City of God between 2014 and 2017 to examine how Rio de Janeiro's *favela* residents have mobilized to improve their neighborhood, demand citizenship rights, and challenge social and symbolic forms of exclusion from the city. I conclude by considering how these findings not only challenge the prevailing assumption that the poor are not organized political subjects and to consider what their mobilization efforts teach us about social movements and democracy in Latin America.

## Urban Violence in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Latin America

Forty-three of the world's fifty most dangerous cities in countries not officially at war are in Latin America or the Caribbean (The Economist 2017). Latin America has only 9% of the world's population, but 36% of its homicides (UNODC 2013). Unsurprisingly, one in four citizens in the region report that insecurity is the main problem in their lives (Jaitman and Ajzenman 2016). Although the causes of homicide in Latin America are varied, the expansion of the global drug trade since the 1980s and the responding *mano duro*, or "tight-fist" policing tactics of the War on Drugs account for many of these. Rival drug factions and militarized police forces employ a number of brutal tactics to fight for control of the profitable drug market and the territories where cocaine and other drugs are grown, packaged, and sold (Inzunza and Veiras 2017). As state and non-state actors fight for territorial control, casualty rates have risen

dramatically, generating significant challenges to state legitimacy and the democratic project and state legitimacy (Husain 2009; Winton 2004).

Jo Beall, Tom Goodfellow and Denis Rodgers (2013) term these forms of internal violence “civic warfare.” The concept of civic warfare is best understood in opposition to sovereign warfare—war between two or more nation-states—and civil warfare, in which two or more organized groups fight for control over the political center of the nation-state. Civic warfare, in contrast, is violence by and between armed actors within nation-states. According to the authors, civic warfare is motivated by “the violent expression of grievance (which may be social, political, or economic) vis-à-vis the state or other actors,” and can include a variety of violent conflicts, such as organized crime, gang warfare, and terrorism (Beall, Goodfellow, and Rodgers 2013:3069). Civic warfare, they argue, occurs primarily within urban areas due to the density, diversity, and segregated inequality that has become increasingly a feature of modern cities. Unequal power relations within cities can lead groups to use violence as a means of both expressing their sense of exclusion and mistreatment and also of attempting to obtain resources and power.

A vast literature has emerged to better understand how and why civic warfare has increased so dramatically in post-authoritarian Latin America. Taken together, it suggests that four overarching factors are to blame: (1) the growth of social exclusion in the wake of liberal and neoliberal economic policies; (2) the weakening of state control over poor areas; (3) the expansion of the drug market into global networks and local territories; and (4) the complicity of the state security apparatus in the criminalization and militarizing of the urban poor. Let us consider these in turn.

## Social Exclusion

Since the colonial era, Latin America has been plagued by extreme inequality and social exclusion, particularly targeted at black and indigenous populations. While the relationships between race and class disparities vary dramatically across the region and over time, a range of exclusionary laws, political policies and ideologies, and social norms ensured that white European elites maintained their power over non-white populations (Chasteen 2016). The project of nation-building that began after independence from Spain and Portugal in the 1800s hinged on maintaining social inequality by replacing colonial systems of racial inequality with constructions of citizenship that were legally inclusive but socially exclusive. Uday Mehta contends that the philosophy undergirding liberal citizenship is inherently founded on notions of exclusion based on assumptions about which groups were and were not “capable” of understanding and executing their roles as political subjects (Mehta 1997). According to Engin Isin, dominant groups legitimize their economic and political status by naturalizing their “superiority” over the dominated, who are often viewed as “barbarians” or “aliens” (Isin 2002:5).

Since independence, various constructions of citizenship have been deployed by governments and white elites to guarantee their access to power and privilege. Peter Wade argues that social constructions of race, gender, and class that characterized poor non-whites as morally depraved, cognitively limited or underdeveloped, and, in some cases, dangerous legitimized the uneven enforcement and provision of their legal and political rights (Wade 2009). In Brazil, the “myth of racial democracy,” or the claim that widespread racial intermarriage has produced racial equality, has helped to conceal many of the economic disparities between racial groups and to facilitate discourses that blame the continued poverty of many black citizens on their “lifestyles,” rather than on racial discrimination (Goldstein 2003).

More recently, the transition from a liberal economic model to neoliberalism has been blamed for growing inequality in Latin American cities. Greg Grandin argues that Latin America served as testing ground for many of the political economic theories emerging in the United States (Grandin 2006). The first neoliberal experiment, for instance, was conducted in Chile under the repressive Pinochet regime, which promoted increased foreign investments in local markets, deregulation, and the tightening of social expenditures (Han 2012). According to neoliberal economic theory, the function of the state is to facilitate the free mobility of capital between economic actors by reducing barriers to exchange by maintaining order and stability (Harvey 2005). In many Latin American countries, this has resulted in the repression of uprisings or groups deemed threatening to the social order. At the same time, technocrats and others (i.e. white “educated” elites) with training in economic and political theory are viewed as most adept at governing the populace while ordinary citizens—particularly those viewed as uneducated—are seen as a hazard to the proper functioning of the capitalist system (Harvey 2005). In the last forty years, these principles have provided a powerful justification for maintaining poor, non-white populations in an economically, politically, and socially inferior position.

At the same time, inequality and social exclusion have increased, particularly in cities where the majority of Latin America’s population resides. Since the 1980s, the privatization of national industries, market deregulation and expanded access to foreign investors, and increased restrictions on social spending have exacerbated disparities between wealthy elites and poor populations (Briceno-Leon and Zubillaga 2002). According to Katya Aas (2013), global cities are increasingly becoming dual cities, “marked by internal segregation and intense social stratification between those who are ‘connected’ to the global power networks, and those who

are disconnected from them” (Aas 2013:58). Similarly, Saskia Sassen (2011) argues that the new urban economy has produced an economically and socially polarized environment as the growth of the (underpaid) service sector and the decline of middle-class jobs exacerbate the divide between wealthy capitalists and poor service employees. Through this process, a growing number of the poor are rendered peripheral to the global economy, excluded both spatially and politically from the active city centers into the “ghetto” (Friedmann and Wolff 1982) and, more recently, what Mike Davis has referred to as “mega-slums” (Davis 2007). The exclusion of the urban poor is also manifested in the “splintering” of access to infrastructure, transportation, technology, and systems of communication (Graham and Marvin 2002). One consequence of this is the emergence of “informal citizenship,” based on “the precarious implantation of (urban) second-class citizenship” (Koonings and Kruijt 2007:8).

Economic, social, and political disparities contribute to the rise of civic warfare in contemporary Latin American cities in several ways. For one, lack of access to formal, well-paid employment increases participation in the informal economy, including work in illegal markets. The production and trafficking of illicit drugs, for instance, has generated a multi-billion dollar black market that employs millions of poor people with little access to alternative, legal forms of paid labor (Rodrigues 2016). Additionally, competition over scarce resources can lead to physical conflicts, which are compounded in cities where groups of differing interests, identities, and values co-exist in close proximity (Davis and Duren 2011). Finally, frustration and anger over the uneven distribution of power and resources can provoke aggression against groups perceived to be unfairly hoarding resources or against the state (Beall et al. 2013), thereby producing a cycle of violence in which some excluded populations engage in physical

confrontation as a form of protesting exclusion and discrimination (Hagedorn 2005; Winton 2004).

### The Weakening of State Sovereignty

While economic, political, and social exclusion help to explain the rise of urban violence generally, the weakening of state sovereignty, particularly in poor regions, is critical to explaining the rise of organized criminal gangs across Latin America. According to Bruce Bagley, “organized crime functions best in the contexts provided by weak states” because they are less able to systematically enforce laws or monitor criminal networks (Bagley 2004:32). In his review of Latin America’s emerging democracies, Guillermo O’Donnell argued that the democratic project in Latin America was “in crisis” due to the ineffectiveness of bureaucratic institutions, states’ inability to systematically enforce the law, and the declining legitimacy of states’ claims to promote the public good (O’Donnell 1993). According to O’Donnell, Latin America’s democracies have been “unable to enact effective regulations of social life across their territories and their stratification system,” particularly in “brown areas” where “ineffective states coexist with autonomous, also territorially based, spheres of power” (O’Donnell 1993:1358). In these areas, populations already economically marginalized have little access to effective political representation and must also contend with the control of non-state armed actors who fill the void left by the absence of state power (Davis 2010). In many of these areas, the only tool consistently deployed by the state to assert authority is its security apparatus, often through extremely harsh and brutal tactics (Hagedorn 2005).

Katya Aas (2013) argues that many illicit networks benefit from opportunities to collaborate with formal state and non-state actors. This relationship between licit and illicit actors is characteristic of the “negotiated state,” as political and economic actors recognize the

“existence of autonomous power centers” inside their territory and create opportunities for the state to be appropriated by these powerful illicit networks (Aas 2013:140). As many scholars have documented, organized crime relies heavily on cooperation from politicians, public servants, and other state actors (Arias 2006a), suggesting that the distinction between “state actors” and “non-state actors” may not accurately reflect the empirical overlap between these categories. Furthermore, there is great variability in the dynamics, characteristics, and configurations of armed groups that emerge in the areas of weak state power (Schubert 2015), and the relationship that these groups have with other armed actors, with different branches of the state, and with local populations is highly contingent on local dynamics (Arias 2017). However, there is little debate that the presence of armed actors outside the formal state apparatus play a significant role in transforming poor, marginalized neighborhoods into “societies of fear” (Koonings 1999). I return to this concept and a more detailed discussion of these areas below.

### The “Glocalization” of Organized Crime

The emergence and contemporary configurations of organized criminal groups and networks as a product of the “glocalization” of crime, which reflects both the globalized, transnational opportunities that have facilitated the spread of the drug trade into nearly every region of the world as well as the local specificities of the geographic territories in which the drug trade operates. At the transnational level, Katya Aas (2013) contends that a critical implication of the increasing interconnectedness of the world is the growing access that criminals have to communication, technology, and transnational illicit markets. More specifically, Bruce Bagley contends that:

transnational criminal organizations have been able to exploit the increased ease of international travel, the liberalization of emigration policies, the expansion of international trade, the spread of high technology communications systems and the under-regulation of international financial networks (via sophisticated money-laundering techniques) to extend their criminal enterprises well beyond the borders of their own country (Bagley 2004:33).

Just as opportunities for legal trade increases between countries, criminal networks cease upon the same technological advances and access to foreign markets. According to Mangai Natarajan (2011), access to advances in communication and technology enable drug traffickers to evade police and subvert the state's attempts to control these illicit markets. Furthermore, as the formal economy made legal goods increasingly accessible to the global market, a parallel liberalization of the illicit economy provided increased opportunities for the expansion of the drug trade. While the opportunities for international cooperation have provided organized criminal groups access to extremely lucrative markets, these groups also rely upon physical spaces in which to grow, produce, package, and sell illicit products. The weakening of state power in poor regions has provided ideal sites for these operations. At the same time, the embeddedness of the drug trade within physical territories reconfigures relations of power in those regions and often exacerbates the vulnerability and social exclusion of local residents.

### Policing, Security and the War on Drugs

The rise of organized criminal groups across Latin America has been accompanied by the launch of the "War on Drugs" beginning under the Reagan administration in the 1980s, which has legitimized the use of aggressive policing practices against those presumed to participate in the drug trade. The growing public perception that the poor are dangerous has helped to generate public support for zero-tolerance and *mano duro*, or "tight-fist" policies to combat crime and other "deviant" behaviors across Latin America, many of which were directly imported from the United States. This has had significant effects on the urban poor. Giuseppe Campesi argues that "the

neo-authoritarian tendencies implicit in the ‘war against narcos’ find their urban counterpart in the ‘war on the poor’ launched in Latin America on the model of the policies implemented in US cities” (Campesi 2010:449). The transfer of the zero-tolerance policy to Latin America, where the police has historically been a primary perpetrator of human rights violations, exacerbates fear and mistrust of the police and contributes to the isolation and segregation of the poor. This, in turn, pushes some poor residents to seek employment in illicit markets and encourages armed conflict against the police.

For some scholars, the turn to neoliberal policies is the core motivator for harsh policing practices against Latin America’s poor. Loic Wacquant, for instance, argues that Brazil and other Latin American states have sought to maintain power in the face of declining state sovereignty through the enforcement of aggressive policing and penal measures. He states that “neoliberal penalty is paradoxical in that it purports to deploy ‘more state’ in the realm of police and prisons to remedy the generalized rise of objective and subjective insecurity that is itself caused by ‘less state’ on the economic and social front in all the countries of the First World as in those of the Second” (Wacquant 2008:56). Magaly Sanchez (2006) similarly suggests that the discontent and instability caused by structural adjustments and market restructuring have increased states’ reliance on force in order to maintain “democratic order” (Sanchez 2006:179). For Sanchez, the structural violence perpetrated by the state through neoliberal policies brought on radical and criminal violence, which have then been suppressed through state-sanctioned police aggression. While historians would surely counter the claim that social exclusion or police brutality are “new” to Latin America, or somehow worse than before, it remains important to examine how these operate under the context of contemporary neoliberalizing Latin America.

## The Spatialities of Precarity and Violence

Though the literature above often characterizes spatialized violence as “urban,” much of the violence with which they are concerned is not evenly distributed across cities. Instead, they are concentrated within specific neighborhoods and even smaller areas. Criminologists, for instance, have shown that crimes tend to cluster in particular areas, such as blocks or streets, which they term “micro-regions” (Eck and Weisburd 2015). Though the “micro-regions” of crime have been primarily studied in American cities, a recent study of crime “hotspots” in five Latin American cities found that 50 percent of crimes are concentrated in 3 to 7.5 percent of street segments, and 25 percent of crimes are concentrated in 0.5 to 2.9 percent of street segments (Jaitman and Ajzenman 2016). A narrower level of analysis is therefore critical to understanding the spatial configurations of precarity and violence and to examine the social, political, and economic forces that operate in these spaces. I refer first to the extant scholarly literature on the concentration of violence and exclusion and then offer a case study of the City of God to consider one empirical manifestations of these phenomena.

Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt suggest that the geographic concentration of crime results from the spatial manifestations of social exclusion and the proliferation of violence. The spatialization of urban segregation “divides” cities by delineating between ‘go’ and ‘no go’ areas. Informal settlements in particular “came to be seen as veritable enclaves that obeyed a totally different set of rules and codes of conduct” (Koonings and Kruijt 2007:11). Similarly, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (2000) suggests that various forms of exclusion tend to cluster in high-crime areas in Brazilian cities, particularly São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro:

These high-risk areas are marked by several unmet needs: an absence or an insufficiency of public services (schools, cultural and sports organizations, transportation, clean water, and street illumination), a lack of commercial infrastructure, and isolation or very

limited access to other neighborhoods, transforming them into enclaves. In these spaces, physical violence is a concrete reality that disturbs every aspect of daily life. The frequency of homicides, thefts, robberies, and aggression in general is such that they have provoked the virtual disappearance of public spaces (Pinheiro 2000:124).

This process should not be viewed as natural or organic, but as a direct consequence of the actions (and inactions) of the state. Veena Das and Deborah Poole contend that the areas often viewed as abandoned by or outside the state are in fact integral to the production of the state. In the same way that modern citizenship is constructed by processes of inclusion and exclusion, these territorial “margins” are also a “necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception [is a core] component of the rule” (Das and Poole 2004:4). In fact, the dynamics of state presence and absence have been critical to the segregation of precarity and violence.

Koonings and Kruijt, for instance, argue that:

The absence or failure of governance (especially the enforcement and protection of citizens’ security) opens the way for a variety of armed actors and violence brokers who carve out alternatives, informal spheres of power on the basis of coercion. The result is in many cases is a fragmented, ambivalent and hybrid cityscape with varying manifestations of the complex of poverty, exclusion, coercion, violence and fear” (Koonings and Kruijt 2007:7–8).

Similarly, Sérgio Pinheiro suggests that the material manifestations of urban polarization have important consequences for how we understand the role of the state and the rule of law in these areas:

In those areas where most of the homicides occur and where the police presence is extremely sparse, not to say absent, the state monopoly of physical violence has been relaxed. An individual's survival may actually depend on his or her ability to display a "credible threat of violence." This may also be explained by the fact that, in an environment where violence is deemed legitimate, a "loss of structure in society" often occurs. In urban Brazil, social restraints have in fact been loosened, and violence is increasingly perceived as a legitimate means of solving conflicts (Pinheiro 2000:124).

The rise of non-state armed actors in informal areas has therefore rewritten the rules of survival and everyday practice in these spaces. At the same time, it creates a condition of “fragmented sovereignty,” wherein weak state institutions and high informality and poverty

allow non-state armed actors to challenge the state's monopoly over violence (Davis 2010). According to Diane Davis, "the new 'spatialities' of irregular armed force form the basis for alternative networks of coercion, allegiance, and reciprocity that challenge old forms and scales of sovereignty, [thereby reconfiguring] the power and legitimacy of the traditional nation-state" (Davis 2010:397–398). Davis suggests that this phenomenon is distinct from the patterns of violence studied by political scientists around national security, whose studies focus on guerrilla movements or other non-state armed groups whose main objective is regime change. The armed actors emerging in Latin American cities, in contrast, are not usually motivated by anti-government ideals or a desire for regime change, but for control over local markets. Specifically, Davis argues that "these particular non-state armed actors use coercive force to protect themselves, monitor or restrain movement in space, or secure access to capital by controlling commodity chains, networks, or the supply of goods, spaces, and activities for economic survival" (Davis 2010:399). In other words, they are more focused on protecting their (illicit) economic enterprises and controlling the local territories in which these enterprises are situated than in challenging the national state.

While non-state armed actors situated in Latin America's poor urban neighborhoods may not direct their activities to overthrowing the state, there are distinct political dynamics that emerge in these spaces. Guillermo O'Donnell argues that many areas across Latin America, which he terms "brown zones," are characterized by an absence of effective state institutions and the enforcement of the law. While O'Donnell suggests that nearly all of Brazil, for instance, would be considered a brown zone, for the purposes of this analysis it is more effective to rescale his concept to account for the differences in state presence within cities rather than across global regions. O'Donnell contends that those these areas continue to hold democratic elections and

have established political representatives, the political parties they represent “are no more than personalistic machines anxiously dependent on the prebends they can extract from the national and the local state agencies” (O’Donnell 1993:1359). The state is present and follows the political processes described in the constitution, but local candidates are beholden to the practices of personalism, familism, clientelism, and other practices that render them incapable of effectively representing the needs of their constituents. The consequence of this, according to O’Donnell, is a type of “low-intensity citizenship” in brown zones, which he describes as “a situation in which one can vote freely and have one’s vote counted fairly, but cannot expect proper treatment from the police or the courts” (O’Donnell 1993:1361).

The spatialization of precarity and violence within poor urban neighborhoods provokes an important set of questions about the limitations and possibilities for collective action within these spaces. In the following two sections, I examine the many intersecting barriers to non-violent collective action in areas of extreme violence. This is followed by an examination of the resources that are, or might be available to the urban poor to overcome some of these obstacles.

## Constraints to Collective Action in areas of Armed Conflict

### Intersecting Experiences of Exclusion

Even without reading empirical accounts of concentrated violence, it would be safe to assume that residing in these areas is no easy matter. Residents in areas of armed conflict experience high rates of resource scarcity, housing informality, racial disparities, and physical violence. The list of negative psychological outcomes associated with experiences of poverty, discrimination, and physical violence is long, and includes a range of mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, stress, fear, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as physical

conditions, such as high blood pressure, trouble sleeping, cognitive impairment, low birth weight among infants, heart disease, and premature death (World Health Organization 2002). It can also be associated with self-injuring behaviors, substance use and abuse, and perpetration of violence against others (Lupien et al. 2009). At the same time, studies show that communal support systems can help to mediate some of the harmful effects of precarity and violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Villarreal and Silva 2006), though studies also suggest that extensive communal violence can erode unity, trust, and cohesion (McIlwaine and Moser 2001; Perlman 2010).

The consequences for social development in areas of overlapping vulnerabilities are also severe. Neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, violence, and non-white populations tend to suffer from a lack of access to good education, formal or well-paid employment, healthcare, stable and safe housing, reliable infrastructure and transportation, and cultural activities. This often results in their exclusion from the mainstream economic, educational, political, social and cultural spheres of society. James Holston and Arjun Appadurai (1996) argue that the formal rights of citizenship provided by liberal democratic states have not been sufficient to ensure that all residents of the nation-state have access to the substantive rights of citizenship necessary to enjoy full membership in society. Without the full array of civil, political, socio-economic, and cultural rights of substantive citizenship, many populations remain unable to access their formal political rights or effectively engage in the national-public sphere (Holston and Appadurai 1996). Writing on Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, Brodwyn Fischer suggests that despite the decrease in object poverty over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, favela residents continue to suffer from a "poverty of rights," unable to access the substantive forms of citizenship.

At the same time, studies show that not all residents in poor, dangerous neighborhoods experience marginalization in the same ways. Race and gender, for instance, have an important effect on individuals' ability to access jobs, education, social networks outside the neighborhood, as well as their likelihood of experiencing different types of physical violence. Other factors that differentially structure individual outcomes include age, physical and cognitive ability, family dynamics, legal status, a history of victimization, and more. While accounting for this list falls beyond the scope of my dissertation, I mention this to suggest that while residents in neighborhoods with armed conflict share similar struggles, their actual experiences with these struggles may vary dramatically.

While this is a broad and surely over-generalized account of some of the challenges faced by residents in areas of poverty, discrimination, and violence, there are two important take aways. The first is that residents in the neighborhoods face a variety of co-occurring, harmful individual and collective consequences that result in (and are caused by) their exclusion from the larger urban fabric. Though we often study each of these variables separately, their form, salience, and effect is defined by their intersection in a geographically-circumscribed area. In other words, the lived realities of residents in areas of conflict are shaped by overlapping, mutually constitutive forms of social, economic, political, and physical vulnerabilities that conspire to constrain and configure residents' individual and collective experiences. At the same time, race, gender, age, and myriad other factors produce important distinctions in *how* these shared vulnerabilities are experienced. To study the lived realities of residents in high-conflict areas is therefore to account for both the local, geographically-bounded dynamics of overlapping vulnerabilities, as well as the varied outcomes produced by differences between residents.

## Societies of Fear

In addition to the multiple, intersecting forms of exclusion and vulnerability experienced by residents in areas of conflict, these are also spaces widely characterized by fear. Stories of public lynching, beheadings, broken bones, burned bodies, shootings, and other forms of extreme torture and violence permeate news stories and ethnographic accounts from Latin America's more dangerous neighborhoods. According to Erika Larkins, the "spectacle" of public violence is a core tactic of producing intimidation and fear among local residents, and is also deployed by the media to emphasize the moral depravity that constitutes these spaces (Larkins 2015). In addition to the visibility of brutal crimes, residents are also exposed to violence in the home, including physical and sexual abuse (Moser 2004). Scholars have come up with many terms to describe these neighborhoods, including "societies of fear" (Koonings 1999), a "culture of terror" (Bourgois 2001), "states of (in)security" (Penglase 2009), and a "state of siege" (Rodgers 2009) to name a few. These terms are intended to reflect the extreme fear that residents of these areas experience as a result of extreme violence that residents either see or hear about on a regular basis.

Living in such environments has several consequences. For instance, Dennis Rodgers describes how in a poor barrio in Nicaragua residents were afraid to leave their barricaded homes and developed strict routines to avoid leaving during more dangerous times (Rodgers 2009). In such societies a situation of "hypervigilancia" has emerged with citizens becoming prisoners of their own fear (Koonings 1999). This can contribute to a weakening of social ties, unity, trust, and cohesion (McIlwaine and Moser 2001). At the same time, scholars suggest that the constant exposure to multiple forms of violence becomes ingrained in everyday practices. According to Caroline Moser, "the sheer scale of violence in the poor areas or slums means that, in many

contexts, it has become ‘routinized’ or ‘normalized’ into the functional reality of daily life” (Moser 2004:6). In some cases, violence comes to be seen as not only “normal,” but as the most logical way of dealing with conflicts or pursuing interests (Tedesco 2000). This contributes to a proliferation of violence in which armed actors begin to extend violence against rival gangs or the police to violence against intimate partners (Moser and McIlwaine 2001). Some scholars refer to the normalization of physical violence in everyday life as constituting a “subculture of violence,” suggesting that low-income, non-white populations in areas of high crime adopt pro-violent values and norms in opposition to dominant middle-class norms (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Decades of scholarship have since refuted the claim that violence is unique to poor, black populations, pointing out the many ways in which violence is deeply embedded in the state and in “dominant middle-class values,” though the direct targets of much of this violence are poor black populations (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Galtung 1969).

### Dynamics of Power

The struggle between armed actors for control over the physical territory, the enforcement of law and order, and local governance structures results in a shifting and dangerous landscape that challenges many of the principles of democracy and possibilities for non-violent claims-making. Writing on Rio de Janeiro, Luiz Machado da Silva has argued that the pervasiveness of violence across the city has led to an entire social order governed by the use or threat of violence (Silva 2004). Ultimately, fear of violence can serve to reconfigure the social and political landscape in important ways that affect possibilities for non-violent collective mobilization in conflict zones. This takes place through several devices, including dangerous alliances, social status, and the maintenance of fear.

In recent years, a proliferation of scholarship has documented the differing types of governance structures and practices imposed by non-state armed actors in conflict zones, which Enrique Desmond Arias calls “micro-level armed regimes” (Arias 2017:3). A review of this literature suggests that there is an incredible range of hierarchies, practices, norms, and relationships between state and non-state actors in conflict zones. Some conflict zones are governed by tightly organized criminal groups that extend into multiple neighborhoods, if not across entire cities or countries (such as the Cali Cartel in Colombia or the Primeiro Comando do Capital in São Paulo). In other cases, such as the Comando Vermelho in Rio de Janeiro, factions are loosely connected and not tightly controlled by a larger organized network, providing local drug lords greater autonomy over their relations with residents and local political actors. Furthermore, while some criminal groups, such as the *maras* in Central America, are known for being especially repressive and violent against local residents, other armed groups seek to maintain collaborative relationships with residents. Relations with state actors also extend from mutually-beneficial collaborative (corrupt) relations to direct threats and physical violence (Snyder and Duran-Martinez 2009). Not only does this range of values and practices vary across conflict zones, but also within conflict zones. Different armed groups or individual actors within the group may compete for power in a particular area and impose their own ways of doing things, and even the same group may change dynamics and tactics over time (Arias 2017).

Despite this diversity of governance structures, it is possible to highlight some important themes that characterize most conflict zones. For one, non-state armed actors maintain close ties to the state. For instance, Arias argues that “chronic crime is not a result of the breakdown of the rule of law per se, but rather the presence of particular types of engagements between state and criminal actors... Collaborations between state officials and armed actors produce systems of

security and order as well as violence and disorder” (Arias 2017:6). Koonings and Kruijt suggest that a tenuous system of law and order emerges in these sites based on a “kind of osmotic symbiosis between the state and ‘common’ criminality” (Koonings and Kruijt 2007:18).

Building on the work of Elizabeth Leeds (Leeds 1996), they contend that

The political dimension of this phenomenon is that the local state and its agents oscillate between selective involvement, insulation, and outright abandonment. In these voids, alternative, informal or ‘parallel’ structure arise, seeking various forms of confrontation or accommodation with the legitimate authorities and with civil society” (Koonings & Kruijt 2007:17-18).

While these collaborative/contentious ties can be found at multiple levels of governance, they are especially impactful in the level of local governance in conflict zones, where criminal actors seek to maintain an environment favorable to the operations of illicit enterprises (Arias 2006a). This often includes bribing or coercing residents, local officials, and community leaders to allow illegal activities to continue unabated and to prevent them from disclosing information to police officers. In some cases, such as in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, drug traffickers employ neo-clientelistic practices with political candidates, coercing residents in their neighborhood to vote for politicians in exchange for legal favors and access to state resources (Arias 2013; Gay 2006). At the same time, the police are bribed to provide them information about upcoming raids, to release drug lords from prison, and to facilitate the import, export, and sale of drugs and other illegal materials. While clientelism is common across Latin America, particularly in poor urban neighborhoods local governance structures in conflict zones are especially difficult to permeate for actors with no close ties to local criminal groups (Penglase 2014).

In addition to maintaining control over local political actors through coercion or bribes, non-state armed actors also seek to assert power over the physical territory and the enforcement of their own systems of law and order. In some cases, armed actors engage in a system of

exchange in which they offer non-armed residents protection from petty crime while demanding their silence around criminal activities (de Souza 2005; Zaluar 1994). Furthermore, Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva, for instance, suggests that in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, a kind of "violent sociability" governs dominant social organizational forms. In this violent sociability,

actions are coordinated almost exclusively in reference to scale of physical force (and their extensions: guns, etc). The actors do not share common values that could regulate the use of violence in the realization of their desires, limiting it to only one of means among many others for obtaining their ends... In the 'violent sociability,' whoever has the most force (and the most artifacts, such as weapons) uses it against others to impose his will, without considering principles of ethics, moral duties, affect, etc (Silva 2008:21).

According to Silva, non-armed favela residents who do not share this disposition must not only co-exist with actors who embrace this violent sociability, but are also beholden to it. For Koonings & Kruijt, violent practices extend from dispositions into the very structures of social organization:

Alternative forms of social organization emerge in these areas, wherein "access to the means of violence (facilitated by the material and social legacy of internal conflicts, drugs money and the proliferation of small arms) has made violence and coercion the prime foundation of such forms. Power, in terms of territorial and social control, extractive capabilities and de facto political prerogatives, is organized on the basis of access to de-officialized, decentralized and fractured means of violence. Status and legitimacy within local urban spaces are derived from the position one occupies with the system of coercion" (Koonings and Kruijt 2007:19).

At the same time, Luiz Eduardo Soares argues that the violent social order in Rio's favelas has a certain logic and predictability which many residents prefer to the arbitrary violence of police officers (Soares 2000). Benjamin Penglase suggests that drug traffickers employ a strategy of "ordered disorder," wherein they both facilitate chaos and insecurity while also presenting themselves to local residents as the enforcers of order in disorder, thereby "legitimizing" their power by presenting themselves as a better alternative than arbitrary state violence (Penglase 2009).

## Masculinity and Social Status

The dominance of armed criminal groups in conflict zones also has an effect on social and symbolic dynamics. Alba Zaluar contends that the drug trade offers young men an opportunity to access modern leisure and consumption activities increasingly important to social identities, particularly among youth. While money earned through work in the drug trade provides young men with the financial means to purchase “fashionable” goods, engagement in drug use, the display of weapons, and the fight against oppressive police officers have also gained purchase in Rio’s favelas as symbols of masculinity and social status, thereby facilitating a kind of “perverse integration” into the urban fabric (Zaluar 2000).

Similarly, Philippe Bourgois found that drug use and the perpetration of multiple forms of violence—particularly against women—enabled them to regain a sense of masculinity in the face of increased marginalization and the loss of opportunities to engage in less violent “masculine” activities (Bourgois 2003a). Ultimately, perpetration of violence for the sake of asserting one’s masculinity both increases the vulnerability of women’s bodies while also gendering the political and symbolic governance landscapes in conflict zones. It can also retrench traditional gender norms, wherein women are expected to manage the household and engage in care work and emotional labor, while men are responsible for the public management of the neighborhood, of the local economic landscape, and of concerns around security. The enforcement of the gendered division between public and private spaces can alienate women from formal political engagement and claims-making.

## The Erosion of Democracy and Non-Violent Action

Within this context, it not difficult to identify the list of unmet needs among residents in areas of armed conflict or the obstacles to their fulfillment. As poor neighborhoods across Latin

America became increasingly dangerous, historic challenges with precarious housing and infrastructure, substandard education, healthcare, and transportation, lack of access to formal employment, and experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination and exclusion from the various spheres of the city were compounded by a direct affront to their physical security. To make matters worse, whatever local political forms that residents in poor, informal neighborhoods had developed to distribute resources, promote services in the neighborhood, and make collective claims on the state were co-opted by armed criminal groups, producing what Janice Perlman has called the “new reality of marginality” (Perlman 2010).

Along with the proliferation of studies on the politics of urban violence has been an increasing consensus among these scholars that the rise of civic warfare in poor areas has eroded possibilities for democratic decision-making and non-violent claims-making. For instance, Victoria Sanford, writing about violence in Guatemala, argues that the perpetuation of environments of fear “greatly impacts individual and community capacities to embrace and reproduce the democratic values and practices necessary to consolidate democratic institutions and laws” (Sanford 2004: 146). Robert Gay contends that the increasing power of favela-based drug groups in Rio de Janeiro has almost entirely destroyed historically autonomous and combative social movements in these areas (2005:54–58). Similarly, Bryan McCann suggests that social mobilization efforts in Rio’s favelas “unraveled” when drug traffickers took over the local residents’ associations, historically the spaces through which residents would debate local issues and make collective demands on the state for resources (McCann 2014). While McCann argues that the destructive forces of violence in democratizing Latin America were especially strong in Rio de Janeiro, the rise of the drug trade in Caracas, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, São

Paul, and Lima similarly reflected the threats that urban violence has posed to democracy in the region.

Brodwyn Fischer contends that the drug trade emerged in large part as a result of historically weak rights in poor areas and that their emergence has even further weakened these rights:

By the time the drug traffickers' unique destructiveness became apparent—in its alchemy of violence, quick money, disregard for community needs, and nihilism—the trade was already deeply ingrained. The irony was bitter. For generations of poor Cariocas [residents of Rio de Janeiro], extra-legality had been the price of urban permanence and survival. But the poverties of rights that it ingrained over generations had opened the door to this new lawlessness, which served not to create a terrain of compromise between law and possibility, but rather to corrode both (Fischer 2008:314).

Fischer's overall assessment of possibilities for Brazilian democracy are even more dire:

Neither hope in the transformative power of democracy, nor faith in the mediating authority of laws and legal institutions can flourish in a context where extra-legality serves as such a ubiquitous compromise between law and everyday life, and where legal status serves to justify the unequal distribution of public benefits. Brazil's democracy still seems to stand a real chance of failing—not, as in the past, because of coup threats from the military and conservative interest groups, but rather through a subtle process of internal disintegration (Fischer 2008:315).

For some scholars, not only have activists been tamed by the threat of violence, but have actually begun to employ violent tactics to demand their rights: “Rebellion against injustice now often takes the form of endemic violence, rather than of an organized movement to demand civil rights” (Pineiro 1993:3). This argument echoes the finding by James Holston that drug criminals draw on the proliferating discourse of citizenship rights in urbanizing Brazil to defend their civil rights and justify opposition to the police (Holston 2008). While it is important to note that armed non-state actors are active political agents in their own right, attempting to reconfigure the security landscape in order to legitimize their actions by presenting themselves as victims of police brutality, they are also committed to maintaining the perverse social and political dynamics that allow them to thrive in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, by deploying

violence as a tactic for effecting political change, armed actors are, by definition, not engaged in non-violent social action. Armed actors are therefore not the objects of analysis of my dissertation, in contrast to most studies of urban violence.

Despite the overwhelming barriers to political action in the context of extreme violence, there may be reason for cautious optimism that social action is possible in these areas. In the following section, I offer an overview of scholarship on urban governance and political engagement in response to violence in order to consider some of the resources that might be accessible to activists in Latin America's poor neighborhoods. Since scholarship on non-violent action in conflict zones remains limited, I draw on the few studies that do directly address this topic and supplement these with other areas of study that provide some direction for exploring possibilities of collective mobilization.

## Possibilities for non-violent mobilization in conflict zones

### Politics Re-scaled

Neil Brenner (2004) and other urban scholars argue that the re-scaling of national politics to regional and urban centers has imbued cities with new opportunities and responsibilities in the remaking of political space (Allen 2011; Swyngedouw 2000). As a result, the urban political arena has become a critical site for enacting, regulating, and contesting power and for producing new modes of governance and social action (Davis and Duren 2011). While the shift to neoliberal economic forms and practices have produced an economically and socially polarized environment (Friedmann and Wolff 1982; Sassen 2011), scholars argue that this also has important consequences for the possibilities of collective action among non-state actors (Weinstein 2014). For one, the rescaling of national politics to the municipal level has led to the

creation of more participatory spaces of governance, in which state and non-state actors collaborate in making decisions about the city (Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva 2008; Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Koonings 2004). At the same time, urban citizens have become increasingly active and creative in making claims for their rights, a process that contributes to the renegotiation of the categories and forms of citizenship and the emergence of new types of political subjects (Holston 1999; Ong 2006; Sassen 2002), and organized resistance efforts that push back against dispossession by global neoliberalism (Weinstein 2014). In many cities, groups have drawn on discourses related to the “right to the city” to demand rights to urban resources and services as well as recognition of and protection for socio-cultural identities based on gender, race, sexuality, religion, and other markers of difference (Brenner et al. 2012; Harvey 2003; Mitchell 2003). Many of these forms of collective claims-making draw upon globalizing rights discourses (Pierotti 2013) and are often linked to movements in other cities, suggesting that the local and the global are increasingly interwoven (Sassen 2002).

### Urban and Transnational Social Movements

While the rescaling of state power has engendered a proliferation of urban-based social movements, in which the city—rather than the nation—is the central object of contestation (Castells 1983), collective social action is deeply embedded in both the history and contemporary political landscapes across Latin America (Alvarez 1990; Davis 1999; Escobar 2010; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2007; Yashar 2005). Movements focused on indigenous rights, labor rights, democracy, rights to land and natural resources, housing rights, and myriad other issues have both responded to and helped to shape Latin American politics. While the forms, demands, expressions and practices of social movements vary dramatically, the legacies and ongoing presence of collective, contentious politics can have an enduring impact on

contemporary citizenship. They can also offer important allies, networks, and resources to local movements.

### Resistance by the Poor

Though poor neighborhoods under armed conflict remain significantly underrepresented in empirical studies of collective action in Latin America, many studies demonstrate that informal settlements have a lengthy history of struggle and resistance, particularly around rights to the construction, formalization, and legalization of housing, as well as collective demands for better infrastructure, voting rights, and access to education and healthcare (Fernandes 2014; Fischer 2008; Han 2012; Holston 2008; Murphy 2014). What remains under-examined, however, are effects of these legacies of collective action on social action after the rise of armed non-state actors in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, the continued role of various social movements across Latin America in contemporary urban politics may provide important opportunities for collective action in conflict zones. While studies suggest that residents of poor, informal neighborhoods are significantly underrepresented in class-based labor movements (in part because formal employment is often inaccessible to the urban poor), less is known about their participation in new movements around identity politics, which may be less likely to connect to issues faced by this population.

### Political engagement in response to victimization

In a three-city study of governance under armed conflict, Enrique Desmond Arias found that experiences of armed conflict, particularly those waged by the police, produced an emotional reaction in many residents, which was then directed towards the mobilization of anti-violence protests (Arias 2017:146). This is consistent with several studies conducted in post-conflict countries in Africa, where victimization during wartime was related to increased voting,

community leadership, and civic engagement (Bateson 2012; Bellows and Miguel 2009; Toure 2002). Regina Bateson (2012) suggests that the ties between personal victimization and political engagement are mediated through emotive and expressive factors, such as to express anger around the violent event(s), to gain the social supports through processes of mobilization (Bejarano 2002), and to express a new identity as a survivor and activist, rather than as a victim (Rozowsky 2002; Schuessler 2000).

Scholars have also found that experiences of victimization can lead to a greater awareness about injustice, which can contribute to deeper engagement in social justice and political resistance. For instance, Elizabeth Wood found that peasant communities provided critical support to revolutionary guerrilla fighters in the El Salvador's lengthy civil war, including joining in local protests and strikes and marching on the capital. According to Wood, insurgent *campesinos* were willing to face extreme risks to their safety in order to assert "their dignity in the face of condescension, repression, and indifference." Furthermore, Wood argues that they mobilized for "the pleasure of agency," to "assert a new identity of social equality, to claim rights to land and self-determination, and to refute condescending elite perceptions of one's incapacities" (Wood 2003:18). Similarly, Augustine Toure found that a host of human rights organizations and women's groups emerged during Liberia's civil war, most of which were dedicated to aiding and drawing public attention to victims of wartime violence, particularly women and children. According to Toure, "the enormity of human suffering and widespread atrocities which characterized [Liberia's civil war] were ironically [what] provided the impetus for civil society's rejuvenation" (Toure 2002:10). Taken together, these studies suggest that victimization leads to civic and political engagement, and that this link is often mediated by emotive and expressive desires.

## Gaps in Literature

While these studies provide some important avenues for exploration, there are several gaps in how they help us understand social action in conflict zones. For one, many of these studies were done *after* the violent experience, or after the war was over. Not only were victims of violence more likely to feel (and be) safe and not fear active threats to their safety for their political engagement, but they also had time to reflect and process their experiences of trauma, which is likely an important step in transitioning from victim to activist. Furthermore, the spatial dynamics of threat are not clear in these studies: how close were victim/activists to the perpetrators of violence? Physical distance may increase real or perceived safety, and enable a level of political or social action unlikely to emerge when the threat remains physically proximate and deeply entwined in community affairs.

Furthermore, many current studies of political engagement during or after war are based on survey research, and are therefore unable to capture the narratives, motivations, and negotiations that participants employ when deciding when and how to become engaged in civic and political activities. These studies also are unable to distinguish between the quality and forms of engagement. In areas of conflict, “participation in a community organization,” for instance, can include anything from holding a workshop teaching poor adults about how to be more “employable” by altering their mannerisms, to drafting petitions demanding a new school, to using an organization as a front to launder money or hide drugs. Only ethnographic research in conflict areas would be able to document the ways in which local residents negotiate ongoing threats to their safety and different options for social and political engagement. In the following section I describe the City of God, the neighborhood in which I conducted extensive fieldwork between 2014 and 2017, providing a brief overview of the social, economic, and political context

in which I examined possibilities for non-violent collective action in the context of poverty and violence.

## Collective Action under Fire: The Case of the City of God

### The City of God

The research for this dissertation is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the course of seven research trips between 2014 and 2017 in the City of God, a neighborhood of approximately 60,000 residents in Rio de Janeiro's west zone, about thirty kilometers from the downtown city area. In addition to high rates of poverty and low participation in the formal job market, the neighborhood has been under control by violent drug gangs since the 1970s, making it an ideal case study for the examination of violence, poverty, and collective action.

The City of God was first erected by the municipal government in the 1960s when it built hundreds of small houses over arid swampland and populated them with families who had been removed from informal settlements in city areas slated for redevelopment. Though this "conjunto habitacional," or "housing complex," is officially designated as a "neighborhood" or "bairro," rather than a "subnormal agglomeration" (the official term for most "favelas,") it has experienced a gradual process of "favelization," or a transformation into what is perceived to be a "favela." For one, it has suffered from resource scarcity since its inception: though the City of God has boasted numerous public housing complexes, as well as electricity, a public water and sewer system, paved roads, and many schools, parks, and a health clinic, these resources have not been sufficient to accommodate the demand of a growing population. Even in the 1960s, many new families were housed in temporary houses, water was constantly running out and electricity was unreliable. Many roads remained unpaved, especially in the areas where growing

families were constructing their own shacks after outgrowing their homes, requiring residents to employ their own, informal practices to fulfill their needs and keep the neighborhood running. Though the municipal and state governments have spearheaded multiple urbanization and social development projects in the City of God over the last fifty years, City of God residents remain significantly underserved relative to other urban citizens. They are also much more likely to be poor, to have low literacy levels, to reside in an informal dwelling, and to work in informal employment. In 2016, the City of God's Human Development Indicator ranked it 113<sup>th</sup> out of 127 Rio neighborhoods. Though the City of God, in contrast to most favelas, was built by the government, its severe lack of social development has placed it solidly in the "favela" category in the collective imagination of the city and in its residents' lived realities.

The City of God shares another common element with other favelas: the control of violent criminal groups. As many residents described to me, the myriad groups of petty criminals who arrived in the City of God with other residents in the 1960s became increasingly organized and armed over the following two decades, using the local territory to sort and sell drugs (primarily to middle-class consumers living nearby) and to assert their physical and political control over the neighborhood. Between the 1960s and early 1980s, local armed groups competed for control over blocks, often killing residents who dared to cross street boundaries within the neighborhood. At the end of the 1980s, the *Comando Vermelho* (the CV), or Red Command, the largest drug faction in Rio de Janeiro, took over the neighborhood and brought local armed groups under their leadership, imposing an informal structure of command and conflict resolution between them. While this significantly decreased fighting between local drug traffickers and greatly expanded residents' mobility across the neighborhood, violence did not decrease. For one, battles with the police escalated as the state government and urban residents

across the city became increasingly threatened by the growing power of drug factions. Security policies that promoted direct confrontation with drug traffickers encouraged sporadic but extremely brutal policing interventions that often lasted only a few hours but resulted in heavy shootouts, death, and violent searches of local residents.

Furthermore, the CV employed extremely violent tactics to consolidate their control over the neighborhood and local residents, and to quash internal challenges to their power. All local political institutions, such as Residents' Associations, the local Regional Administration, and influential community or business leaders were bribed into complacency or, if they refused to align themselves with drug traffickers, were expelled or killed. Drug traffickers suspected of plotting to take over or cooperating with the police were brutally murdered, often publically. Many police officers were also "bought" by the CV, offering them insider information about upcoming police invasions or releasing arrested CV members from prison for a fee. As I describe in Chapter 3, resource scarcity and extreme violence have shaped the very foundation of the neighborhood, as well as local narratives, practices, and, ultimately, mobilization strategies of local activists.

## Research Methods

Though Chapter 2 offers a detailed description of my research methods and my approach to knowledge construction, I offer a brief overview here in order to contextualize my findings and my arguments below. The primary data used for this dissertation was ethnographic field work collected in the City of God between 2014 and 2017. During this time, I conducted over one hundred interviews with ninety-six unique participants, most of whom were local residents or former residents. I also engaged in extensive participant-observation in multiple public and

private spaces across the neighborhood. Ethnographic research extended into the virtual sites developed by and for City of God residents, including WhatsApp text messaging groups and Facebook pages, as well as political spaces across the city, such as municipal government and large NGOs. In 2017, I worked with a team of local residents to design and execute a large-scale survey (n=989) across the City of God that measured social development, insecurity, and civic engagement. I draw primarily on descriptive statistics from this survey in Chapter 3 in order to support ethnographic findings about how security has affected residents' access to social services in their neighborhood.

It is important to mention that although I am a white American researcher, I spent eight years of my childhood with my family in Rio de Janeiro, living on the outskirts of the City of God. I am fluent in Portuguese and comfortable with many Brazilian cultural practices, which facilitated my research. Furthermore, my mother, a psychologist by training, worked in the City of God with families who had experienced domestic violence. Though our family moved back to the United States when I was twelve years old, I maintained many contacts in Rio de Janeiro, including a close friend of my mother's, "Rosangela,"<sup>2</sup> who was raised in the City of God and was still extremely active as a volunteer in several community-based organizations. Rosangela introduced me to other volunteers in City of God's organizations and brought me into the neighborhood and helped me find my way around. As I formed relationship with other residents, I worked with them to navigate the neighborhood's public spaces and political dynamics and adopted multiple strategies to ensure that my presence in the area would not be perceived as threatening to local drug traffickers. With their guidance, I was able to inhabit this complicated and dangerous environment without placing myself in any more risk than other residents. I

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<sup>2</sup> All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and safety.

discuss this in greater detail in my next chapter. For now, I turn to a discussion of security, politics, and collective action in the City of God.

### Security and Politics in Contemporary City of God

When I began conducting field work in 2014, the City of God was at once different from and yet still ominously the same as decades past. Five years earlier, specially-trained police officers known popularly as the UPP, of *Pacifying Policing Units*, had invaded the City of God, expelled local drug traffickers, and implanted four local policing precincts that were staffed 24-7 in order to prevent drug traffickers from returning. Between 2009 and 2014, the UPP maintained close watch over the streets. Homicide rates fell by 75% and shootouts between police and drug traffickers decreased to nearly zero. In my own excursions around the City of God, I saw no armed men besides the UPP and no drug sales. Over the following three years, however, the tranquility of City of God's public spaces gave way to a full-fledge warzone.

In 2014, residents reported to me that they had already begun to see signs of the drug trade returning: drug sales in the peripheral areas of the neighborhood, and a drive-by shooting of one of the police precincts committed, supposedly, by City of God's main drug lord. By 2015, armed men began to roam more freely in many areas of the neighborhood and sell drugs more conspicuously, and the UPP began restricting its patrolling to only a few main spots. By 2016, drug traffickers occupied most main areas of the neighborhood, and the government began deploying the military police to conduct "operations" in the neighborhood that at times resulted in the arrest of a few drug traffickers or the apprehension of guns or drugs, but almost always provoked shootouts and an overall sense of insecurity among residents. By the end of 2016, the City of God had turned back into the warzone it had been before the UPP. Drug traffickers sold

drugs on nearly every corner, police invaded daily provoking constantly shootouts, and informal reports of homicides circulated weekly.

While the UPP intervention and these fluctuations in the security landscape have been of great fascination to the international community and have produced heated debates between Rio's policy-makers, urban security scholars, and human rights activists, overall they did little to reconfigure the local symbolic and political landscapes of power. More importantly, they produced virtually no change in local political constraints and possibilities for collective action. This was for a very simple reason: residents did not believe any of these improvements to public security would last. Even at the height of UPP control over the City of God between 2009 and 2014, residents were certain that the drug trade was watching residents' behaviors and would soon return to punish miscreants who had violated the "laws of the favela." As many scholars have documented, the "laws of the favela" were rules enforced by the drug trade for the last four decades that brutally punished residents who talked to the police or attempted to subvert their control over local political networks and institutions. With few exceptions, even at the height of the UPP residents still refused to talk to the police, to forge alliances with leaders in local political institutions, or to speak about the drug trade in public. And no one spoke out against the drug trade. While the increase in shootouts did pose a number of challenges for my participants, it did not significantly alter the core strategies employed by activists in making demands for their rights.

Since the 1970s, residents had witnessed extreme brutality by drug traffickers who killed residents—often through excruciating public torture—if they were believed to have "snitched" to the police, stolen money or drugs, had sexual relations with a drug trafficker's girlfriend, spoke out against drug traffickers, or refused to comply with their requests. Nearly all my residents had

family members killed by drug traffickers or by the police, and had witnessed (or heard) the torture and assassinations of many others or had walked past their dead bodies strewn in the street on their way to school or work. This extreme violence has shaped the very core of the neighborhood, and it would take much more than a few years of decreased shootouts to dramatically reshape the social practices, narratives, and norms that have taken hold in the City of God. I feel confident that the mobilization efforts I observed between 2014 and 2017 were deeply informed and configured around the extremely violent practices of drug traffickers and their allies. While decreased shootouts and increased social services during the height of the UPP offered activists more resources for civic engagement, I do not believe their mobilization *forms* were meaningfully impacted by the UPP. In other words, public security had a quantitative effect on activism, but not a qualitative impact. And while more resources are better than less, I am much more interested in understanding *how* residents negotiate political claims-making under the drug trade. I therefore offer these findings as a case study of strategies of collective action in the context of extreme violence.

### Non-Violent Collective Action in the City of God

Despite the chaos of constant shootouts, the insecurity of violent drug traffickers and police, and continued struggles with poverty and scarce public services, I watched hundreds of local residents working together to improve opportunities and increase resources for other residents in the City of God and to demand greater social services, financial support, and protection from human rights violations. Many of them were exhausted, and some were fearful, but they persisted and, in some cases, succeeded. Though many of the activists I came to know were related to drug traffickers—as are nearly all residents in favelas—they were intentional in avoiding close relationships with armed actors and any community leaders believed to have ties

to the drug trade. With only a handful of exceptions, they did not directly engage any armed actors and they refused to participate in any activities that could be perceived as corrupt. In other words, they did not attempt to squeeze their way through the tight webs of local political networks. Instead, they avoided them entirely. In my own analysis of how activists engaged in collective action, any attempt to uncover who had been bribed or threatened by whom and for what would not only have been extremely dangerous, but unnecessary. Since my own participants never knew which political actors they could trust, they stayed away from all of them. In fact, the “truth” about dangerous politics in the City of God matters far less than the perception of danger, and my activists had plenty of reason to be suspicious of all powerful actors in the area.

Notably, I found plenty of evidence that the clientelistic dynamics documented by favela ethnographers existed in the City of God, but these were not the object of my study. Ultimately, this is not an ethnography of urban violence; it is a study of non-violent collective action. Because it takes place in a site of extreme violence, it cannot be understood apart from the context of armed conflict and violent political and symbolic structures. But the focus of this dissertation is not on the violent actors who govern City of God’s political structures; it is on the activists who work to transform their neighborhood. While I reserve the details of their stories for the rest of this dissertation, I conclude this chapter by outlining a preliminary framework for examining social mobilization in conflict zones.

### Social Movements Rescaled

The main finding of my research was that extreme violence did not prevent social mobilization in the City of God, but reconfigured it and rescaled it. The social movements I documented were smaller and more fragmented than the large-scale, institutionalized movements

that typically make it onto our radars. However, like larger movements, these movements were bound by common *political imaginaries*—conceptual frameworks through which they made sense of their reality and the processes for changing them—and shared *logics of action*—the collection of tools, including discourses and practices, that are activated to effect change. While the three movements I document in this dissertation varied in their political imaginaries and logics of action, they all worked to improve their neighborhood, to make demands for the protection and fulfillment of their political, civil, social, and cultural rights, and to resist narratives that promoted racial and gender-based discrimination and other forms of symbolic exclusion. Many of these demands were made directly on the state, though others were made more indirectly on society as a whole or on specific civil organizations.

There has been great debate about what does and does not constitute a social movement, especially with the decline of labor-based collective action and the rise of “new social movements,” such as those around racial justice and gender rights more solidly situated in the realm of identity politics. Despite these variations, some widely-accepted definitions highlight core features among social movement literature. McAdam et al (2001) define social movements as collective forms of contentious politics activated for the purposes of achieving political goals through non-traditional means. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani argue that social movements “are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; and share a distinct collective identity” (Porta and Diani 2009:20). Manuel Castells, writing on urban social movements, defines them as “collective actions consciously aimed at the transformation of the social interests and values embedded in the forms and functions of a historically given city” (Castells 1983:xvi). I draw on these definitions to suggest that social movements are (a) collective forms of contentious politics that are (b) based

on strong social ties and shared political imaginaries and logics of action and that (c) aim to make clear political demands and to transform the social interests and values embedded within society.

Though each of the three movements I identified had distinct identities, demands, and logics of action about how to make these demands, they were all united by a shared objective to make claims for their rights and transform the forms and values of society. By “rights” I refer to the work of James Holston and Brodwyn Fischer who, building on the work on TH Marshall (1950), suggest that states are not only responsible for enforcing political and civil rights guaranteed by the constitution but for providing the range of social and cultural rights needed for all members of the state to access political and civil rights. Each movement, however, had a unique set of political demands and ideas about what a transformed society should look like. It is important to highlight that not all forms of contentious politics are included in this definition, but only those that seek to *transform* society. Clientelism, patronage politics, and other types of practices in which individuals work through informal channels to gain access to resources for themselves, but have no intention of reconfiguring broader social and political structures, fall outside the scope of my analysis.

The three movements I documented also operated under a similar set of understandings about how to make political claims and demands in the context of violent governance. They all embraced four overarching and overlapping elements: (1) discourses and practices of non-violence, (2) moral legitimacy as political capital, (3) avoidance of local governance structures, and (4) the feminization of politics. Though social movement scholars often emphasize *the state* as both the main perpetrator and the object of claims-making among civic society groups, the City of God had a different target: violence. This included not only physical violence, but also

structural violence, such as resource scarcity and economic inequality; political violence perpetrated by the military police; and symbolic violence, including racism and other types of discrimination imposed by both the state *and* civic society. The social movements I found in the City of God were committed to combatting these many forms of violence through non-violence, including both discourses of non-violence and organizing practices that were explicitly non-violent. The idea of combatting the drug trade or the police by taking up arms themselves was never under consideration. Beyond that, activists were constantly looking for ways to address other types of economic and racial inequality within their movements.

While their emphasis on non-violence was primarily ideological, activists also embraced these strategies out of a recognition that their main political capital in a neighborhood governed by violent politics was moral legitimacy, or more specifically, the perception of moral legitimacy. In a context of corruption, back-door deals, neo-clientistic practices, and constant breaking of laws, what offered them support from local residents was their ability to perform the opposite, to demonstrate that they were moral actors in a deeply immoral environment. On many occasions, activists refused economic or political resources in order to maintain their legitimacy in the neighborhood. Their public persona and the overall perception of them and their organizations by other residents was critical to their ability to continue functioning and making claims in and beyond the neighborhood.

In order to maintain their commitment to non-violence and their public persona as moral actors, City of God's social movement leaders and participants adhered to a strict code of conduct which required near-total avoidance of all local governance networks and institutions. Since no one knew exactly who was being bribed or threatened by drug traffickers, local residents had simply come to look at all community leaders with power and influence as

corrupted. Local institutions with access to money or support from local city counselors or state deputies were also presumed to embrace shady tactics and to divert money from public funds to criminal actors. Any engagement in these networks was presumed to be dangerous, illegal, and immoral. Though many residents did in fact engage in these political networks, the activists in City of God's social movements avoided them entirely. This was in part to preserve their legitimacy, but also to stay alive. Residents who dared to engage in corrupt networks could be threatened, expelled, or killed if these relationships frayed at some point. Since local activists refused to use weapons or to maintain close ties to people who engaged in physical violence, they had no way of guaranteeing their personal safety. Their best, and perhaps, only chance of staying alive was to stay as politically and socially distant from armed actors as possible.

Finally, social movements managed to survive in the City of God because they occupied a feminized counter-sphere of non-violent politics that operated in opposition to the hypermasculine world of violent politics. There was little question that City of God's violent actors and political allies were primarily male and drew heavily on norms of physical violence, hyper-sexuality, and physical dominance. Though there were some female actors within these violent networks, its leaders and practices were overwhelmingly masculine. City of God's social movements, in contrast, were overwhelmingly feminine. Nearly all activist groups were run by women, which meant that their public representatives were women. Narratives and practices also emphasized notions typically associated with femininity, such as care work, nurturing, social development, and art and culture. While there were many male activists, most decision-making was negotiated by women. As a result, activist movements—and their leaders—were rarely viewed as directly threatening to violent politics and actors in the neighborhood. Though this did prevent them from challenging or transforming violent governance structures, it allowed

them to survive under conditions of extreme violence and to fight for change within and beyond their neighborhood.

### Three Models of Collective Action

#### *Transformative Assistencialismo*

When I arrived in 2014, the City of God had dozens of community-based organizations (CBOs), small non-governmental organizations founded and run by local residents, often with very little funding, that provided a range of social services to the community. Services included sport and leisure activities for children, parenting classes and food assistance for parents, professional courses for adolescents and adults, and sewing classes for senior citizens. NGOs in Brazil have been criticized for focusing too much on “assistencialismo,” roughly translated as “assistance” or “welfare,” providing immediate help without addressing the root, structural causes of poverty and inequality. However, while City of God’s CBOs were largely dedicated to “filling the voids” of the state rather than directly challenging the state through protest, they also followed a logic of individual transformation, taking advantage of social services to foster political subjectivities. Ultimately, this model of collective action emphasized change by cultivating the transformative power of individuals. As CBO volunteers taught dance or computer classes, handed out lunches to hungry children, or dressed the wounds of elderly patients, they taught them about structural violence, state violence, economic inequality, harmful public policies, racism, and the exploitation of the poor. They helped participants understand how these larger forms of injustice contributed to the making of the drug trade and segregated poverty, and offered them ideas about how to fight against these and by helping them attain positions of power in society.

## Community Militancy

A second group of activists, many of whom also founded and ran their own CBOs, ascribed to a logic of change that emphasized the needs of their neighborhood. The term “community militancy” drew upon the discourses of radical guerrilla movements during the dictatorship, and emphasized a similarly emphatic commitment to the City of God. As one activist put it, “We fight for the community no matter what, even when there is no money, no time, we fight for the community.” Specifically, community militants emphasized direct claims-making on the municipal and state government for *políticas públicas*, or public policies that would guarantee long-term public investments in the social development of the neighborhood. They advocated for more public housing, schools, health care facilities, paved roads, educational and employment services for adults, sports and leisure activities, and many other social services. In contrast to CBOs, which accepted whatever little bits of funding they could muster, community militants refused funding or partnership with outside organizations that would not contribute to the long-term economic and social improvement of their neighborhood. They had become accustomed to engaging in combative relationships with reticent politicians and state administrators. While community militants had earned a reputation for being conflictual and difficult to work with, they succeeded in bringing many new services and public institutions to the City of God in the last fifteen years.

## Politics through Art

A third form of citizen activism in the City of God was motivated by a vision of change through art and culture, wherein “cultural tools,” such as poetry, theater, painting, rap, dance, and writing, could be utilized as a gateway to promote both symbolic and structural changes and to advocate for their civil rights. Two of the most active groups in cultural politics were “Art Talk”

and “#PeaceCDD,” which had overlapping members of mostly young people committed to defending favela residents’ civil rights through radical artistic expression, engagement in urban and transnational social movements, and organized local protests. Art Talk held monthly open mic nights, often in local bars or parks which they decorated with paintings, flowers, and flashing lights. These events attracted dozens of City of God residents and progressive middle-class residents from nearby, where participants shared impassioned stories, plays, poems, and songs that condemned police brutality, racism, violence against women, and the neglect of favelas. Many cultural activists were also engaged in municipal politics, either as public servants or political candidates. They also played important roles in the Black movement, the feminist movement, and other initiatives in the city and in global movements. Through art and culture, favela activists had managed to bring favela issues into larger debates about identity politics and structural injustice in Rio and beyond.

### Conditions under which movements emerged

Despite the many differences between these three political forms, there were several common conditions that facilitated their emergence and that structured their narratives and practices. I describe these below.

### History of social movements around housing and against dictatorship

Although scholars have argued that organized collective action unraveled in Rio’s *favelas* after the rise of the drug trade, the history of activism both in and beyond these neighborhoods provided local residents, old and young alike, with resources and repertoires of contentious action and discourses upon which they could draw within the context of armed conflict. CBOs, for instance, benefited greatly from the availability of buildings constructed by the Catholic Church many decades earlier when it embraced a community-engaged, radical philosophy of

liberation theology. Their continued allegiance with local churches allowed them to benefit from these resources, as well as from narratives that residents had once learned from the church. While the Catholic church no longer advocated for favela rights in the ways it once had, its history of social action left a lasting legacy upon which contemporary activists could draw.

For older residents who had participated in consciousness-raising literacy groups and underground leftist anti-military groups, the discourse of militancy and the organizational, confrontational practices they had deployed during the dictatorship provided them valuable tools for making sense of a new set of constraints. While they had little choice but to direct their claims at the municipal and national levels of government, rather than at local political networks, their previous experiences in social action provided invaluable tools and discourses. For younger activists, their participation in urban social movements and transnational activist networks, particularly the Black movement and the global feminist movement, had a similar effect. Though many had not been alive, or had been very young during the dictatorship, they had studied the history of social action and social movements around race and police brutality across the country and adopted a discourse that connected contemporary state violence with its legacies of political repression. These legacies, and activists' continuing dialogue about them, paved the way for a new set of confrontations that, despite their limitations in local politics, allowed them to engage in contentious politics.

### Democratic urban governance

The City of God's activists operated within a larger context of democratic governance. In Brazil in particular, municipal governments have acquired much of the administrative and distributive power in the nation (Heller and Evans 2010), and many of nation's political decision-making occurs at the city level. Activists in the City of God took advantage of the

urbanization of power by forming relationships—both contentious and collaborative—with elected officials and public servants beyond the limits of the neighborhood. They especially targeted political actors who did not have close ties to drug traffickers in the City of God, which could be both dangerous and ineffective. CBO leaders, for instance, nurtured relationships with mid- and low-level state employees who did not have much direct access to money and therefore were unlikely to be coopted by drug traffickers. And young artistic activists opted to embed themselves directly in city politics, where they could advocate for the needs and rights of the favela without directly engaging local political actors in the City of God. Ultimately, the presence of a semi-functional democratic state outside the City of God provided residents with possibilities for non-violent claims-making that was not possible in their neighborhood. While civic warfare produced a number of limitations, the embeddedness of the City of God within an otherwise stable, democratic state offered its residents several important avenues for civic engagement and collective action.

#### Presence of urban and transnational social movements

Finally, activists demanding greater respect for and protection of *favela* residents' civil rights leveraged allies in other *favelas*, in city-wide NGOs, and in transnational social networks. Because City of God's movements were small, they immersed themselves in broader urban movements that would allow their personal plight to gain meaning and traction within larger, more visible, and more resourced movements. One way they did this was by politicizing their raced and gendered identities in order to connect to broader movements around racial justice and women's rights. For instance, demands for the rights of Brazil's large black population have merged with mobilization against police brutality and the exclusion of blacks from universities. Leonardo and Natalia, among many others, used their own racial identities to align themselves

with these larger movements. Once engaged, they used their membership in the racial justice movement to advocate for the rights of favela residents (who are mostly black). Some activists even referenced the Black Lives Matter movements in their organizing, and I met one black woman from another favela—a leader in the poetry slam movement in Rio de Janeiro—who had been invited to share her story and her poetry with students in Atlanta. Similarly, female activists and male allies in the City of God engaged in discourses around feminism, and specifically black feminism, in order to connect to larger urban and transnational women’s rights movements. The expansion of social movements, and particularly movements around identity politics, provided City of God’s activists with allies who could help them gain visibility, resources, and connections to activists in other cities and countries and advocate for the rights of the favela.

## The Possibilities and Limitations of Favela Mobilization

The primary contribution of this dissertation is to contend that non-violent collective action is possible in areas of extreme violence. In fact, extreme violence engendered and fueled non-violence in the City of God, even as it constrained and threatened it. Constant exposure to physical atrocities, economic precarity, resource scarcity, and discrimination provoked outrage among activists and spurred their commitment to fighting for peace and justice even when they were fearful and exhausted. The costs of activism were high, but the costs of doing nothing were even higher. This finding suggests that the urban poor should not only be studied as victims or, at best, resilient. While they are both of these things, they are also *political subjects*. They are engaged in intentional efforts to transform social and political structures of violence and inequality and to fight for a different, and more just society. In scholarly literature, they deserve

to be treated as political subjects, studied as political subjects, and understood as political subjects.

These findings also suggest that social movement scholars should not limit their research to large, institutionalized, and visible political or social movements. What has allowed City of God's social movements to survive is their ability to disguise themselves as apolitical and unstructured. They do this by remaining small, by resisting institutionalization, by avoiding local governance structures, and by employing feminized narratives and practices. But upon closer examination, I discovered in their "hidden transcripts" were highly political discourses and objectives. There was little question to me that City of God's activists had every intent of transforming society, of resisting harmful public policies, and ultimately, of combatting violence in all its forms. They *must* remain hidden to drug traffickers and dangerous political actors, but they should not remain hidden from us.

Favela activists are not only located in favelas, however: City of God's activists were in nearly all political and social movements in the city and in many global movements. Their presence often goes unnoticed by academic and middle-class activists who have little experience in favelas or other low-income neighborhoods and who remain unaware of the specific needs of these spaces, many of which are different from the needs of the working class or social groups that are not extremely poor. This dissertation is a call for social movement scholars to search for favela activists, or their equivalents, within the movements they study or in which they participate in order to amplify the voices of these hidden activists and ensure that their needs are being met by the movement.

This is also an intervention in the literature on urban violence to look below and beyond local governance structures in areas of armed conflict, for there is much to be found in these

alternative spaces of political claims-making. While my own study relied heavily on the scholarship on urban violence, which helped me make sense of local politics and the many ties between security and local governance, there remains a major gap in our understanding of non-violent residents as political actors. What this study shows, however, is that there is in fact a sphere of non-violent politics in areas of extreme violence. By taking non-armed actors as political subjects, we can better understand the unique configurations of this sphere.

At the same time, favela activism remains constrained in multiple ways. For one, their lack of consolidation and institutionalization, which would be extremely dangerous under the drug trade, also prevents them from becoming visible and from effecting significant change in municipal and state policies. The activists in the City of God were unable to claim representativeness of the City of God—most, in fact, resisted this role because it was too dangerous. This made it difficult to hold the police accountable, to enforce their collective civil rights, or to force the government to invest more heavily in their neighborhood. Instead, most of their efforts resulted in a piecemeal approach to social change that brought some needed improvements to the City of God and some effective efforts to halt police brutality but could not guarantee permanent changes. CBOs constantly struggled to find new pools of funding. Community militants could not guarantee that new schools had teachers or that new housing complexes were properly maintained. The struggle to hold on to these “victories” was ongoing. Cultural activists, on the other hand, had joined a more diffuse movement for social and symbolic change, and their successes could not be easily measured and relied on a more long-term change strategy that would likely take years before it resulted in meaningful political or social change.

Through this case study, we also learn that the fissures between democracy and violence are not only sites of contradiction, but of political mobilization. Democracy has been a far from perfect project in Latin America, and City of God's residents are a testament to its many shortcomings. But the openings that have remained through political rights, the municipalization of state power and resources, and the expansion of social movements outside the favela have offered local activists with valuable resources with which to demand more and better public policies. And while violence continues to curtail social mobilization, it also offers activists fuel, determination, and a clear objective for change-making. Much remains to be understood about the possibilities for collective action in Latin America's violent democracies. I suggest that if we want to truly understand this question, we refocus our attention on the spaces in which its extremes come to full fruition: in the spaces of urban poverty and armed conflict. This project will be particularly useful if Latin American democratic institutions continue crumble and physical violence escalates. Sadly, social movements in the future may have little choice but to borrow the strategies for collective action orchestrated by favela activists. Now is the time to understand these tactics, and I hope this dissertation will offer a valuable starting point for doing so.

## Outline of this dissertation

In this dissertation, I will expand on each of these ideas in the context of the City of God. **Chapter 2** provides an outline of my research methods, with a discussion of the importance of and challenges to employing a participatory action approach in conflict zones. I also consider how I negotiated the multiple risks of the City of God and the dynamics of power related to my own raced, gendered, classed, and national identity. **In Chapter 3** I provide an overview of the

social and political historical trajectories in Rio de Janeiro that led to the creation of the City of God and its current challenges. In **Chapter 4** I examine the dynamics of City of God's local governance structures, the counter-sphere of moral politics that it engendered, and the closures and opportunities that existed within and beyond the City of God. In Chapters **5, 6, and 7** I take a closer look at the political imaginaries and logics of action among the three social movements in the City of God. I then conclude in **Chapter 8** with consideration of how my findings might inform future research and policy-making in and around areas of extreme violence.

# **Chapter 2**

## **Research Methods and Approaches: Negotiating Violence, Power and Privilege**

## Studying the Subaltern

While there is widespread agreement in the social sciences, and sociology in particular, that studying marginalized populations is a critical task, there is extensive debate about how to do this. Many of the questions that animate studies of the “subaltern” can be broadly categorized as epistemological concerns and ethical concerns. Epistemological concerns include debates about the mechanisms and possibilities for the production of “truth,” the extent to which the biases of the researcher can be minimized by different methodological approaches, and the possibilities for retrenching difference between the “subaltern” and the rest of the world in the construction of knowledge. While debates about the researcher’s role in producing “truth” continue to rage between the post-positivist and post-modernist perspectives, there are also extensive debates between scholars within each of these paradigms. Related, but distinct, ethical concerns include any issue related to the actual research processes and how these affect populations under examination. Questions abound about the potential harm that might come to vulnerable research subjects, the unequal dynamics of power between researchers and subjects, and the obligations of the researcher to contribute to positive social change.

I begin this chapter by providing a general overview of my position on these questions, which can best be described as a feminist participatory framework. My epistemological perspective is undergirded by claims among feminist scholars that all researchers are embedded within hierarchies of power and are therefore unable to take an “unbiased” approach to their research or provide “objective” truth. Rather than seek to obtain “objective truth,” the scholar’s responsibility should be to generate questions, methods, and arguments that incorporate a diversity of perspectives from a range of “standpoints,” or social positions. In other words, theory should be driven by the dialogue between the scholar and her participants, rather than by a

distant, outsider analysis. While a researcher cannot escape her own location within power structures, she should be aware and reflexive of her positionality and how it might affect her analysis and welcome the critiques of those in other social locations. I address ethical concerns by drawing on the principles of participatory action research, which contends that it is the researcher's responsibility to (a) work to level unequal power relations between her and her research subjects; (b) incorporate participants' feedback into every stage of the research process, including analysis; and (c) ensure that the research process and outcomes provide a useful return to the research population and contribute to decreasing social injustice. After laying out the framework that guided my research process, I provide a justification of my research methods. I then describe in detail the data that was collected for this dissertation and how I implemented a feminist participatory approach in each method.

## Socially Situated Knowledge and a “Multiple Standpoints

### Epistemology”

#### Epistemological debates in feminist theory

The social sciences are rooted in the assumption that the social world, like the natural world, is governed by laws and patterns that can be uncovered through empirical observation (Comte 1868). The objective truth, claim empiricists, can be ascertained by any scholar employing rigorous and unbiased (and primarily quantitative) scientific methods. Beginning in the 1980s, however, feminist scholars began to contest the core tenets of traditional social science, asserting that no social fact is universal since all knowledge is situated within particular socio-political contexts and hierarchies of power (Code 1996; Harding 1993). Lorraine Code argues, for instance, that the belief in a value-neutral science that emerges independent of the

researcher's identity and social position is not only a myth, but allows for the production of hegemonic epistemologies through the "hidden subjectivities" of (largely white male) researchers (Code 1996:19). The forms of knowledge being created within this paradigm can become tools for the control of women and other subordinated groups by constituting them as objects of scientific inquiry and claiming to understand their lived realities without actually speaking to them or allowing them to speak for themselves.

The myth of value-neutrality that undergirds traditional science has, according to feminist scholars, severe consequences for the production of inaccurate and harmful facts and theories, which exacerbates and legitimizes gender inequality and other forms of oppression. Sandra Harding (1993) suggests that two pernicious consequences emerge from this approach to social science: (1) the production of partial and distorted facts and (2) the neglect of research about and relevant to women's lives. In the first case, the failure of traditional scientists (even feminist empiricists) to recognize and operationalize the patriarchal norms that permeate all scientific inquiry causes them to overlook important cultural variables that produce social realities. As a result, theories and methods do not take into account gendered explanations that might be central to explaining particular outcomes. In the second case, entire topics and questions have been excluded from scientific inquiry due to the lack of interest in women's lives. According to Harding, "in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics shaping the very structure of a society, the activities of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them" (Harding 1993:54). In other words, social inequality helps to stratify, and limit, the process of knowledge production. For Harding, those occupying dominant positions in society are at a distinct disadvantage in their ability to see and study power, having a much more

limited line of vision than those at the bottom: “One’s social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know; some social situations—critically unexamined dominant ones—are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief” (Harding 1993:55).

According to Linda Alcoff, these limitations in knowledge production transcend the realm of academia, allowing “epistemologies of ignorance” to emerge and remain uncontested, thereby legitimating inequality against repressed social groups (Alcoff 2007). Since all knowledge is situated within structural conditions of inequality, argues Alcoff, dominant groups are able to create theories and discourses about subordinate “others” that justify unjust policies and practices, often in direct contradiction to documented realities. Some examples of this include the blaming of poverty and broken homes on the “pathological” behaviors of black mothers (Augustin 2003) or the justification of the criminalization of cultural and religious practices of colonial subjects in Africa and Southeast Asia as a means to “civilize” or “save” “primitive” groups (McClintock 2013; Spivak 1988). The exclusion of the perspectives of marginalized populations in the production of knowledge is both epistemologically limiting and politically harmful. Additionally, the absence of opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in the construction of knowledge has resulted in an intellectual imperialism, wherein “Northern” theories have dominated the social sciences and excluded knowledge produced in the global South (Connell 2007). According to Raewyn Connell, while the North has been the main producers of theory, the South has been used primarily as the “raw data” with which to test theory, rather than as spaces in which theory is produced. Not only does this limit our access to innovative and critical ways of apprehending and theorizing the social world, it also exacerbates social inequality by marginalizing the poor not just politically and symbolically, but also

epistemologically by devaluing their views.

In order to address the epistemic and political injustices perpetuated by western empiricism, feminist scholars suggest that women and other repressed groups should take an active, if not central, role in the production of knowledge. According to Sandra Harding (1993), “the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought—for *everyone’s* research and scholarship—from which humans’ relations with each other and the natural world can become visible” (Harding 54, italics in original). Incorporating the views of oppressed populations can help generate new lines of inquiry, problematize traditional assumptions about gendered practices, and contribute to theoretical conclusions that might have otherwise been overlooked or misunderstood. Julian Go, writing about the historic exclusion of the indigenous and other “subaltern” populations in literature on coloniality and postcoloniality, suggests that “sociology should go native, opening up conventional social science to voices from the postcolonial world” (Go 2016:149). For both feminist and postcolonial scholars, including the voices of the marginalized “Other” becomes a critical task in expanding and leveling the production of knowledge.

Many critical scholars argue that black, non-western, and other minority women have even greater epistemic advantages than white women, as their multiple forms of oppression position them outside dominant power structures and provide them a unique and valuable perspective on power (Bar On 1993; Collins 1986; Narayan 1998). According to Patricia Hill Collins (1986), sociological theories and practices, which were primarily developed and furthered by privileged white men, have established particular ways of apprehending the world that contradict the experiences of black female sociologists. Black women in sociology thus have an “outsider within” status due to their exclusion from mainstream sociological analyses

and assumptions despite their presence as individual within the field. This provides them a unique ability to reveal the truths obscured by traditional scholarship and to “produce facts and theories about the Black female experience that will clarify a Black woman’s standpoint for Black women” (Collins 1986:16). Similarly, Uma Narayan (1998) suggests that nonwestern women have “double vision,” as the necessity of operating in both dominant and subordinate cultures gives them a unique perspective on dominant power structures and cultures.

At the same time, many scholars suggest that oppressed groups may not always be in a position to critically reflect on their situations or the forces the undergird their oppression. For instance, Collins notes that black women and others willing to challenge patriarchal, positivist science may risk losing professional credibility and personal relationships with colleagues who still embrace the dominant paradigm. Oppressed groups may therefore not have the security needed to speak freely about their views and may be pressured to de-politicize their writings. Even more problematic is the challenge of identifying symbolic violence. According to Pierre Bourdieu, dominant narratives that legitimize unjust policies and continued social inequality are easily internalized and “misrecognized,” even by the groups directly oppressed by them, rendering them incapable of identifying and reflecting critically on them (Bourdieu 1989). Narayan, for instance, argues that nonwestern women are not automatically or necessarily able or willing to identify cultural hegemonic forces as they also exist within power structures and may be unaware of symbolic forms of violence or may benefit from their complicity with dominant social norms.

Additionally, Bat-Ami Bar On argues that the attribution of “epistemic privilege” to subjects who are distant from the centers of power “does not merely recover the agency of socially marginalized subjects but valorizes it in such a way that even if the theory does not

essentialize agency, it always idealizes it, abstracting from the actual lived practices and generalizing from normatively approved ones” (Bar On 1993:92). In other words, the temptation to construct theory in opposition to dominant discourse can lead to similarly over-generalized theories that not only take away from the heterogeneity of lived realities, but reduce women, and non-western women in particular, to a monolithic, reductive, and homogeneous concept that Chandra Mohanty (1988) has termed the “Third World Woman.” For Mohanty, the cultural and ideological composite of the “Woman” overlooks the real, material subjects (i.e. “women”) (Mohanty 1988:334). This not only obscures the unique, human elements of each individual subject, but fails to consider the unequal power dynamics between them (Mohanty 1988).

Additionally, Bar On argues that standpoint theorists might romanticize the moral dispositions and agentic practices of oppressed groups; the experience of oppression, however, does not necessarily make oppressed groups morally superior nor actively resistant to unjust structures of power. Bar On further warns against the tendency for standpoint theorists to attribute more authenticity to some perspectives over others, thereby reproducing the very epistemic inequalities that standpoint theory aims to combat. This is problematic at both the theoretical and practical levels. If the production of knowledge relies on a multiplicity of perspectives, the exclusion or dismissal of any perspective (even those of members of the “dominant” group) limits understanding. At the practical level, the project of determining which individuals are “more” marginalized and therefore have a more “authentic” perspective of power than others can result in the researcher imposing her own biases onto her participants and the production of knowledge and dismiss the potential epistemic contributions of individuals not deemed sufficiently oppressed.

## A framework for a “Multiple Standpoints” Epistemology

Building on this literature and the debates within feminist standpoint theory, my dissertation research was based on several core principles that guided my view of my responsibility to the production of knowledge as a researcher:

(1) All researchers are situated within unequal relations of power, and the knowledge we produce is limited by our perspective from our position within these hierarchies of power. While the researcher cannot necessarily alter her positionality, she can—and should—be aware of it and reflect on the limitations of her line of vision.

(2) The researcher should reflect critically on the multiple axes of power in the society under investigation; how her research participants are situated in, reflect, or resist those existing power relations; and where her own preferences/biases lie. Since the individual researcher has only a limited set of lenses through which to view these, she can amplify her line of vision by incorporating the perspectives of others. This might be thought of as a “multiple standpoint epistemology,” wherein the project of knowledge construction is strengthened by the inclusion of multiple views.

(3) Rather than focus on incorporating the perspectives of people whom the researcher perceives as most “marginalized,” the researcher should recognize that each individual has a unique position in relation to power dynamics. By valuing and incorporating the perspectives of individuals from a range of social positions, the researcher can minimize the tendency to homogenize, over-generalize, romanticize, or essentialize the experiences or views of her research participants. The researcher should also remain attuned to unequal power dynamics between her research participants and account for the multiple, and intersecting axes of power that shape the perspectives and experiences of individual participants.

(4) The researcher should be aware of her unique role and limitations in the research process and in the dissemination of knowledge. Just as participants cannot escape the practical and political consequences of their actions, neither can the researcher. Remaining alert to and forthcoming about the ways in which external forces shape her research process and the dissemination of findings can help to create accountability for the results and to recognize the ways in which epistemological reflexivity is limited by real-world constraints.

## Ethical Concerns and Participatory Action Research

While feminist/postcolonial scholars call for the inclusion of multiple voices in order to avoid, or at least minimize epistemic violence against marginalized populations, scholars must also take into account the practical and political consequences of research their participants. After some particularly egregious violations of participants' rights in the Milgram experiments and the Tuskegee Syphilis studies, among others, the National Research Act of 1974 and the resulting National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research instituted several principles which all research with human subjects must uphold. These include "respect for persons," which requires that participants be treated with respect, be fully informed about the research process, and provide their consent. Furthermore, studies must demonstrate "beneficence," ensuring that the study maximizes the benefits of the research project and minimizes risk to subjects, as well as "justice," wherein the benefits of the research are evenly distributed. While this was an important step in the right direction, they have not been sufficient to address the many ways in which the research process exacerbates the material inequalities between scholar and subject.

## Practical and Political Consequences of Research

One of the most common ways in which research contributes to inequality results when scholars gain much more than is returned. For instance, while occasionally researchers offer a stipend to research participants—which according to the Institutional Review Board must be modest in order to avoid coercing participation—the long-term financial and social rewards of a successful research project to the academic are immense. These often include the (not immodest) salary of a professor, subsidized travel to academic conferences around the world, profits from books or awards, as well as prestige, the financial security of tenure, and the opportunity to engage in autonomous, creative, and often exciting work and to become the legitimate authorities of knowledge. Some activist-inclined scholars may do their best to effect public policies that aid their participants (and the broader population to which their participants belong) by, say, writing op-eds or being active on social media platforms. Large-scale political change is slow, however, and by the time any meaningful changes occur, the actual research participants may no longer be in a position to benefit from them. In a very direct way, then, researchers gain an awful lot from their interactions with participants; participants, in contrast, gain little more than a \$10 stipend, which may not have even covered transportation fare and the loss of potential wages during the time they spent being surveyed, interviewed or otherwise sharing information.

This is especially problematic in the context of research on economically, politically, and/or socially vulnerable populations who may have very little access to basic resources or political power. This makes them less able to have control over their own participation in the research study or its outcomes. For instance, Elizabeth Wood notes that fully informed consent is difficult to obtain among populations with high rates of illiteracy or semi-literacy, where

participants are unlikely to understand the process or purpose of the research, may not know how to demand their rights, may feel too intimidated to decline participation, or may be unable to negotiate which content can be published (Wood 2006). The challenge for freely giving consent is further exacerbated when the scholar and her subjects occupy different and unequal social, economic, or political positions. For instance, a poor black woman may feel intimidated by a white male academic and may consent to participation due to social expectations of deference, rather than out of choice. She may also be unable to confront the researcher about the potential harms that might come to her or other participants in her social network or to demand that changes be made to the study to minimize harm and maximize benefits. In other words, differences in the identities and social positions between the scholar and the participants can jeopardize the ability of the research process to be consensual, beneficent, and just for participants.

At the same time, there is often little emphasis in traditional research processes to contribute to broader social or political change. For many scholars, the goal of scientific research is not to produce change, but knowledge; a commitment to a political agenda, they argue, is likely to introduce biases into the researcher's analysis and stymie the ultimate goal of science to identify objective truth. As noted above, feminist and postcolonial scholars contend that not only is all knowledge socially situated, but all research promotes an ideological agenda, even if inadvertently. Scholars contribute to the political landscape whether they acknowledge this or not. In addition to being forthcoming and reflexive about one's ideological biases and social positionality, scholars have an obligation to promote structural transformation by combining "social investigation, educational work, and action" (Hall 1981). This obligation becomes especially pressing in settings where participants face multiple forms of oppression.

This “emancipatory” approach to research dates back to the 1970s among leaders of popular education movements in poor neighborhoods across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The work of Paulo Freire (2000) and José Ortega y Gasset (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991), among others emerged in opposition to the colonial roots of western research, which emphasized the “breaking” of the “monopoly over knowledge production by universities” (Hall 1992:92). In order to avoid reproducing the unequal structures of power that reinforce the subjugation of oppressed populations, the researcher should be thoughtful about how to design research processes and outcomes that help to address inequality.

### Principles of Participatory Action Research

Based on these considerations, participatory action research (PAR) ascribes to a broad set of principles:

1. PAR is inclusive, recognizing the expertise of participants on the research questions, methods, and analysis of data and providing them opportunities to be co-producers in the making of knowledge in each step of the research process. In order to fully include participants, especially if they are members of marginalized populations, the researcher must seek to level relations of power as much as possible (Minkler and Wallerstein 2011). This can be achieved through institutional partnerships, systems of accountability, reflexive dialogue about power differences, etc.
2. PAR is pedagogical, such that the collective process of knowledge production should contribute to participants’ own ability to think critically about their environment and, together with the researcher, develop strategies for confronting barriers (Rodríguez and Brown 2009).
3. PAR is political, aiming to contribute to addressing structural inequality that oppresses

particular groups of people. It is therefore geared at both critical reflection *and* praxis, which can be achieved either through the process or outcomes of the research (or both) (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2013).

While these are the main tenets of PAR, each research site and population has a unique set of interests, needs, resources, and relationships between participants and researchers. How the principles of PAR are implemented vary from site to site. While the vast variability in the forms and practices of PAR can often make it difficult to compare across sites, they also allow for dialogue and innovation. Furthermore, scholars and participants face many challenges in attaining these principles. Some of these include limitations imposed by the research institute or expectations of publication or other scholarly outputs. Limited financial resources can also constrain the possibilities for activity. Furthermore, the differing needs and interests between the scholar and the participants, and between participants, can also contribute to competing agendas and the need to prioritize some ideas or outcomes over others. In the following section, I describe how I sought to incorporate the principles of multiple standpoint epistemology and participatory action research in my research. First I describe my ethnographic fieldwork, which took place across multiple sites, then I describe the survey research I conducted in the City of God.

## Ethnographic approaches to studying poverty, violence, and politics

The objective of my dissertation research was to identify the possibilities for non-violent collective action in the context of armed conflict and contested sovereignty. To this end, ethnographic fieldwork was the most suitable methodological approach. The primary practice of ethnography is an immersion in the place and lives of research participants. According to Lisa

Wedeen, ethnography requires a commitment “to chronicle aspects of lived experience and to place that experience in conversation with prevailing scholarly themes, problems, and concepts” (Wedeen 2010:257). Among sociologists, ethnographic research can be especially valuable in uncovering the structural forces that shape, inform, and constrain individual practices, beliefs, and possibilities (Bourgois 2003b). Building on observations and interviews, ethnographic research can provide valuable tools for thinking about under-examined complex social situations. Mario Small, for instance, has argued that despite the tendency for ethnography and other qualitative methods to be measured against the gold standard of generalizability, the primary aim of quantitative research, qualitative research contributes something entirely different: they uncover core mechanisms, themes, connections, and logics of action that help to structure social life. According to Small:

Generally, the approaches call for logical rather than statistical inference, for case- rather than sample-based logic, for saturation rather than representation as the stated aims of research. The approaches produce more logically sensible hypotheses and more transparent types of empirical statements (Small 2009:28).

In other words, ethnographic research does not seek to uncover a universal, generalizable set of facts or correlations; rather, it seeks to identify the mechanisms that undergird social practice. Furthermore, while some ethnographers employ a positivist framework, looking to test hypotheses by taking participants’ statements at face value and their decisions as motivated by rational choice, many ethnographers, and anthropologists in particular, embrace an interpretivist framework.

According to Lisa Wedeen, within the interpretivist approach to ethnography,

Anthropologists question the possibility and desirability of objectivity; avoid model building and hypothesis testing; attend to the ways in which disciplines can shore up the very unequal power relations they seek to describe or explain; and interrogate a presumed division of the social world into real, replicable observations and intersubjective “noise” (Wedeen 2010:258).

The focus of interpretivist ethnography on the language, context, history, and meaning is

especially suited to address the call among feminist and postcolonial scholars for reflexivity about unequal power relations. The immersion of the scholar within the physical and other spaces in which participants engage can provide the researcher with valuable insights into the multiple dimensions along which power operates and the various forms it takes. The exploratory nature of ethnography is especially useful for identifying the unique workings and manifestations of inequality within populations facing multiple forms of oppression. Judith Stacey has argued that ethnography, which she defines as “intensive participant-observation study which yields a synthetic cultural account” is ideally suited to accomplish the objectives of feminist research (Stacey 1988:22). The relationships built between the ethnographer and the research community can, in some cases, provide space for “authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity” between the researcher and her participants and can help to level power imbalances between the researcher and the research community. In contrast to other forms of research, which may have little direct contact with the objects of research, ethnography allows for an interpersonal, interactive, and contextual form of knowledge production.

At the same time, the presence of the ethnographer within a community can introduce new dynamics of inequality—i.e. between the researcher and the participants—and affect participants’ behaviors, thereby reproducing dominant biases related to race, class, and gender (Naples and Sachs 2000). Nancy Naples and Carolyn Sachs, writing on the challenges of ethnographic research, argue that “dynamics of power influence how problems are defined, which knowers are identified and are given credibility, how interactions are interpreted, and how ethnographic narratives are constructed” (Naples and Sachs 2000:195). Particularly in the context of marginalized research populations, ethnographers may feel compelled to “sanitize the suffering and destruction that exists on inner-city streets” out of “fear of giving the poor a bad

image” (Bourgois 2003a:12). In order to address this, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that, for the feminist ethnographer, “that means being aware of domination in the society being described and in the relationship between the writer (and the readers) and the people being written about” (Abu-Lughod 2008:5). Feminist ethnographers must therefore remain self-reflexive about their positionality vis-à-vis their participants within larger relations of power.

This has several implications for how I decided to conduct, analyze, and discuss my research in the City of God. I describe how I address these elements in each of my research methods below.

## Multi-sited Ethnography in the City of God

The research conducted for this dissertation employed several forms of data collection, including multi-sited ethnography, survey research, and secondary data analysis. Multi-sited ethnographic research was (a) geographically based in the City of God, but also extended into (b) various “political” spaces across the city, including the municipal government, NGOs working on urban and national issues, and other favelas; and (c) the virtual spaces operated by and for City of God’s residents. I also worked with a team of local residents to design a survey measuring social development, security, social resilience, and social and political action in the City of God, and together we interviewed a sample of 989 respondents who were roughly representative of the geographic, gender, and age characteristics of the neighborhood. Secondary data analysis included review of newspaper articles, speeches, government reports, census data, and other relevant data. I describe each of these below.

## Segmented Ethnography

The primary sources of data from which this dissertation draws are the observations and interviews I conducted during my physical presence in the City of God. Between 2014 and

2017, I took seven trips to the City of God, each of which lasted between two and six weeks for a total of twenty-five weeks, or a little over six months in the field. Although traditional ethnographic research typically takes places over several months of continuous research, there were many benefits to spacing out my field visits over several years. For one, being present in the City of God over four consecutive years allowed me to gain a longitudinal perspective of changes in the security landscape with the deterioration of the UPP and the effects that these changes had (and did not have) on the political dynamics of the neighborhood. I also found that my coming and going—with regular in-between contact through Facebook, skype, and WhatsApp text messaging with key participants—allowed me to develop close, trusting relationships with participants as they witnessed my multiple returns. Isabella, a 34-year-old woman who founded a popular Facebook page dedicated to sharing news and stories about the City of God and whom I came to know very well, often joked that she never knew where in the world I was because I was always popping up in the City of God.

There were practical benefits to this segmented ethnographic approach as well. Ethnographic research can take a toll on ethnographers' mental and physical health due to being far away from their primary support systems for many months and being immersed in a foreign culture in which they do not necessarily belong (Wood 2006). This is exacerbated when poverty, violence, and other complex social issues create extreme vulnerabilities for both participants and the researcher. Being embedded in areas of high suffering and fear can take an extremely heavy toll on the ethnographer, and may pose such a risk to her safety that being in the area for too long could create severe risks. Although I was certainly not immune to these risks, these were minimized thanks to the brevity of my trips. Because each of my trips only lasted a few weeks, I was able to sustain the energy, focus, and stamina that was required to conduct in-depth research

in a high risk, high suffering environment for the duration of each trip, and then return home to recharge, reconnect with family members, and rest. I also believe that my brief trips helped to decrease some of the risks to my safety. Fortunately, I never had any dangerous encounters with drug traffickers and never received threats due to my presence in the neighborhood. But I believe that my ability to ask participants sensitive questions, to enter areas of the neighborhood where outsiders were rarely allowed, and to observe drug traffickers and police officers in the street was facilitated by the fact that I always disappeared after a few weeks. This meant that not only was there less opportunity for me to accidentally ask the wrong person the wrong question or otherwise raise suspicion, but that even if drug traffickers became suspicious, I never stayed long enough for their suspicions to escalate. My participants also knew that I only stayed for a few weeks at a time, and I believe that they were willing to share sensitive information in part because they knew that I—and my data—would be leaving soon. While I also employed many other strategies to stay safe while in the field, which I describe below, it is highly unlikely that I would have been allowed to collect the depth of data that I did if I had lived in the City of God for several consecutive months.

Time away from the field between trips was also invaluable to gaining the analytical distance required to critically reflect on my findings, to determine which questions had not been sufficiently asked or answered, to shift my focus or direction, and to gradually construct my argument and theoretical framework. Ethnographers are often charged with becoming too deeply embedded in the communities they study and too emotionally invested in the personal lives of their participants. The desire (or pressure) to describe their participants in the best light, to romanticize their practices, and to attribute either too much or too little agency to them, particularly among marginalized populations can, some argue, cloud an ethnographer's analytical

perspective. While, as I discuss below, I disagree with the claim that any scholar, regardless of her methods, has the capacity to divorce herself from her biases, I did find that it was very difficult to see the big picture of my study and my findings while I was in the field. To cite the common idiom, it was hard to see the forest when I was standing inside it, surrounded by trees. Time away from the City of God allowed me to access a more “bird’s eye” view of my field site. I used my time back in the United States to discuss my research with advisors and colleagues, to present preliminary findings at academic conferences, and to prepare, submit, and receive feedback on journal manuscripts. These opportunities for academic dialogue and analytical reflection between trips helped me to distinguish between core and tangential findings, to hone my questions and arguments, to identify variables I had not sufficiently explored in previous visits, and ultimately to determine what City of God’s activists could contribute to our understanding of non-violent action in conflict zones. While I may have spent less time in the field than other ethnographers, I was extremely focused and intentional about my research while there and was able to gain a rich, varied, and directly relevant collection of data.

Of course, there are disadvantages to segmented ethnography. For one, there were many events that occurred when I was in the United State which I could not directly observe. As I describe below, I was able to document many of these through virtual ethnography by following my participants’ posts on Facebook and WhatsApp and by talking to them about the events by phone or skype. While these second-hand accounts did not replace direct observation and relied heavily on the perspectives of local residents, I valued the opportunity to witness how narratives of major security or political events were shaped through online discourse. The more problematic gap, I believe, were the everyday events that were not posted online and which I was unable to observe. Often what residents find significant differ from what the ethnographer finds

significant; many of my most instructive moments in the field would likely be viewed as ordinary by most participants, who would therefore be unlikely to post about them. If my dissertation lacks in thick description of these everyday moments, it is because they were in fact more limited than for other ethnographers. However, by the time I returned to the field in January, 2017, already with a great deal of clarity around the core mechanisms by which power was negotiated in both violent and non-violent action, I found that I had mostly reached the saturation point in both my interviews and observations. New events, discussions, and interviews supported my main argument and, while they added valuable examples, they did not alter my theoretical framework. In other words, I believe the data collection I was able to achieve during the time substantiate all of the claims I will make in this dissertation and that additional time in field would not have altered these claims. Next I describe what data I was able to collect during my dissertation research.

### Multi-sited Ethnography

The research for this project not only took place across multiple segments, but also across multiple sites. Many scholars have argued that a multi-sited approach to research is critical for examining and accounting for the relationship between institutions and people (Marcus 2009), the migration patterns and “transborder” locations of immigrant groups (Miraftab 2016; Stephen 2007), the multiple physical locations across which cultures extend (Leonard 2009), and the embeddedness of the “local” within global institutions and processes (Burawoy et al. 2000). One of the core motivators of multi-sited ethnography is the recognition that a participant population occupies, affects, and is shaped by multiple dynamics of power that do not always operate within one, physical location. Ethnography must therefore extend into other sites in which relationships, experiences, narratives, and practices are formed. To this end my research was

geographically based in the City of God but extended into the virtual spaces in which residents organized around their rights and the political spaces in which larger debates about development and security in favelas was negotiated. Below, I discuss the data collected from interviews, participant-observation in the City of God, on the virtual sites designed by and for residents of the City of God, and the political arenas of debate and action.

## The Politics of Participation

In each of the geographic, political, and virtual locations of my research, I became deeply immersed within the lifeworld of my participants. On the one hand, this approach provided me valuable access to information about how residents were affected by resource scarcity, insecurity, and discrimination, among other issues, and how they worked collectively to address these challenges. On the other hand, it generated the many challenges discussed earlier in this chapter. In order to negotiate these, I employed a feminist participatory approach to ethnographic research based on the principles of a multiple standpoint epistemology and participatory action research. As described above, this approach required ongoing awareness of and reflection about my own positionality within the larger fields of social, political, and economic power. It also required bringing my participants' views and analysis of my research into my own process of knowledge production and ensuring that my research benefited my research participants in some way and contributed to addressing larger socio-political inequalities. In this section, I describe how I gained entry to the City of God, how I negotiated my multiple identities in relation to my participants, and how I sought to incorporate their feedback and interests into my research process.

When I began fieldwork in 2014, I had several advantages that allowed me to access the

City of God and form relationships with local residents. Although I am the daughter of two American parents, I was fluent in Portuguese and had familiarity with the city of Rio de Janeiro and local cultural practices. I had spent most of my childhood living with my parents and two younger siblings in Rio de Janeiro, had done all of my early schooling in Portuguese, and had maintained my fluency in the language even after returning to the United States with my family at the age of twelve. Consequently, I often “passed” as a Brazilian. Since I am white with light brown hair and blue eyes, most Brazilians—including City of God residents—assumed initially that I was from southern Brazil where descendants of German immigrants who migrated during WWII have a similar phenotype. Among my participants, however, I was forthcoming about my nationality and my role as a PhD student from an American university. I also was accustomed to many cultural features of social interaction in Brazil. Brazilian culture is widely known for being especially personable and affectionate; Brazilians greet each other with hugs and kisses on the cheek and tend to position their bodies closer to each other during conversation than in other countries. They are also known for being generous, especially with their time and attention, and for sharing (and asking) about personal topics that might be considered uncouth in other settings. Having been brought up in Brazil, and then sustaining relationships with Brazilian ex-patriates in the US, I felt comfortable with this form of interaction before entering the City of God and easily adjusted to the close and familiar approach of many of my participants.

Just as a valuable as my language skills and cultural knowledge were the relationships I was able to establish before I entered the field. The year before I first arrived in the City of God, I had several Skype conversations with my mother’s close friend and former colleague, Rosangela, who had lived most of her life in the City of God and, even after moving to a neighborhood a few miles away, remained active as a volunteer in many small community-based

organizations. Rosangela and I skyped several times in the year preceding my arrival to the City of God, during which time she generously provided me valuable information about what the City of God was like. She also put me in touch with Solange, the founder and director of a well-respected community-based organization called Youth Promise. Youth Promise, which I discuss in much greater depth in Chapter 5, provided a range of social and educational activities to about two hundred children and fifty adolescents before and after school, as well as various workshops for their participants' caretakers. With Rosangela's recommendation, Solange had agreed to speak to me on the phone, and then many times by email. I explained that I wanted to come to the City of God to research urban violence, but that I also wanted to do something that would be helpful to the community. She agreed to let me volunteer at Youth Promise, first by designing an evaluation for a workshop on domestic violence they were organizing—I had spent five years working with domestic violence survivors before starting graduate school—and eventually helping with multiple tasks while in the City of God.

Volunteering at Youth Promise turned out to be the most effective mechanism for gaining safe entry to the City of God. During my first two trips to the City of God, in 2014 and 2015, I resided first with Rosangela, and then with a childhood friend, both of whom lived a short bus ride from the City of God. I spent many of my days during these trips at Youth Promise helping to run activities for children, making or translating monthly bulletins, chaperoning field trips, or writing grants. It became a safe space where I could go in between interviews and meetings. Spending too much unstructured time in the streets or at open bars or luncheonettes observing passersby or working on field notes would have raised suspicion about whether I was a spy working for the police and would have jeopardized my safety. Though in 2014 the presence of the drug trade was not as visible as by 2016, it was widely believed by residents that drug

traffickers remained attuned to who was coming and going from the area. Wearing the Youth Promise t-shirt and walking in and out of their front door several times a day allowed these “eyes on the street” to see me participate in the community as a volunteer in a local organization. As I was told, even drug traffickers approved of volunteers committed to the well-being of children. If, any point, I was questioned about why I was in the City of God by a drug trafficker, I could declare my affiliation with Youth Promise. But more commonly, members of the drug trade observed newcomers from a distance in order to ascertain, through observation and, sometimes, word of mouth, what the newcomer was doing in the area. If the newcomer displayed the common signs of being a volunteer—coming and going from a known organization, dressing casually, chatting with staff members on the street, and greeting participating children in the street—this could reassure local drug traffickers that I was not a spy for the police. While I cannot know for certain who observed me doing where and with whom, I was never questioned about my presence in the City of God by a stranger or an armed drug trafficker.

Serving as an active volunteer had other benefits as well. It gave me opportunities to meet many of the volunteers and employees, staff from other organizations who came to Youth Promise for meetings or to run a workshop with students or their caretakers, and some of the parents. I quickly formed relationships with many of them, including Maria Rita, a 35-year-old computer teacher with whom I got along especially well. As I came to know my contacts at Youth Promise, they introduced me to their social networks, welcomed me into their homes, and informed me about other agencies and relevant community events. Serving as a volunteer also gave me the opportunity to be useful to the neighborhood in a tangible, if small, way. Although the City of God has been the subject of dozens of studies and most of my participants had been interviewed or surveyed several times, many residents complained that scholars did not actively

engage in or give back to the community. Though I chose to volunteer at Youth Promise out of a sense of responsibility to be useful, many of my participants expressed their appreciation for my direct engagement in a local organization. Over the years, I assisted in projects with other organizations as well, including translating into English a newspaper that Rosangela and other residents produced every three months, running workshops for young people on how to conduct community-based research, helping to set up events, and other small projects. While none of these activities significantly addressed the structural inequalities in the city, residents valued my willingness to participate in their social and political engagement efforts. On many occasions I consciously volunteered to help with more menial tasks, like washing dishes or sweeping the floor; outsiders were usually invited to do more “substantive” work, like lead workshops, while residents (usually poor black women) were asked to engage in more hands-on, domestic chores. By volunteering in a range of activities, I hoped to counter some of the traditional researcher-participant dynamics in poor neighborhoods.

Over time, I formed a friendship with Maria Rita, who invited me to stay with her and her family in 2016. For the rest of my fieldwork, which took place over an additional five ethnographic research trips between 2016 and 2017, I resided with Maria Rita, her older sister Esther, and Esther’s 12-year-old son André. Esther’s older son, 26-year-old Leonardo, kept his belongings at Esther’s house and sometimes slept over when he was not at his girlfriend’s home in Tijuca, one of Rio’s wealthy neighborhoods. Leonardo had a 3-year-old son, Ramon, who was also a regular visitor, often coming to stay with Esther even when Leonardo was away. In addition to the immediate family, Esther opened her home to many adolescent boys during those two years. This included Diego and Pablo, twin 18-year-old boys whose neglectful and emotionally abusive mother often deprived them of food and safe living conditions. Diego and

Pablo would often eat lunch or dinner at Esther's house, sit quietly on the couch surfing the internet on their used smartphones, and receive plenty of advice and support from Esther and Maria Rita to re-enroll in secondary education or get an internship or job. In exchange, the boys would help Esther with small home repair projects or sell pizza or baked goods that she had made to local neighbors. Esther also helped to support André's three older half-brothers—ages 16, 17, and 19—whose mother had died four years earlier from pneumonia. Their father, Esther's ex-boyfriend and André's father, did little to support the boys financially or otherwise, and Esther had found the three adolescent boys a room for rent directly across from her house. Though the boys did not sleep at Esther's house, they spent much of the day there helping with chores, eating lunch and dinner, getting assistance on homework and help signing up for school or internships, advice on how to handle a host of issues, and otherwise being treated as though they were Esther's children.

Esther had an especially motherly disposition, cooking lavish meals, sewing up holes in clothes, offering advice, and jumping in to fix things whenever possible. Perhaps not surprisingly, I quickly became another one of Esther's children. Though I was in my early thirties at the time, the City of God was a terrain I needed constant help navigating, and Esther and Maria Rita had embraced the task of helping me survive and accomplish my research objectives. I became Esther's "American daughter" as she fondly introduced me to friends and neighbors, perhaps in a similar way as that described by Donna Goldstein during her fieldwork in another Rio de Janeiro favela (Goldstein 2003). In no time, André, Leonardo, Maria Rita, and André's three step-brothers began referring to me as their "sister."

While it is not uncommon for Brazilians to use family names to refer to each other (for instance, most children are expected to call adults by "tio" or "tia," meaning "uncle" and "aunt"),

the terms of endearment that Esther and her family used towards me reflected my embeddedness within their non-traditional (though not at all uncommon) family dynamic. Esther's family did not conform to the nuclear model. Leonardo's father had been killed nearly twenty years earlier, and Esther had kicked out André's father two years earlier when he became overly jealous and possessive. There was no "man of the house," but rather two commanding women who, together, ran the household, paid the bills, and cared for all its members, biological or otherwise. While the nuclear family as an actual model is beginning to wane across much of the western world as divorce rates rise, the matriarchal and dynamic composition of Esther's family is quite common across the City of God and many other poor neighborhoods. For me to belong there said more about them than about me: watching over the people who needed a home was at the core of what constituted a family for Esther and Maria Rita. While I reciprocated as much as possible—washing dishes, cleaning up, helping to pay for bills and groceries, and otherwise partaking in everyday family events—their willingness to embrace a stranger in need of a place to stay had long been instilled as the family practice before I arrived.

Living in the City of God with Esther and Maria Rita had an incredible impact on the information I was able to access, and provided me critical support negotiating the challenges of ethnography in the City of God. After spending my first two trips living outside the neighborhood, entering the area mostly during the day and leaving by nightfall, residing in the neighborhood provided me invaluable opportunities to observe and experience the multiple, overlapping challenges of living in an area of armed conflict. The two sisters also introduced me to many of their friends across the neighborhood and helped me navigate the security and social structures of the area. Esther in particular was fond of scheduling interviews for me with the people she deemed "very interesting." Maria Rita often helped me navigate the nuances of

conducting research in her neighborhood, such as what to wear to which events, whether to give my participants a stipend or a gift, how to explain my research to a drug trafficker if I were questioned, and how to handle conflicts between my participants without appearing like I was taking sides. As a member of Youth Promise, she also knew the activist landscape in the City of God very well and would often introduce me to important contacts and keep me informed about upcoming events related to my research.

While having such close ties to Esther, Maria Rita, and many other residents in the City of God was extremely valuable to my research project, it also created significant complications. For one, despite my well-intentioned efforts to volunteer with local organizations and help around the house, there was ultimately little that I could do to address the enormous disparities between my access to resources and status and theirs. Maria Rita and Esther, like my other participants, somehow always made due, finding a way to collect just enough money to pay their bills at the end of the month. But rarely was much left over to pay for new clothes, leisure outings, the costs of an expensive private school for André, or bus fare for Leonardo. Much of their “extra” money would be spent when André’s teenage brothers needed help paying their rent or when a neighbor in need asked for help with groceries, medication, or clothes. They relied heavily on the public healthcare system, which, as I describe in the following chapter, was wrought with problems, and, despite Esther’s promise each year to move out of the City of God, they could not afford to do so. They also faced racial discrimination—both direct forms as well as subtle, historical, and institutionalized racism—and had less access to educational opportunities than I did. Many of my other participants were in much worse financial situations than Esther and Maria Rita, had smaller or more precarious housing, worse health, and even less access to good schools; the power differentials and access to opportunities between me and them

was even more glaring.

Surely, this had an effect on how I was treated, though in most cases I cannot be entirely sure how. For the most part, I was treated extremely well by all of the residents with whom I formed relationships, many of whom invited me to their homes, parties, church meetings, and other events. Since Brazilians are known for being very hospitable, it is impossible to know how much of their kindness and generosity was related to my race, class, education, or other attributes and how much was their own commitment to hospitality. Most residents, particularly those I met through mutual acquaintances, readily agreed to be interviewed and openly shared their life stories with me. While in theory I agree with Abu Lughod's call for self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, and I do my best to interject with my analysis of how subjects may have altered their responses for my sake, I do not find it useful or possible to attempt to read my participants' minds. As Erving Goffman has argued, we are all constantly engaged in the art of performance, sometimes to such an extent that the performance becomes itself a closer representation of reality than our "authentic" selves. My participants were constantly adjusting to the myriad risks in their environment, and surely their responses to my questions were shaped by a constellation of considerations—only one of which was me, my positionality, and our relationship. I cannot imagine any context, with or without me, in which my residents were not adjusting their actions and words in response to their environment.

Instead of pursuing the impossible task of finding "true" or "authentic" data, I sought to enhance the quality of my research findings and analysis through a "multiple standpoint" approach, offering my participants the opportunity to analyze my findings over time and in different contexts. In most cases, I discussed my findings and analyses with individual residents or informal small group settings. While some residents agreed with my analysis, in most cases

my claims led to animated and insightful discussion among highly reflexive participants also fascinated in understanding why and how they did what they did. In some cases, they offered up critiques, edits, or re-framings; in many cases, they offered additional examples that supported my argument. In all cases, these conversations helped to build trust with my participants, who appreciated being treated as not just objects of analysis but as active agents in the building of social theory.

I also presented pieces of my research in formal presentations, particularly when I had arrived at some coherent explanation for a phenomenon I had observed and had something tangible to present to my participants. In these cases, I invited all of my participants to a local community-based organization where I presented in a similar style as at an academic conference: I dressed professionally, used powerpoint slides, and presented my question, methods, findings, and conclusions—though with non-academic language—and then opened up for discussion and Q&A. At each presentation, residents of all ages, levels of literacy and engagement in activism attended. Watching such a diverse group of residents discuss security and activism in their neighborhood was itself a fascinating and highly instructive experience, and I am certain that my own understanding of my field site was strengthened by the questions, debates, and comments made by participants during the discussion of my findings. Many participants also approached me individually afterwards and told me that my presentation and the ensuing discussion had given them a useful framework for thinking about their own views and practices. While I do not believe they altered their activities in a meaningful way as a result of these presentations—shootouts, scarce resources, and the risks of the drug trade surely had a much stronger influence—they did provide me and my participants with a valuable opportunity to engage in deep academic debate about the possibilities for and limitations of non-violent action in conflict

zones. If, at any point, I succeeded in “uncovering” some of the internalized or subconscious beliefs or habits my participants employed in their activism, then rendering these visible as objects of debate to my participants gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own motivations and to better understand the larger social and symbolic contexts within which they operated.

There was another benefit to discussing my findings with a variety of residents in a range of contexts: triangulation of data. As my own understanding of my field site and my findings became clearer, I began to find that most of my hypotheses held constant across settings and people. This allowed me to dig deeper into the shared meanings and practices among my participants. Whenever a participant disagreed, or said something that contradicted my hypothesis, I focused on better understanding whether I had in fact missed something or whether the inconsistencies were a product of residents’ differing positions in relation to power and resources. This has also enriched my understanding of activism in the City of God and of how race, gender, and other elements differentially structure opportunities, narratives, and action.

## The Data

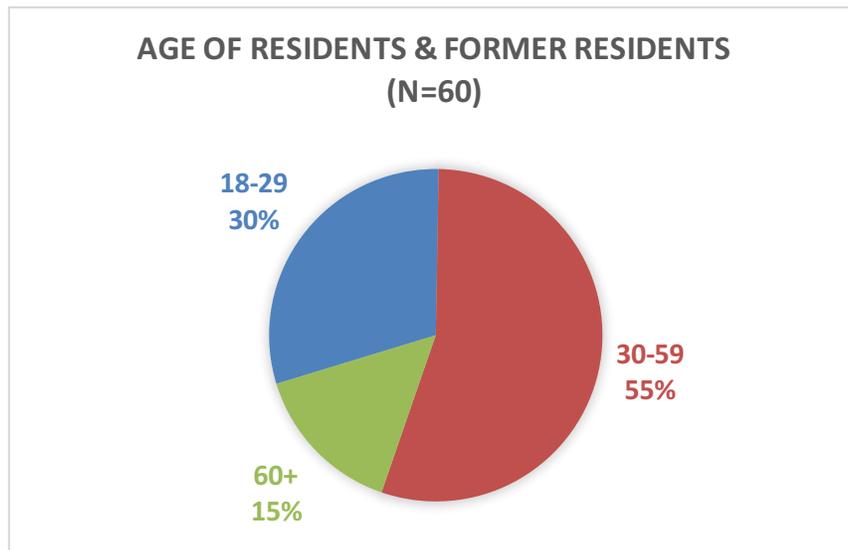
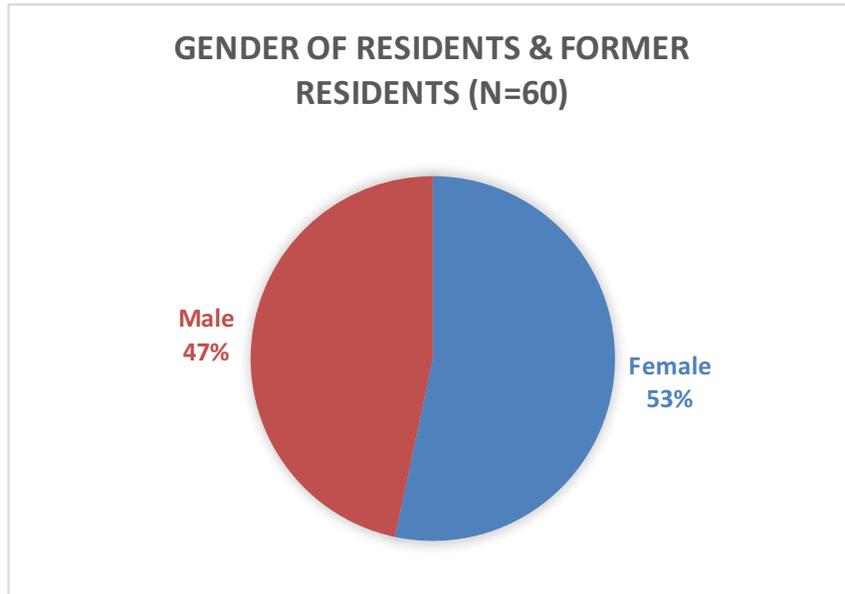
### *Interviews*

During my time in the field, I conducted 105 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 96 unique participants. I recruited participants for interviews based on a multi-entry snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is a common strategy for identifying research subjects, and entails asking primary contacts or gate-keepers to establish connections between the researcher and their friends and family members, who then facilitate contact between the researcher and other social networks (Cohen and Arieli 2011). Since individuals tend to

gravitate towards like-minded people or have networks of people in similar professions or with shared political opinions, I formed ties early on with several participants who varied by race, age, profession, and level of engagement in social mobilization efforts, and then made contacts through these diverse social networks in order to vary my sample as much as possible. Multi-entry snowball sampling is an extremely effective way of meeting residents in a neighborhood like the City of God, where researchers and other outsiders are viewed with great suspicion and cannot randomly approach people on the street. It is also critical for building rapport and trust with residents which can, over time, allow for a more open and detailed exchange of information about experiences and opinions.

Of my total interview sample, fifty-nine of my interview participants, or 58%, were residents of the City of God or former residents who remained actively engaged in the neighborhood by volunteering at local agencies or regularly visiting family members. Just over half of my sample of residents and former residents was female (53%). Eighteen of them (30%) were between ages 18 and 29, thirty-three (or 55%) were between ages 30 and 59, and the remaining nine (or 16%) were 60 or older, which roughly corresponds to the age breakdown in the City of God. I did not systematically ask residents to identify their racial identity because I was primarily interested in studying race as a structural issue and, later, as a social construct employed by residents for political reasons. While I did ask many participants about their racial identification, I focused these questions on activists who politicized their racial identities and do not therefore have the data for my entire sample. However, only a handful of my participants had the purely Caucasian skin color and features typically associated with whiteness. Based on the many conversations I had with participants about their racial identity, I believe that the vast majority of the residents I interviewed would likely have identified as “pardo” (roughly

translated as brown or mixed-race) or black.



The remaining thirty-seven interview participants consisted of state employees—including elected officials, social workers, a police officer, and administrators—staff at NGOs outside the City of God that focused on urban or national-level issues, scholars from Rio de

Janeiro’s universities, residents of other favelas, and a small business owner and religious leader who worked in the City of God:

**Interview Participants**

City of God residents	54	52%
NGO staff	13	13%
State employees	12	12%
Former residents	6	6%
University researchers	5	5%
Residents in other favelas	4	4%
Outside business/religious leaders	2	2%
Total	96	100%

Among my participants who were neither residents nor former residents, sixteen of them were actively engaged in activities in the City of God and entered the neighborhood on a near-daily basis and many had been working in the neighborhood for many years. They provided a valuable insider/outsider lens on the security and political dynamics of the neighborhood, though for the most part their perspectives were similar to those of residents. The twenty-one “outsiders” with little direct engagement in the City of God, such as NGO workers, state officials, academics, and residents of other favelas, offered a perspective of security and politics from a broader lens. My interviews with them allowed me to better situate my findings from the City of God within the larger urban context and to consider the ways in which my findings varied from or coincided with power dynamics and collective organizing efforts in other favelas.

In addition to these formal interviews, I had informal, yet no less insightful conversations with dozens (if not hundreds) of other City of God residents, many of whom I came to know very well but opted not to formally interview if I did not believe it would contribute any new information. I also engaged in many spontaneous conversations with people outside the City of God who I met at events related to security in favelas, protests and marches, cab rides, homes of

friends and acquaintances in middle-class areas, and strangers I met during leisure activities across the city. The unfolding political and security landscapes of the city, and in favelas in particular, are subject of great debate and discussion, and simply mentioning that I lived in the City of God would often spark heated conversations with outsiders eager to share their two cents about the UPP, the drug trade, violence, corruption in politics, the work ethic of favela residents, and much more. Many “cariocas,” the popular term for Rio de Janeiro’s residents, are quite chatty and opinionated, and the recent political scandals and rampant homicide rates have only fueled already-contentious debates. In many cases, I had to say little in order to learn a great deal about how outsiders viewed the City of God. While their opinions are not the subject of this dissertation, many outsiders provided (sometimes inadvertently) ideas about how to ask my questions differently and how to reflect on the relationship between the City of God and the rest of the city.

### *Participant-Observation in the City of God*

As an ethnographer, I also engaged in extensive participant-observation in spaces and events across the City of God and the city of Rio de Janeiro. These included the homes of many participants, various community-based organizations, community meetings and events, and public institutions (such as the health clinic and the soup kitchen). In my first two field visits, I lived with friends in nearby middle-class neighborhoods, spending all day in the City of God but leaving at nightfall. During the last five of my seven field visits, I lived with Esther and Maria Rita in their home in the City of God, and was able to be a full participant in the neighborhood, which included everyday activities like shopping at the grocery store, getting my nails done, buying our morning bread, and accompanying Esther to friends’ homes around the neighborhood, to the pharmacy and the emergency room, and to her friend’s pizza shop on the

other side of the City of God where Esther sold snacks for a time during 2016. I also participated in dozens of events and activities related to community improvement efforts and social mobilization. These were held in community-based organizations, like Youth Promise, religious institutions, parks, bars and restaurants, and public institutions. I spent a great of time with participants in their homes during parties, family reunions, informal meetings, or just for casual conversation. I also accompanied participants to the health clinic, the emergency room, the youth center, and held interviews at most other public institutions across the neighborhood.

### *Participant-Observation in Political Spaces*

In addition to fieldwork in the City of God, I conducted participant-observation in various other spaces in which security and development in Rio's favelas was discussed, negotiated, and challenged. These included various NGOs—such as Viva Rio, Movimentos contra a Violência, Jornal Nova Democracia, Observatório das Favelas, Centro das Artes da Maré, Luta Pela Paz—as well as several offices of the municipal government, including City Hall. I also attended marches, rallies, and other events related to politics, security, and claims-making across the city. I was also engaged in the broader urban fabric by visiting museums and other cultural and social centers, tourist areas, leisure activities, and homes and events of some middle-class friends. The purpose of these visits was to better understand the debates around security, democracy, and social movements at the municipal level and to situate my findings from my field site in a larger context social, political, economic, and cultural context.

Rio's favelas and their security situations are subjects of widespread debate in just about every setting. Whether riding around in a cab, chatting with young professionals at a baby shower, or observing social interactions at a shopping center or on the bus, the relationship between favela residents and the rest of the city plays a central role. In many cases, non-favela

residents mentioned the City of God or other favelas, or the drug trade, the police, or made comments about inequality in the city even without knowing about my research. Once the people with whom I interacted outside the City of God learned about my research project, it was not uncommon for them to shower me with their (usually unsolicited) opinions about who was to blame for the violence in and outside favelas. My interactions and observations in these sites outside the City of God were therefore extremely beneficial to understanding the context in which City of God's residents were situated, what challenges and possibilities existed beyond their neighborhood, and how they negotiated these.

### *Participant-Observation in Virtual Spaces*

Brazil is considered the most “connected” country in the world, as it has the highest percentage of citizens engaged in social media of any country. This was no exception in the City of God. A 2010 study found that 69% of City of God residences had at least one cell phone, 43% had a computer, and of those, 76% have internet access (Souza 2010). In my own observations, I found that the vast majority of adult residents, and many adolescents and pre-adolescents, had access to a cell phone—many second-hand from friends or relatives—and accessed the internet through inexpensive data plans or at the homes of friends or nearby organizations. Most people had a Facebook account and an account on WhatsApp, a popular internet-based (free) text messaging and call platform. I became an active participant-observer in both of these platforms.

My engagement on these sites had several benefits: (a) it allowed me to maintain contact with participants when I was away from the field; (b) it provided me valuable insight into the virtual practices of City of God's residents and the limits and opportunities for social activism in these non-physical spaces; and (c) it allowed me to keep track of and document the events

deemed important to residents (many of which were also directly relevant to my research) and to track, often in real time, how residents were reacting and responding to these events. Perhaps most importantly, however, social life across the globe exists both in the “spaces of places” and the “spaces of flows,” as so famously described by Manuel Castells (2012). The City of God was best understood as a “multimodal social world” (Garcia et al. 2009), operating in multiple sites of social engagement. To study a geographic neighborhood in its physical realities without examining how its residents interacted in virtual spaces would have been to entirely overlook a critical dimension of its social and political construction (Crang, Crang, and May 1999; Holmes 1997). Conversations that residents had on Facebook and WhatsApp were critical to their gathering of information, sharing ideas, constructing narratives, and planning events, as well as debating issues, engaging political actors, and mobilizing allies within and outside the neighborhood. These were therefore sites of identity construction, narrative-building, and political action. My study would have been wholly incomplete without deeply engaging these platforms.

### Facebook

Most of my participants were extremely active on Facebook. On their personal Facebook accounts, residents posted photos of themselves and their family and friends, special interest videos and news stories, comments about their everyday lives, and posts about myriad social and political issues, in much the same way that people in the United States and other countries are doing. There were also dozens of Facebook pages created by and for the City of God: In 2016, I counted eighty-two pages that had “City of God,” or its abbreviated “CDD,” in the title of the page. They were dedicated to news, cultural or music events or local artists, community-based organizations, religious groups, small businesses, and more. In a neighborhood where formal

registration of a business or organization is not always possible or desirable, having a Facebook page dedicated to the organization helped to “formalize” its presence in the shared understandings of the neighborhood. The fact that so many organizations in the City of God explicitly referenced the neighborhood in their title demonstrated the importance of their socio-geographic embeddedness to their own identity.

These pages had anywhere from a handful of followers to hundreds or thousands; some were created but abandoned (having no new posts since 2014), while others remained extremely active. One Facebook page, which I refer to in my dissertation as “CDD Connects,” had over 80,000 followers by 2017, most of which were likely City of God residents since all of the content was dedicated to the City of God. The page was dedicated to sharing stories about what the founder, “Isabella,” described as “positive things” about the neighborhood, as well as information about social, cultural, and economic opportunities, such as an upcoming vaccine clinic, a sale of discount eyeglasses, various employment opportunities, or the opening of a new pizza shop. Isabella also posted information that could help residents make their way around the neighborhood safely, which included things like the location of shootouts, school or street closings, and the deviation of bus routes during police operations. Other pages shared information about upcoming cultural events, such as “funk” parties, free computer classes, or a dance class for children, among other things.

### [WhatsApp](#)

WhatsApp is an internet-based platform on which residents can exchange text messages, call each other on voice or video, and share information (including images and videos) on text messaging groups. In Brazil, phone plans are extremely expensive; WhatsApp, on the other hand, was free. It required only an internet connection, which residents either had in their homes

or could access in the homes of friends, in local “LAN houses”—small shops with rows of computers and printers where residents could, for a small fee, access different types of technological connectivity—or at community-based organizations or small businesses. Many of Esther’s friends and neighbors would regularly swing by to check or send messages on her wife network. WhatsApp had two popular features: texting between individuals and participation in text messaging groups. Any individual could form a “group” by inviting other contacts; they could then add other administrators to the group, and these administrators could add their own contacts. Once a person had been added to a group, they could send a text message, audio message, image, or video to the entire group. Groups could have up to 500 members, and many did.

The City of God has become extremely connected through these WhatsApp text groups. Most residents with a cell phone were members of dozens of groups. These could include a group for family members, a group for the parents of children who participated in the same afterschool activity, a group for employees of a local business, a group for members of the same church, a group for people organizing an upcoming event, a group for people who had attended the same music concert, etc. Some groups were composed entirely of City of God residents, but most groups had members who resided outside the City of God, such as family members who had moved out of the neighborhood or members of a church or organization located outside the City of God. I had personally been added to dozens of groups in my three years in the City of God, at times by directly requesting that the administrator add me, but more often because my participants saw me as part of that group, because they wanted to introduce me and my research project to the group, or because they thought I would be interested in the information. While the groups were often formed with an explicit purpose, such as to share information about an

upcoming event or an ongoing set of activities, they also became sites for forming relationships, exchanging information about anything from active shootouts to new employment opportunities, exchanging ideas, and constructing new networks. It quickly became overwhelming to keep track of the hundreds of exchanges, many of which said things like “Good morning, everyone!” or “I hope you have a blessed day” surrounded by heart emojis. I therefore did not engage in a sustained, daily analysis of these groups. But I actively monitored them and occasionally contributed to them when I was in the field, and I often accessed them to gain information about major security events, upcoming protests or meetings, and other activities directly related to my research when away from the field.

There were important distinctions between Facebook and WhatsApp that proved valuable to my documenting and understanding of politics in the context of insecurity. For one, while personal Facebook accounts could be used to share information about a range of topics, WhatsApp groups were thematic. Analyzing Facebook allowed me to get a sense of the range of activities, interests, and public discourses that reflected the collective understandings of the City of God. WhatsApp groups, particularly those created for the purpose of social and political mobilization, had a more targeted population and narrative. By comparing how residents engaged in these two different platforms and in different WhatsApp groups I was able to gain insight into how residents altered their discourses and posts for different settings and groups and to identify how political practices were situated within the larger socio-political context of the neighborhood. Secondly, in contrast to the very public nature of Facebook posts, WhatsApp groups were private. One must be invited by an administrator to participate, and one could be removed from the group if they did not follow the informal rules of engagement. While participants sometimes shared the same content on their personal Facebook accounts, on their

organizational pages, and on various WhatsApp pages, some content or discourses were reserved for WhatsApp, where residents could share opinions with less risk (but certainly never no risk) of outsiders reading it. In a context of deep insecurity that operated at multiple levels, what residents did and did not post—and how they framed it—provided valuable information about what was deemed “safe” at different levels of exposure and how residents manipulated their own public discourses for different settings. Most relevant to my project were the rhetorical devices employed by residents to discuss sensitive issues around politics and insecurity in public or semi-public forums. It was especially fascinating to contrast the radical political discourses of participants in private WhatsApp groups and the more muted tones employed on Facebook. Ultimately, engagement in these platforms proved invaluable to understanding how residents in areas of conflict negotiated possibilities for collective social and political action.

After my first visit to the City of God in 2014, dozens of local residents sent me “Friend” requests on Facebook. I considered the option of creating a separate Facebook page for my research, but decided that I did not have time to populate this page, and that whatever I might post on a “professional” page (such as news stories or posts related to sociology or academia in general) would likely isolate (and bore) most of my residents. So I decided to accept their Friend requests on my personal account, and have since used my personal Facebook page as an entry-point to the City of God’s virtual world. This decision has had important implications. For one, being Facebook friends with participants meant becoming more than a passive observer of their online practices, but an active participant in their lives by deciding which of their posts to “Like,” where, when and what to comment, and what to post on my own page. Even when I was not in the City of God, I remained deeply embedded in their networks. At any time, I could log into my Facebook account and see who had posted about what and if any major events were

taking place in the neighborhood. I also received near-daily messages from participants, they commented on almost all of my posts, and tagged me in photos we took together while in the field. I have therefore had to be extremely thoughtful about what I chose to post on my Facebook page, opting to share general interest stories that were unlikely to solicit strong support or contention, and only a few pictures of myself, mostly focused on my family members. Recognizing the disparities in income and access to leisure activities, I rarely posted photos of myself enjoying activities that my residents were unlikely to be able to afford. I also avoided posting anything about my personal situation other than occasional photos of family or friends.

I have not remained entirely “neutral” on my Facebook page, however. As feminist scholars have suggested, neutrality is itself a myth: staying silent on major issues can implicitly suggest an opinion or perspective and can influence participants as much as explicit disclosure about one’s political position. When carefully negotiated, this can be an asset to the research process. Politically, I had much in common with most of my participants, who, by virtue of the topic of my project, were mostly activists deeply committed to racial and gender justice, to equality, to progressive public policies, and to government reform. While participants differed widely about *how* to achieve these changes, they widely agreed that racism, sexism, violence, and social inequality were major issues that needed to be addressed. I therefore opted to express my general opinions supporting social and political initiatives around racial, gender, and economic equality in both the US and Brazil. While this did expose my “biases,” it also created a sense of solidarity between me and my participants, who came to see me as not only a researcher but an ally in the fight for justice. I stayed away from more sensitive issues, such as those related to religion or the specific political debates in Brazil where I knew my own participants had differing opinions. In other words, I carefully weighed which issues would be

embraced by all (or the vast majority) of my participants and refrained from posting anything that might cause conflict.

My deep engagement in these platforms may be perceived as problematic, particularly since most researchers of virtual spaces either gather big data by harnessing it directly from the platform, or conduct observation through “lurking”—looking without engaging participants (Garcia et al. 2009:49). These scholars do not directly interact with the people contributing information to virtual platforms. While these methods give researchers access to valuable information without risking affecting participants’ practices, thereby collecting what might be considered more “pure” data, this data is usually analyzed outside the larger (physical) contexts in which participants operate. Often, the posts and other online practices of participants are taken as an accurate reflection of their actual beliefs or opinions, rather than as a negotiation (either conscious or unconscious) of their own situatedness within larger landscapes of meaning. The “pure” data collected by non-participating scientists is therefore uncontextualized, and can easily be misunderstood or misinterpreted. While, to some extent, my participation on these platforms may have affected some of their practices, it also gave me access to their perspectives, their motivations, and the broader historical, social, and political contexts and consequences of their posts. In other words, I exchanged the possibility of “biasing” the data in order to gain a greater understanding of it. Ultimately, I was only one of hundreds (or thousands) of participants in both Facebook and WhatsApp text messaging groups. While residents were aware of my presence, their decisions about what to post were surely influenced by the presence of hundreds of other people who might read their posts as well. My unique contribution to their consideration about what to post was likely minimal relative to the many other virtual relationships my participants had to negotiate.

In my case, however, I had very little choice but to be a participant. I relied on Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with my participants, to schedule interviews, to learn about upcoming events, and to gain information about shootouts or other security risks that could jeopardize my safety. My research would have been impossible without participating in these platforms. The risks of impacting a site were minimal relative to the high likelihood that the very project would not have happened otherwise.

Furthermore, while my participation on Facebook and WhatsApp did create a number of potential complications that required thoughtful consideration on a daily basis, most of these challenges were similar to those faced by ethnographers in physical spaces, where personal boundaries are constantly negotiated, challenged, and adapted. My identity, my opinions, my interests, my access to resources, my life story, and my personal situation could not be “hidden” any better in person than online. In my own perspective, attempting to operate within either the physical or virtual worlds of the City of God as a “neutral observer” (whatever that actually means in practice) would have come across as fake, disingenuous, robotic, and, worst of all, exploitative. How could I expect my participants to share deep, personal stories about their struggles, to welcome me into their homes and their lives, and to invest in the success of my project if I was unwilling to be authentic in return? I found that by being genuine and emotionally accessible—by acting as a human being rather than as a “unbiased researcher”—I was able to connect with my participants and establish a level of trust and interpersonal reciprocity that would not have been possible otherwise, that gave me invaluable access to information, and that, as I describe below, helped me gain entry to and maintain security in an extremely dangerous area. While this approach was, I believe, critical to data collection, I had a deeper motivation. City of God’s residents had faced multiple experiences of being treated as

de-humanized, stereotyped objects by researchers, administrators, employers, and policy-makers. Even before I arrived in the field, I made a conscious decision to relate to my participants first as people, and only second as research subjects. I therefore acted as a person first, and as a researcher second. While this did create a number of challenges around boundary making and re-making, I believe that my deeply personal approach to my research allowed me to negotiate these consciously, explicitly, and collaboratively with my participants.

## Survey Research

In 2017, I oversaw the construction, execution, and analysis of a large-scale survey across the City of God. The project was funded by a grant from the Office of the Provost at Northeastern University, in collaboration with two faculty members at Northeastern University: Dr. Thomas Vicino, Chair of the Department of Political Science and Dr. Dietmar Offenhuber, Assistant Professor of Art, Design, and Public Policy. I also invited one of my participants in the City of God—Esther’s son Leonardo—to manage the project with me. As I discuss in detail in Chapter 7, Leonardo is one of City of God’s most well-known activists. He is an actor and founded a theater company for City of God residents, where he uses acting as a gateway for talking about issues of racism, sexism, police brutality, and other social issues. He was also a reporter for *O Globo*, Brazil’s largest media conglomerate, on a show dedicated to discussing issues in favelas. He was charged with producing and reporting on special interest stories in the City of God, and has become popular and well-liked by residents across the neighborhood. At the time, Leonardo was unemployed, and, in the spirit of PAR, I wanted to invest as much of our grant money directly into the neighborhood and its residents as possible. Hiring Leonardo to help me manage the project therefore allowed academic resources to be directly funneled into the

research site, gave me and my other team members valuable insight into the power dynamics of the neighborhood and ideas about how to negotiate these, and gave our project immediate credibility among local residents who were surprised and excited to have a local resident in charge of a major research project funded by a private American university.

Our project had two overarching objectives. The first was to design a survey that measured socio-economic development, insecurity, social resilience and political engagement in the City of God and collect a sample that was representative of the geographic, gender, and age characteristics of the neighborhood. The second was to execute every step of the project in a participatory action approach, such that local residents became actively engaged in designing, executing, analyzing, and disseminating the survey and data. To this end, we organized the project into three phases:

#### Phase 1:

In the first phase of the project, conducted in January 2017, Leonardo and I organized five focus groups with local residents. They were widely publicized on the Facebook page CDD Connects and on our social media platforms. We also publicized the meetings with posters and in conversations with our social networks. Each group had between ten and twenty participants from a range of ages, genders, racial profiles, engagement in politics and the social service networks of the neighborhood. Residents also came from all areas of the neighborhood, each of which has unique characteristics. We explained the purpose of our research project to focus group participants, highlighting their role in the construction of the survey questions. We then asked them what they thought were the most pressing issues in the City of God, what they felt were the current challenges in their everyday lives, and what types of questions they felt we should attempt to measure in a survey. Discussions were very open in order to solicit as much

diversity of ideas as possible. I took detailed notes in order to identify common themes across groups, as well as issues relevant to specific groups. In addition to the five focus groups, we also posted these questions on CDD Connects and invited residents to share their suggestions about what questions or topics to include on the survey. In total, we heard from over one hundred local residents.

We then assembled a draft of the survey and invited about twenty local residents to review each question and offer feedback. We edited the survey questions in order to best capture the information that residents felt was most critical or relevant to their everyday experiences. In the end, the survey was similar to the census, but altered to best reflect their exact needs. For instance, while the census asks: “How many children in the household are currently enrolled in school?” our survey also asked “How many children in the household missed school in 2016 due to security issues?” The final survey contained 110 questions about health, education, mobility and transportation, housing, social activities, religious, and social and political engagement.

## Phase 2:

In the second phase of the project, conducted in March 2017, we hired fifteen local residents and trained them to administer the survey. Over the course of eight full days, our team set out on foot to interview residents. We used what I call a “beehive approach,” walking the streets as a cluster with the same maroon t-shirts with our project logo so residents would take interest in the project and feel more willing to talk to us. Each day we covered a different geographic area of the neighborhood. Researchers were asked to randomly select households from each street in order to attain the greatest diversity and representation of the population. They also interviewed people they ran into sitting on sidewalks or working in small businesses. Respondents had to (a) be 18 or older and (b) identify themselves as a resident of the City of

God. In total, we interviewed 965 people. We also made the survey available online, and an additional 24 respondents filled out the survey this way, for a total of 989 responses.

Research in areas of armed conflict is not without danger. While the primary motivation for hiring local residents, rather than trained research assistants from local universities, was to invest money into the neighborhood, we also recognized that local residents had critical knowledge about how to negotiate the risks in the City of God and had extensive social networks with other residents that would lend credibility to our project and minimize the chances of being questioned by drug traffickers. Before beginning the street surveying, Leonardo, Esther and I spoke with the managers of the four main drug sales points across the City of God to explain the project, show them the survey, and get their permission to survey respondents in the streets. Drug traffickers readily agreed. For one, they knew (or knew of) Leonardo and Esther and trusted them to not ask any questions about the drug trade or other criminal activity on the survey. In fact, we had been careful not to include any survey questions about criminal activities, focusing instead on social development and “insecurity” in a general sense. The insider knowledge of local residents had therefore been vital to question design.

Furthermore, drug traffickers were also local residents; their children attended local schools and their relatives sought medical care at local health clinics, and they hoped our survey might promote better social services. In the end, many drug traffickers approached our researchers to ask what we were doing (apparently the managers had not properly communicated to them about the survey). We explained that we had received permission (by their manager), and then told them about the survey and invited them to participate. In several cases, drug traffickers opted to be interviewed for the survey. And on several occasions, drug traffickers warned our team members when they suspected the police were about to enter and engage in

gunfights so our researchers could safely relocate to another area.

### Phase 3:

After collecting survey responses, I returned to the US to clean and analyze the data. I returned in August 2017 and worked with Leonardo and two other residents to prepare a brochure with some of the most compelling descriptive statistics from each of the themes of the survey. The language in the brochure was simple and straightforward, and it contained many colorful images and graphs that made the content accessible and interesting. We then made 3,000 copies of the brochure, re-hired our research team, and spent two days walking across the City of God handing out the brochure, reminding residents about our survey, and explaining some of the results. We also put together a website with additional data in case residents wanted more information and invited them to attend a presentation and discussion of the data. We encouraged residents to share the findings of the study with friends and family members. When residents asked what the benefits of the study were, we explained that we now have concrete data proving that the issues they know to be a problem are, in fact, serious and widespread. We also encouraged them to call their elected officials and share the data with them and demand more investments in the neighborhood. One of the common lines our researchers used was: “Next election cycle, when a politician comes offering you a few bags of rice to vote for him, give him this brochure and tell him this is what our neighborhood needs.”

In addition to handing out the brochures, we held several presentations of the data, which were followed by an analysis of the data and a discussion of how it could be used. For Leonardo, it was very important to democratize the data: to make it accessible to as many different people as possible (not just institutions) so that people could use it in many different ways and for different purposes. I also presented the data to the Secretary of Environment, who

was in charge of public housing and infrastructure in the city.

In the next phase of the project, we will publish our findings in various formats, including academic journals as well as a more accessible report in Portuguese that local residents and other activists and academics can access and use. For instance, Geovana, one of the activists I discuss in Chapter 6, invited Leonardo and me to submit an article in Portuguese about this project to an edited volume called “The Dictionary of the Favela,” under contract at FGV, one of Brazil’s leading editors. It will be published alongside articles written by City of God residents on various social issues in their neighborhood. Our survey data has also been featured in two recent news articles in major media outlets in Brazil. In my dissertation, I draw primarily on descriptive data in order to describe the current socio-political landscape of the neighborhood, which is the subject of Chapter 3.

# Chapter 3

## **Violence, Democracy, and the Making of a State within a State:** A Brief History of the City of God

## Introduction

The term “favela” is often translated as “shantytown” or “informal settlement,” translations that tend to imply an empirical reality of informal housing. But this term is better conceived of as a construct. In her discussion of the similar term “slum,” Liza Weinstein suggests that the “slum” is “more a matter of politics than of science” (Weinstein 2014:9). Specifically, it can be used to both justify its clearance and the displacement of people, as well as to make claims for resources and urban rights (Weinstein 2014). While the term “favela” has a set of specificities indigenous to Rio de Janeiro that have since been applied to other poor neighborhoods in Brazil, it follows a similar analytical and political logic. Favelas are, first and foremost, social constructs, in the sense that a “favela” is not in fact a legal term, but a concept with a socially agreed-upon definition produced over history and through social and political processes that has been applied to particular housing settlements. At present, neighborhoods and housing clusters in Rio de Janeiro get labeled “favelas” when they are believed to have high levels of poverty, informal housing, and crime, all of which were historically seen as a consequence of “marginal” cultural and moral dispositions (Davis 2007; Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1984; Perlman 1979). While a recent shift in public opinion and urban politics has placed some of the blame for these socio-political formations on unjust public policies and racial discrimination, the view of favelas as spaces of moral depravity remains widespread. At the same time, many favela residents have begun to embrace the “favela” label as a political statement and a frame around which to make claims by emphasizing their shared, spatialized experiences of vulnerability, exclusion, and mistreatment.

Just as the term itself remains contested, the actual material conditions of the physical spaces known as “favelas” are also constructs: they are products of a lengthy history of political,

economic, and social practices by the state and (mostly white) elites undergirded by racism, class inequality, and other projects of social exclusion. These forces have promoted the spatial segregation of poverty, housing informality, insufficient resources in healthcare, education, formal employment options, and the physical violence of the drug trade and the military police. Taken together, I argue that favelas are the spatialized consequences of *structural, symbolic, political, and criminal violence*, all of which have been central to the process of state-building and Brazil's bumpy road to democratic governance. In this chapter, I draw on print and oral histories to sketch the historical trajectory by which these four forms of violence have produced the material, symbolic, and political realities now present in the City of God. But first, let us define each of these concepts.

The term structural violence was first introduced by Johann Galtung in his article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," published in 1969, in which he proposed an extended definition of violence as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is" (Galtung 1969:168). Many years later, Paul Farmer's extensive work on preventable diseases in Haiti demonstrated how poverty, gender inequality, income disparities, and a host of other factors conspired to limit Haitians' access to the care and services necessary to live a healthy life (Farmer 2004). Building on the work of Galtung and Farmer, *I define structural violence as the activation of economic, political, and social mechanisms in both history and present that produce and reinforce unequal relations of power between groups and result in scarcity of economic, social, and political resources among oppressed groups.*

The concept of symbolic violence was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, who suggested that material differences between groups tend to function as signs of actual differences between them,

wherein people subconsciously come to see social status and lifestyle as innately connected; groups with less material resources are seen as responsible for their oppression due to their own choices (Bourdieu 1989). These shared beliefs not only legitimize inequality but conceal the structural violence that undergirds it (Bourdieu 1998). Building on Bourdieu's writings, *I define symbolic violence as a shared vision of society that perceives a group's position within material relations of power as natural or legitimate based on socially constructed identities or assumptions about lifestyles choices.*

In contrast to structural and symbolic violence, which often operate in subtle or indirect ways, *political violence is defined here as violence perpetrated by the state or by actors on behalf of the state apparatus.*<sup>3</sup> This can include violence perpetrated by national armies or domestic police forces, as well as vigilante or para-military groups that are financed by the state or that operate with legal impunity. Finally, the term criminal violence accounts for all forms of physical aggression committed by either state or non-state actors, that violate the law or that were not conducted with explicit permission from the state. In practice, there is a great deal of overlap between these forms of violence, and a single event could fit multiple categories. I therefore am more concerned with thinking about categories of violence analytically (rather than empirically) in order to highlight how both direct and indirect forces conspire to harm favela residents—physically and otherwise—as well as to prevent their social and economic mobility and their ability to take full advantage of their rights as Brazilian citizens. At the same time, as this chapter will demonstrate, one form of violence might in fact function to prevent the other,

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that non-state actors can, and sometimes do, engage in violence aimed at enacting regime change. This can include coups led by civilians or defecting military officers, as well as violent revolutions, riots, or rebellions. For the purpose of this analysis, I do not include these forms of violence in my definition because the perpetration of violence *by the state* is what motivated much of City of God's activists. However, in other analyses a broader definition of political violence could be warranted.

demonstrating that the effects of state-building and democratization produce a complex landscape of both coherent and contradictory patterns of violence that both limit and open possibilities for non-violent collective action.

Just as violent forces do not always follow similar trajectories, neither have Rio's favelas. While favelas<sup>4</sup> share certain characteristics, they are also extremely heterogeneous. Favelas can range in size from a few hundred residents to Rocinha's 200,000+ residents. Many favelas are located on steep hillsides, but some are on flat ground; some favelas border Rio's business district, wealthy neighborhoods, or tourist sites, while others are located over 50 kilometers from the downtown and surrounded by swampland. The first favelas were constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, while others are only a few years old, and others are still in the making. These historic and geographic differences have contributed to differing experiences of violence, as each favela has a unique history of violent contestation between drug traffickers, the military police (and, in some cases, the national army), and the *milicia* (para-military vigilante groups). While some favelas experienced or continue to face heavy fighting between rival drug factions or between drug traffickers and *milicia* groups, others have been run by the same group for decades. These areas often have a more stable security landscape (i.e. fewer shootouts), but local drug lords are also more likely to have absolute control over local political institutions (Arias 2017). There is, therefore, no "representative" favela. While favelas tend to share some attributes or stereotypes, to presume that a study of any one favela could speak to realities across favelas would be to falsely claim generalizability.

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, the term "favela" will be used without quotations to denote the housing settlements widely called "favelas" by Rio's residents both within and outside these areas.

Rather than attempt to generalize my findings from the City of God across favelas, I am more interested here in describing how the City of God is situated—historically, politically, economically, and socially—in the larger context of the city and other favelas. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate how the multiple relationships between democracy and violence in Rio de Janeiro have produced the current landscape of insecurity and social (under)development in the City of God. Since the rest of this dissertation is dedicated to understanding the constraints and possibilities for collective action in the context of civic warfare within national democracy, it is vital to consider the multiple ways in which violence has become embedded in the making and withering of democracy since Brazil became an independent nation in 1822. Over the last two centuries, Brazil’s transformation into a nation-state has incorporated different features of liberal democracy, but often in an uneven and non-linear trajectory, culminating into a state form that Theresa Caldeira and James Holston call a “disjunctive democracy” characterized by a wealth of universal rights, but enormous disparities in the enforcement of these rights (Caldeira and Holston 1999). An overview of Brazil’s trajectory towards democracy reveals an ongoing reliance of every regime on exclusionary policies and practices and on violent tactics to impose these policies. At the same time, the “violence” of the poor has been utilized as a justification for increasingly harsh policing and penal policies (Wacquant 2003), and all of these combined have paved the way for the explosion of armed conflict in favelas and, more specifically, in the City of God (Zaluar 2004). In this chapter, I hope to unravel these intertwining threads in order to identify the different, but overlapping, relationships between violence, democracy, and state-building and how they are rendered visible in the City of God.

While historical accounts of democracy and violence are often described from a birds-eye view that focuses on major transitions and events, I am interested in also documenting how City

of God's residents experienced political, economic, and social changes and continuities. To this end, I offer a historical narrative of the City of God that is both situated within a larger landscape of state-making and urban planning but directly experienced by local residents. I therefore draw on the first-hand accounts of my participants to tell the history of my field site. I do this for several reasons. For one, the telling of history is never value-neutral: the author decides which facts to leave in and take out based on what they perceive as relevant. The consequence of this is usually an overemphasis on "official" facts, like laws, court cases, regime changes, public policies, or economic changes at the exclusion of the stories of lived realities of these changes. In my view, both are important. Second, by drawing on the stories of multiple participants, I hope to show that history cannot be viewed from a single account; it is better understood through multiple perspectives and experiences. Third, "real" historical facts sometimes matter less to the present context than the ways history is interpreted and translated into contemporary social meanings. Both individual and collective memories play a powerful role in shaping discourses and practices in the present, and an understanding of how history was remembered is critical to understanding present-day behaviors and attitudes among City of God's residents.

To this end, I draw on the stories of three women in the City of God with whom I formed close relationships: Esther, Luz, and Geovana. I chose them for several reasons. For one, all three resided in the City of God for most of their lives and were especially adept at recalling detailed moments and facts that many of my other residents described more broadly. They also represent a diversity of locations—racial, socioeconomic, geographic, and political—within the neighborhood. Esther remained mostly outside the political or activist circles of the City of God, focusing her efforts instead on evangelizing neighbors or providing them individual assistance as a dedicated member of an evangelical church. But Esther was a keen observer of social changes

and often offered commentary about the ways the state had helped and hurt her neighborhood over the years. Geovana was deeply engaged in the political organization of the neighborhood, serving for many years as the president of a local agency that organized residents to demand housing rights. She adopted a deeply critical view of state investments and divestments in the City of God, which she saw as a project for maintaining urban inequality and the exclusion of poor black residents from full membership in the state. Luz remained detached from neighborhood institutions, working mostly as an autonomous entrepreneur. She spent many years battling depression and addiction to drugs and alcohol, but had managed to become sober eight years earlier, shortly after discovering a passion for making art. In recent years, Luz had embarked on a mission to gather information about the construction of the City of God and had created a blog to tell its story. The studio in the back of her house overflowed with paintings of the City of God and its residents as she remembered them over the years.

## Before Birth: At the margins of Brazil's democratic project, 1822-1965

While most of this chapter is dedicated to the story of the City of God, the neighborhood's founding in 1965 was preceded by a long history of state-building whose very commitment to liberal democratic values relied, in practice, on the making of socio-political "margins" that signaled who "counted" as a full citizen of the state and who did not (Das and Poole 2004). Violence—including structural, symbolic, political, and physical forms of violence—were critical elements in the making of the modern Brazilian state and the construction of the City of God. Since my participants were not alive or were very young during this period (from 1822 to 1965) I draw on a broader account of the trajectory towards democratization in Brazil, which was centered in Rio de Janeiro, the nation's capital until 1960,

to demonstrate how violence and democracy undergirded the emergence of the City of God. This is followed by a chronological recounting of the City of God's fifty years and concludes with an overview of the current social development landscape. I hope to contribute to what Veena Das and Deborah Poole call an "anthropology of the margins," wherein the state itself—its practices, places, and languages—is rendered intelligible by accounting for those that have been excluded from it (Das and Poole 2004). When framed in this way, Rio's favelas can be viewed as the "exception [that] is a necessary component of the rule" (Das and Poole 2004:4). In other words, the construction of the City of God and the exclusion of its residents should be viewed as integral to the making of the Brazilian state and determination of who belonged within it.

### Post-independence and the making of a state

As Latin America achieved independence from Spain and Portugal, two forces spread across the continent: liberalism and nationalism. According to John Chasteen, liberalism "favors progress over tradition, reason over faith, universal over local values, and the free market over government control. Liberalism also advocates equal citizenship over entrenched privilege and representative democracy over all other forms of government" (Chasteen 2016:6). Nationalism, or a commitment to an independent nation-state characterized by its political structures and cultural cohesion (Oliveira 1990), provided an "ideological self-defense against imperialism" (Chasteen 2016:6). However, the actual project of determining what constituted citizenship in "the nation" has been an ongoing struggle between economic, racial, and ethnic groups as they demanded inclusion in both the political and symbolic structures of their country (Holston 2008). In Brazil, the dual commitments to liberalism and nationalism have "stumbled forward" over a rocky and windy terrain, arriving nearly two centuries later to a pluralist and robust political

arena and a seat in the global economy on the one hand, but massive levels of corruption, urban violence, and social inequalities on the other (McCann 2008:1–10).

After Brazil achieved independence from Portugal in 1822 it began to establish itself as a kind of representative monarchical government (Carvalho 2001). The Constitution of 1824 established three powers of government: the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Branches. The members of the Legislative branch—composed of the Senate and Congress—were elected through an indirect voting system which, according to Carvalho, accounted for the highest rate of participation than any other country at the time. With the exception of slaves, who would only be given rights after 1888, all men ages 25 and older (or 21+ for men with families) with a minimum income of 100,000 réis—a modest sum at the time—were allowed to vote for “electors,” who then voted for a list of Senators and Congressmen. The king then appointed representatives from this list. In essence, this guaranteed near-universal male suffrage to all non-slave men (Carvalho 2001).

This dramatic expansion of political rights generated new problems for the democratic project. While the king’s control at the national level impeded nation-wide changes, the transition to electoral politics was especially significant at the local and regional levels where oligarchs employed a range of coercive and fraudulent tactics to guarantee the maintenance of their political power. According to José Murilo Carvalho,

The vote had a completely different meaning than that imagined by legislators. It was not about the exercise of auto-governance, the right to participation in the political life of the country. It was about an act strictly related to local disputes. The voter did not act as part of a political society, of a political party, but as a dependent of a local chief, whom he obeyed with more or less loyalty (Carvalho 2001:40).

Elections often transcended into bribery, coercion, and physical fights as local chiefs drew on all possible tactics to ensure a victory. Voters, in turn, came to view elections as an

opportunity to gain needed materials, such as a new pair of shoes, building supplies for their home, or a job in government. To address the deep corruption in the voting system, legislators made two major changes in 1881: they eliminated the “elector” middle-men, making voting direct, and they required voters to be literate. While, in theory a literate public was necessary for informed political participation—one of the core principles of modern political theory and which inspired public education across Europe and the United States—in Brazil, where educational opportunities were scant, 90% of previous electorates were excluded. The absence of accessible education and other social supports prevented Brazilians from accessing their political rights (Fischer 2008; Marshall 1950).

In 1889, Emperor Pedro II was overthrown in a military coup and the government was declared a republic. Voters, rather than the king, elected state “presidents,” which contributed to a decentralized national landscape that at once offered voters greater access to state representatives but also contributed to the formation of solid oligarchical states (Carvalho 2001). Oligarchs solidified their control over local politics through similar devices as in the past, including voter fraud during elections, thereby destroying the legitimacy of elected representatives and the political process itself. Ex-slaves, finally freed one year earlier in 1888,<sup>5</sup> remained unable to access the right to vote, but this time due to illiteracy. Ultimately, the expansion and contraction of political rights during the 19<sup>th</sup> century did little to effectively include the population into the process of political debate and decision-making so central to early theories of liberal democratic participation as advocated by John Stuart Mill or John Locke. Instead, it contributed to the consolidation of a decentralized oligarchical political system that

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<sup>5</sup> Brazil was the last country in the world to abolish slavery, in large part because slavery was so deeply embedded across Brazilian society, permeating all regions of the country and across most socioeconomic levels (Carvalho 2001).

hinged on patronage politics sustained through clientelism and violence. It also contributed to a political landscape in which only free, literate men were given full political rights, thereby excluding women, blacks, and most poor men.

Even worse, however, Brazil's early republic hinged on the violent repression of populations deemed "threatening" to the symbolic and social order often through a process of "pacification" by the National Army that was based, in theory, on suppressing insurgent rebels in order to "civilize" them but, in practice, usually resulted in their slaughter (Rodrigues 2016). Freed slaves were especially vulnerable. While some newly freed slaves stayed on plantations as (poorly) paid workers, many fled to start their own colonies, known as "quilombos."<sup>6</sup> Quilombola communities survived through subsistence farming and small trade with other colonies, and provided its residents with the freedom to practice their own cultural or religious practices, including Candomblé, a spiritist practice common in Africa. Ilka Leite argues that for many contemporary Brazilians, the quilombo represented a form of social organization and a struggle to be recognized as a political entity within the state (Leite 2000). For the new Brazilian state and white elites attempting to gain and maintain power within it, however, the quilombos were viewed as an affront to Brazil's political, economic, and social order and were deemed threats to national security (Reis 1996). Brazil's first national police force was formed for the explicit purpose of quashing such "internal enemies," paving the way for an ongoing reliance on the state's military apparatus to promote national security and state-building by killing its own subjects (Husain 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> The term "quilombo" references the Mbundu term "kilombo" from the Congo-Angola region used to describe communities of young warriors from various ethnic groups who had been uprooted from their home villages (Reis 1996).

Exclusionary and violent politics perpetuated in the name of liberal democracy and nation-building by the new Brazilian government gave rise to new sets of challenges to national stability and the democratic project. Rio de Janeiro's first "favela" for instance, was built on the Morro da Providência (Providence Hill) by former slaves working in plantations, homes, or the commercial districts of the city who needed to live close to the city but could not afford formal housing. They were joined by migrants from the poor northeast state of Bahia, primarily ex-soldiers from what had become popularly termed the Canudos War of 1887. When a group of around 15,000 poor white and mestizo peasants formed their own colony and declared independence from the state, Brazil dispatched its national army to suppress the colony, ultimately killing all but 150 inhabitants (most female survivors were sent to brothels in Salvador, Bahia's capital). Peter Robb notes that correspondents of the event, mostly working for the Brazilian government, labeled it a war "as if it were a conflict between nations rather than the extermination of a tiny community within a single country" (Robb 2004:215). The soldiers who built their homes on the Morro da Providência—many themselves from poor families—had resisted the war and slowed the army's eventual victory over the dissidents (Valladares 2005). These soldiers were discharged with little access to sustainable employment, leaving them little recourse but to move to Rio de Janeiro to look for work. According to Licia Valladares, these early foundations of Rio's favelas were poignantly symbolic: "The demobilized soldiers of the Canudos War and installed on the Morro da Providência at the same time placed themselves in a strategic position in relation to the Ministry of War and remained submissive to it in the hope of receiving their late pay" (Valladares 2005:29). Poverty, dependence on the state, and resistance to it coexisted in tension in Rio's favelas.

As Brazil's violent democracy moved forward throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rio's favelas and its inhabitants increasingly became the sites of exclusion against which new ideas of nation and political belonging were constructed. The decentralized system of the new republic placed great national power in cities, and Rio de Janeiro—the nation's capital until 1960—became the central region for the making of the nation. In contrast to other cities, the city of Rio de Janeiro did not have direct elections until the capital was relocated to Brasilia in 1960. Instead, decisions for the city were made by the Federal Senate, which in practice often resulted in weak oversight of city issues and a haphazard approach to urban planning (Osorio et al. 2015). At the same time, Rio de Janeiro became the stage on which national policies and experiments could be implemented and evaluated. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, debates over rights and citizenship in Rio took on meaning beyond urban contestation and into the national realm.

At the turn of the century, Rio was a populous, diverse, and rapidly transforming metropolis. Over one third of residents were of African descent, thirty percent were foreign-born, and twenty-six percent were migrants from other Brazilian states. Technological advancements in electricity, sewer systems, roads, and other infrastructure meant that previously informal and haphazard auto-construction of homes required more planning and cohesion. Brodwyn Fischer notes that the European influence over racial and social ideologies and growing urban inequality “helped to convince many elite Cariocas that new forms of social regulation—of criminality, of public health, of entertainment, even of architecture and urban design—were necessary to make Rio a fully ‘civilized’ city” (Fischer 2008:23). Rio's politicians and bureaucrats took the role of refereeing in this charged environment. Their decisions, Fischer argues, “laid the foundations for a strikingly bifurcated form of urban growth, both deepening and broadening colonial inequities” (Fischer 2008:23). By 1940, for instance, the number of

white residents in each neighborhood was closely correlated with the streets with urban services in 1933.

Medical advances in epidemiology merged with racialized narratives about the prevalence of filth and decay in black communities to motivate the tight regulation of “cortiços,” or ramshackle tenements which housed freed slaves, rural migrants, and foreigners unable to afford more formal housing in more development areas of the city. Eventually, the commitment to “sanitizing” cortiços turned into a mandate to destroy them altogether. The anti-cortiço campaigns took full force between 1902 and 1906 under Rio de Janeiro Prefect Francisco Pereira Passos, who razed shacks to make room for “wide avenues and sumptuous belle époque architecture” in an effort “civilize” the city by imposing a Haussman-style urban architecture that prioritized the interests of urban developers and elites (Fischer 2008:35). Cortiço demolitions were aided by national and city codes that allowed, for instance, for private property to be seized by the government “for the public good,” or that outlawed housing structures made of wood, among others. However, as Licia Valladares notes, while laws could be used to justify the removal of cortiços, during most of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century these housing settlements, particularly those not located in areas under development, were ignored and allowed to grow with little state intervention (Valladares 2005).

### The Vargas Era and the Rights for the Poor

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rio de Janeiro witnessed a period of rapid transformation when industrialization, urban migration, and technological advances resulted in dramatic urban growth, new cultural forms, and populist politics (Fischer 2008). Rio’s population tripled between 1920 and 1960, to over 3 million inhabitants; satellite cities around the metropolis began to emerge to accommodate the burgeoning population. Urbanization in Rio

was a result push and pull factors tied to global changes. For one, privatization of rural land and the consolidated control of agrarian oligarchs over rural Brazil had rendered many peasants landless and poor. Additionally, the Great Depression had begun in the United States, prompting Latin America's large economies—which to this point had mostly relied on exports of raw materials—to shift to import-substitution industrialization (ISI). Rio de Janeiro expanded industrial production dramatically, focusing on textiles and steel, among others.

While new industries took off in the 1940s, the labor market expanded, but it could not provide enough formal, decently paid jobs to accommodate the growing population. Descendants of former slaves and migrants from Brazil's northeast rural states could not afford formal housing. The number of dwellings classified as shacks increased five-fold—from around 50,000 to 220,000—between 1940 and 1960, and the number of recognized “favelas” (defined as having 50 or more shacks), grew from 59 in 1960 to 147 in 1960. Population growth in the absence of sufficient jobs or government services contributed to the continued expansion of Rio's favelas. The anti-cortiço movement of the 1920s and 30s, which tended to focus on a few shacks at a time, spiraled into a city-wide sentiment that favelas had become an urban “problem” that needed to be addressed seriously, systematically, and scientifically through a process known as “urbanism” (Valladares 2005:43). The 1940s were the beginning of a long period of investigation and documentation as urban planners, social workers, health professionals, demographers, and academics sought to better understand the conditions within informal settlements (Valladares 2005). In 1949, the city administered the first “Favela Census,” which helped to demystify many misconceptions about favelas. For instance, favelas were found to have one eighth the number of residents as predicted, and rates of literacy were much higher (53%) than was popularly presumed. As Janice Perlman argued, the perception of favela

residents as culturally, socially, or morally distinct from or “marginal” was a myth: in many respects, favela residents were integrated into the fabric of the city, albeit excluded from it economically and politically (Perlman 1979).

Rio experienced major political transitions at the same time. In 1937, Getúlio Vargas overthrew the “old republic” and established a dictatorial civil regime called the “New State.” Backed by the armed forces, the first Vargas regime outlawed political manifestations, censored the press, and imprisoned “enemies of the state” (Carvalho 2001:113). Despite this, Vargas had widespread support from the people thanks to his promises of electoral and social reforms and a fierce nationalist agenda that rejected the traditional oligarchical structure and the historic control of agrarian elites. Vargas expanded the franchise to women, lowered the voting age to 18, and implemented new measures to make voting secret and less fraudulent, which increased voter participation but did not significantly alter clientelist practices. Vargas also helped to centralize state power, interfering to rescue the failing coffee economy. Civil rights expanded as well. New labor rights included an eight-hour work day, restrictions on child labor, the implementation of work authorization cards, and a national minimum wage. Retirement and pensions also became legal rights. Ironically, the greatest expansion of political and civil rights in Brazilian history took place under dictatorial rule.

In contrast to the previous approach of disengagement with informal settlements, Vargas espoused an image of “father of the poor,” by seeking to recognize and regulate the poor. Under Vargas’ leadership, Rio de Janeiro’s municipal government passed the 1937 Construction Code addressing the “extinction of anti-hygienic housing,” which prohibited the existence of favelas, officially defined as “conglomerates of two or more hovels regularly arranged or in disorder, built from improvised materials and in violation of the dispositions of this decree” (Valladares

2005:52). On the one hand, the Construction Code of 1937 officially recognized favelas as a type of urban space present in the Federal District (Valladares 2005:63). On the other hand, the regulations for legality set by the Construction Code were beyond the reach of the urban poor, and with few resources guaranteed by the state to assist dwellers in these informal settlements, the illegal status of the poor was formalized.

At the same time, labor laws did not apply to informal or autonomous workers or to domestic servants, thereby excluding much of the favela population from labor protection. As a result, the working and middle classes were the main beneficiaries from the opening of the political system and increased legal protections. Ultimately, the urban poor were not legally excluded from Brazil’s expansion of rights. Rather, the complexities of the bureaucratic state apparatus and the lack of social infrastructure (hospitals, schools, ect) in favelas impeded the urban poor from securing the legal documents—birth certificates, land titles, employment papers, etc—needed to benefit from many of the entitlements and protections guaranteed by the constitution (Fischer 2008). As a consequence, demands for infrastructure and social services came to occupy the core struggle for favela residents’ inclusion in the social, political, and economic fabric of the city and access to the political and civil rights that were, in theory, universal.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Major state policies towards favelas</b>
1930s	Early process of the “favelization” of Rio de Janeiro and the recognition of the existence of the favela with 1937 Construction Code
1940s	The first proposal of public intervention with the establishment of “proletarian” parks
1950s to early 1960s	Uncontrolled expansion of the favelas supported by a growing populist ideology
Mid-1960s to end of 1970s	Removal of favelas during the authoritarian regime
1980s	Favela urbanization projects under the Banco Nacional de Habitação

	(National Housing Bank)
1990s	Urbanization of the favelas, spearheaded by Rio de Janeiro's municipal government through the project Favela-Bairro

Table translated from Valladares, Licia. 2005. *The Invention of the Favela*. P. 23

By the 1940s, the lack of political rights began to weigh on Vargas' power. In 1945, Vargas was deposed by his Minister of War, only to ascend to power again after a democratic election in 1950 with widespread support from urban workers. This early era of populist politics, in Brazil as well as Argentina, Peru, and other Latin American countries, both expanded and challenged democratic governance. On the one hand, Vargas' election reflected widespread entry of the "masses" into politics; on the other hand, the masses remained dependent on Vargas and other political leaders, whose handing out of social rights came to be seen as a favor reliant upon party loyalty. According to Carvalho, "the citizenship that resulted from this was passive and 'receiving' rather than active and based on the making of claims" (Carvalho 2001:130). In any event, Vargas' second regime spearheaded a new wave of political rights, including regular elections for the president of the Republic and national and regional legislative posts, freedom of the press, and freedom of political organization. These remained in place between 1946 and 1964, when a military coup dramatically reversed democratic progress in Brazil.

### Fighting Back: Early Social Movements

While global, national, and municipal changes conspired to exclude Rio's poor from economic and political advances during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some important advances were made as well. According to Brodwyn Fischer's tempered account of citizenship in Rio de Janeiro, "legal modernization allowed some poor people, at some times, to use rights to navigate Brazilian society more effectively" (Fischer 2008:10). For instance, as the electorate in favelas expanded as literacy rates rose among the urban poor, politicians were required to at least

give the appearance of advocating for the causes of favela residents. Their support was inconsistent, however, and usually relied on a clientelist system of exchanging favors for votes. Politicians operated in an old-fashioned populist fashion called “water-spigot politics,” wherein local bosses “registered voters and brought out supports and politicians, usually through intermediaries, by granting small concessions” (60-1), though these social services were usually inadequate and distributed based on political loyalty rather than need or right. In this system, charisma supported by the appearance of understanding the needs of the “morro,” (the “hill,” a popular term for favelas), was critical to election. Evidence of this commitment could be backed by news images of visits to the favelas, the implementation of a social project in a favela, or forming relationships with favela community leaders. Similar to populist politics at the national level, favela politics relied on the loyalty and gratitude of favela residents and a performance among charismatic politicians of a patronizing commitment to the needy (Gay 1993). While individuals could gain access to services and entitlements through their connection to political leaders, the political machine was something to be manipulated by savvy and corrupt actors rather than a legitimate or effective vehicle for attaining collective social needs.

Despite these obstacles, favela residents made their voices heard by sending letters to politicians, engaging in demonstrations, and conducting interviews with the press. Increased attention to the “favela problem” had also given birth to a counter-narrative of favelas as spaces of hard-working people with few resources and, for some more radical advocates, as a creative solution to the drought of urban housing and infrastructure. Communists had come to see favelas as sites for popular mobilization, both before and during the military dictatorship, and members of the Catholic Church had begun embrace a commitment to helping the poor (Fischer 2008). While these efforts and sentiments mostly led to a scattered and contradictory policy landscape

that at times threatened to evict favela residents and at other times offered some infrastructural improvements, it also resulted in more substantive policy changes. In the 1940s a joint venture between the Catholic Church and the federal and municipal governments resulted in the creation of Fundação Leão XIII which provided widespread social services, including health care, and educational services to favelas in a effort to prevent the spread of communism in some of the largest favelas. Other social services were spearheaded by Catholic organizations with the belief that urbanization was a minimum requirement for human existence, helping favela residents negotiate for electricity, water pipes, public telephones, as well as the organization of neighborhood associations and collective mobilization against evictions. The anti-community undercurrent of these efforts helped to stymie more radical action in favelas, favoring instead a piecemeal and negotiated approach to urbanization (Fischer 2008:76).

Favela residents found some support from increased technological capacity, which helped to bring limited infrastructure to auto-constructed neighborhoods, including paved roads, drainage systems, electricity, and water into many favelas, though often in a patch-work fashion that left out the neediest areas. Two government initiatives—the Social Security Institutes and the Fundação da Casa Popular—undertook several housing initiatives between the 1930s and 1970s, constructing multiple housing projects which, according to some estimates, provided formal housing to over 120,000 poor residents. However, many of these housing complexes were located in vacant areas distant from the city center and often lacked public transportation, thereby isolating local residents. Furthermore, homes went to people with stable jobs and connections to local politicians; the very poor remained excluded from public housing options.

According to Fischer, Brazil's urban poor did not ascribe to a particular racial or gendered identity, but simply as poor people trying to get by in the city, an identity that was

privileged above others. This was in large part a factor of the heterogeneity of favelas. In contrast to the urban “ghettos” of the United States, Rio’s favelas were racially diverse, with a somewhat even mix of white, black, and mulatto residents (though white were the clear majority in most other city neighborhoods). Some favela residents had formal employment, but many engaged in autonomous or informal work. As a result, “poor people’s heterogeneity,” Fischer argues, “did not obstruct some other, more ‘natural’ path toward common identity and collective action; it was instead the defining feature of a loose grouping whose main concerns centered on the uneven incorporation of poor and rural people into Brazil’s economic, social, cultural, and political modernities” (Fischer 2008:4).

While favela residents’ access to infrastructure and other social resources progressed in a scattered and fragmented fashion, the national landscape of rights witnessed a decisive fall beginning in the 1960s. For one, the federal capital was moved from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia in 1960 in an effort by then-President Juscelino Kubitschek to escape, in space and symbol, the old politics by ruling from a newly-built “city of hope,” a utopia for democracy (O Globo 2013), which both removed Rio de Janeiro from the political center of the nation but also decreased economic investments to it. Additionally, a great deal of turbulence in national politics had led Vargas to commit suicide in 1954 in the midst of an economic scandal. By the 1960s, the country had been led by two other leftist presidents, which severely polarized party politics, and the national economy was in sharp decline. With support from Brazil’s National Congress and the United States, who had come to associate all leftist politics in Latin America with communism (Gobat 2013), the Brazilian Armed Forces overthrew president João Goulart in response to his plan to socialize the profits of large companies. Political rights were suspended, and the Congress elected General Humberto Castelo Branco as President. Castelo Branco

promised to return power to national industries, to expand foreign trade, and to promote the political stability deemed necessary for effective economic growth. Neighboring Latin American countries witnessed a similar fate as the anti-communist, pro-capitalist forces conspired to overthrow populist national leaders and impose authoritarian regimes. For the next twenty-one years, Brazil remained under dictatorial rule. It was in this context—of dramatic national transition and a complex and contradictory urban landscape—that the City of God was born.

### 1960s: Urban planning, the City of God, and dictatorship

There is no shortage of stories about the City of God's early years, though few people could retell vivid, detailed, and deeply human stories in the same way as Luz. I first met Luz through her paintings, which I had helped to hang around one of City of God's larger bars in preparation for an open mic poetry event. Her paintings were exuberant: they were large and filled with bright colors and characters. I had been especially drawn to a painting of a shirtless boy of around eight years of age drinking thirstily from a water spigot as he clung tightly to the top half of a 2-liter plastic coke bottle, rows of colorful one-story houses sat in the background a brown clay floor. When Luz arrived at the event a few hours later, I eagerly introduced myself and, after some brief chit chat scheduled to visit her in her "atelier," or art studio, a few days later. Luz's atelier was in the back of her home, a large one-bedroom house with a wide patio behind a thick concrete wall. A painted caricature of a cheerful young girl pulling the sides of her cheeks into a smile to display two missing front teeth brightened the white exterior wall. At age 58, Luz was one of the most cheerful people I met in the City of God. She laughed jovially at the ordinary and the tragic alike; much of her own reality had been so extreme that laughing about it seemed the only logical response. Luz's atelier was large and exploding with hundreds

of canvases in various stages of completion, her art supplies scattered over tables and chairs throughout the room. She had started painting ten years earlier, focusing mostly on portraits of famous people, but had recently begun to paint images of how she remembered the City of God during her childhood.

The painting of the little boy at the spigot, Luz told me, was of one of her neighbors who carried his bucket to the public water spigot in City of God's central park when it was first built in the 1960s and the water system could not keep up with the demand. Luz had remembered the little boy waiting in line, filling his upside-down coke bottle and then pouring that into the bucket, "instead of just leaving the bucket there under the spigot" Luz chuckled. "I would play," she recalled, "I would get water and would go play a bit and I would say, when someone stayed in line, 'so-and-so, push my bucket there, go pushing my bucket up,' and it was like that every day, we had to carry water to fill our tanks, to fill the buckets, because we were also missing water, there were so many people."

Luz had arrived in the City of God in 1964 at age five when the first homes were still being built. Her family had managed to secure a "triagem," or temporary house in the City of God when their home near the city center was washed away by a flood. Luz recalled:

When the rain stopped, then began the moving, people moving, and I remember my father talked to my mother, I remember my mother said, "I don't want to go to that place, I don't want to go to Rocinha, I don't want to," and he said: "Mila...you don't get to choose. We can't choose anything, no, we go wherever they tell us to go," and she talked about the City of God, "Oh but the City of God, how are we going to that place, this place is so far. And he said, "No, this is the closest for us"...and everyone agreed.

Like many others arriving in the City of God in the 1960s, Luz's family had been relocated there after becoming homeless from natural disasters that destroyed their precarious homes in other informal settlements. Many other families had lost their homes to forceful eviction, however. The most notorious case was of Praia do Pinto, an informal settlement on the

beaches of Rio's south zone where police were accused of setting fire to the wooden shacks in order to force families out (Barbosa 2012). In the City of God's first five years, newcomers arrived from sixty-three different favelas, though the majority were from Praia do Pinto and five other settlements. Luz and many other families had been brought to the City of God in garbage trucks, a gesture that was as denigrating as it was practical. Luz once showed me a painting she had made of the day she arrived in the garbage truck with her family: "When I painted this, I was remembering how much fun I thought it was back then to ride in a garbage truck. But then I looked at it (the painting) afterwards, and thought, you know, I think this is a message, that even though they treated me like trash, I'm here surviving, thriving. Their plan to throw me away didn't work."

Unlike most of Rio's favelas, which were auto-constructed by local residents, the City of God was built as a "conjunto habitacional," or housing complex, to accommodate families relocated from wealthier areas of the city. Then-governor Carlos Lacerda had been elected in 1960 on promises to reverse urban decay by "sanitizing" the city from unwanted shantytowns and growing Rio's industrial potential. During his tenure, 140,000 people were relocated, mostly from the areas near Rio's beaches, the business district, and wealthy neighborhoods, and displaced to more distant—and still underdeveloped—areas. The first houses in the City of God were constructed by the "Companhia Estadual de Habitação" (COHAB), the State Company for Housing, with financial support from the "Banco Nacional de Habitação," (BNH), which was founded in 1964 under the Brazil's new military dictator Castelo Branco to "promote construction and acquisition of self-owned homes, especially among the classes of lower income, to increase opportunities for employment and to invigorate the civil construction sector" (Fundação Getúlio Vargas 2009). The housing complex was strategically located in the

Jacarepaguá region, a large area about 30 kilometers from the city's downtown which had been identified as a new site for the expansion of urban industrialization. While the Jacarepaguá region had some commercial areas before the 1960s, most of the land had been used for cultivating sugarcane, coffee, and other types of agriculture, much of which had relied heavily on slave labor. Seventy years later, City of God's new residents were expected to provide the manual and service labor needed to grow these new industries.

The plan for the City of God held some promise, at least in theory, for offering new residents a decent life. Luz had personally interviewed the architect of the City of God and had admired the thoughtfulness and care with which he had approached his design. In addition to individual houses, to which residents would be allowed to earn the legal titles after paying them off at a reduced rate, the City of God had electricity, water and sewage systems, and some paved roads. The Fundação Leão XIII, the first and largest social institution founded in 1947 by national decree to offer social services in favelas, provided residents with schools, a health clinic, food supplements, and social assistance. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the City of God was so-named in order to convince residents to embrace their new home and to commit themselves to building a formal, respectable neighborhood rather than a favela (Marcelino 2013).

Luz's early memories of the City of God, however, were mostly of insufficiency. While the government had built hundreds of houses by 1965, it could not accommodate the number of families being brought in. Luz's family, for instance, had been assigned a temporary house called an "embrião," or "embryos." Luz remembered her father explaining that the government had named them after the barracks made to house refugees in Italy during World War II. It would take her family more than ten years to afford to move into a permanent house.

While the City of God had basic water and sewage systems, and eventually electricity, its infrastructure could not withstand the demands of a burgeoning population. Infrastructure broke constantly, and most homes did not have toilets, walls, or connection to the water and sewer systems. With little support from the government, residents were required to repair, install, and build much of the local infrastructure. Furthermore, transportation had been extremely limited until the installation of a bus popularly labeled “cata mendigo,” or “beggar pick-up” that ran between the City of God and Freguesia, a local commercial town. The City of God had some primary schools, but these too were full by the time Luz arrived. Luz’s mother had paid another resident to tutor her children until she was able to enroll Luz in school at the age of 12, only to have Luz’s father remove her from school a few months later because “women are not supposed to study,” Luz remembered. “Women, women will marry, women will take care of the family,’ he would say.”

“We had no door, no bathroom,” recalled Esther, who had also arrived in the City of God at age five in the first years of its construction. Thanks to her father’s employment and steady income her family had been allotted one of the formal houses that Luz’s mother had so coveted. Before arriving in the City of God, Esther—along with her parents and two siblings—had been living in the “Fazenda Modelo,” or Model Farm, a type of urban refugee camp run by the national army<sup>7</sup>, after her family’s home was washed away in a flood. Esther had described it as a concentration camp, thanks in part to the strict curfew and rules, which forbid residents from leaving with the exception of men going to work, and in part due to the high rates of infant mortality that Esther recollected. “I think they were poisoning us,” she had commented to me on more than one occasion. “The food tasted like kerosene, and children were constantly dying.”

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<sup>7</sup> I was unable to locate any information on this camp beyond what Esther could recall.

Mothers and children had slept on cots under a tent, the men had been required to sleep outside in the open. Esther's mother had finally succeeded in getting a house in the City of God after going straight to a local congresswoman. With her family's support, Esther had attended primary school in a neighboring town.

“What was the security situation like back then?” I had asked Esther during one of our interviews. “Look, things were much better than before,” she had replied, “because today, people have choices of work, they can do formal work or not, but back then you had to have a *carteira assinada*, a formal employment card, because the police would patrol the streets asking for your card. [Men] who didn't have one would get arrested for vagrancy.” Under the dictatorship, police tightly controlled the streets and enforced formal employment, thereby preventing drug traffickers from inserting themselves into the physical and economic landscape of the neighborhood. Police patrols, Esther recalled, also surveilled the streets at night, forcing residents to go home unless they could provide just cause. On the one hand, these restrictions on mobility in the neighborhood curtailed possibilities of mobilization against the dictatorship and subdued some of the early efforts around organized action for housing rights and other neighborhood needs. On the other hand, Esther believed that this police surveillance had made things “tranquilo”—calm—because it had prevented criminal activity and the proliferation of the drug trade. The strength of the state's policing apparatus in the City of God during the 1960s at once restricted residents' political rights while also enforcing public security. To many residents' dismay, this “tranquility” was short-lived.

## 1970s: The “favelization” of the City of God

The security landscape transformed dramatically in the 1970s. The City of God was still expanding at a rapid pace. A government-funded apartment complex went up on the northeast side of the neighborhood, single-family homes were still being built, often on top of the areas that had previously been designated as parks. Residents added extensions and second and third stories to their houses to accommodate their growing families. Clusters of shacks began to emerge as well as people outgrew their homes or new families arrived with no place to live. The “triagens,” which had been initially designed to be temporary housing, were reinforced with more solid materials by residents who had grown pessimistic about a speedy transition to formal housing. Not only was the City of God becoming crowded, but residents tended to cluster in different areas based on the settlements from which they had come. Gangs of local residents—mostly young unemployed men—emerged to defend their “part” of the neighborhood, enforcing strict punishments for residents who trespassed onto a rival gang’s territory. Men from one block who crossed into a rival block could be physically assaulted or even killed, while women ran the risk of being raped. “At that time, the bandits of that period did not have pity for women, no, they would kill women, raped women, it was horrible,” Luz recalled. Gang members engaged in theft and the sale of marijuana. At age 18, Esther had been robbed in front of her home: “They assaulted me and took my watch, took my bracelet, and then they returned it because I said that I lived here, I said: ‘You’re robbing me in front of my own house?’ and they returned my things, it was a silver bracelet and a Cartier watch.”

The patterns of housing expansion in the City of God, which clustered residents from the same favelas into specific blocks, gave rise to a spatialization of violence that has remained integral to the evolution of the neighborhood’s security landscape. As Esther’s story

demonstrates, gangs' control over specific areas—usually of a few blocks—not only punished trespassers but were expected to respect the rights of the residents of their turf. This was in part a strategy for gaining local residents' support, but also because gang members grew up and lived in their blocks. Local residents were their relatives, neighbors, and the owners of the stores where they purchased their food or got their hair cut. In the next forty years, this complex relationship between residents who were not directly involved in gangs and the young men—their sons, nephews, neighbors, students, or friends of their children—who joined the gangs had a profound effect on the social and political dynamics of the area. Integral to residents' security was a *performance of neighborhood citizenship*, wherein one's belonging was constantly enacted by reminding local gangs that (a) they were a resident of *their* block; that (b) they respected gang members' control over the area; and that (c) they were not affiliated with rival gang members. In exchange for a performance of neighborhood citizenship, gangs were expected to, at the very least not attack, steal from, or otherwise harm local residents. This tacit understanding had helped Esther retrieve her stolen jewelry. Though the ways in which this performance of citizenship was managed has shifted along with changes in the security landscape, being a “morador,” a local resident, who skillfully performed neighborhood citizenship would remain the core defense for residents when dealing with drug traffickers even forty years later.

Gang rivalries increased dramatically during the 1970s, as did the atrocities that they committed in the name of defending their turf. Many of these were described in detail in the book “The City of God”—which later inspired the movie by the same name—by Paulo Lins, a former resident of the City of God who had witnessed or heard about the vicious killings by gang leaders. The worst punishments were levied against rival gang members, members of the same gang believed to be planning a “coup,” or residents believed to be collaborating with rival gangs.

Violence was exacerbated by the growing availability of weapons, sold illegally by police officers to drug gangs. Brazil's military regime had commissioned the manufacturing and importation of a massive artillery of guns and heavy weaponry, much of which has found its way into the hands of illicit actors and fueled the escalation of armed conflict between local gangs, as well as between gangs and the military police (Asano and Nascimento 2015).

The regular shootouts between rival gangs and the brutal killings of residents suspected of betraying their local gang leader had extreme consequences for everyday living. Children who had been assigned a school in rival territory risked their safety every time they crossed through; girls in particular were at constant risk of being raped. Stores could only sell to clients in the same gang territory. Residents would often have to walk around the City of God—rather than through it—to access bus routes or main roads. Luz's father, already against women's schooling, had used the growing violence as justification for keeping her locked in their home all day. At age 15, Luz met and quickly married a boy who worked at the local butcher shop moved out of the City of God. While leaving the City of God gave her a reprieve from gang violence, her husband would soon become physically abusive and, after the birth of her three daughters, she was forced to return to her parents' home to escape him. Esther had also tried to escape the violence of the City of God by going to work as a nanny in a nearby middle-class neighborhood at age 15. This had also not lasted long; Esther fled the home at age 17 when her boss' father tried to rape her. While the City of God, like most sites of urban violence, are often examined from the perspective of public insecurity and the threats of drug gangs, the stories of female residents provide a tacit reminder that more intimate forms of violence remained just as pervasive, even if less visible. Both the public threats of drug traffickers and police and the

private threats of abusive husbands, employers, and other men conspired to limit opportunities for women's mobility, education, employment, and autonomy.

While for Luz and Esther the 1970s was a time of great insecurity and limited personal mobility, Geovana remembered it also as a time of early mobilization efforts. Unlike Luz and Esther, Geovana had moved to the City of God ten years later, in 1975, from her home state of Minas Gerais, a large, mostly rural state to the north of Rio de Janeiro, for the explicit purpose of helping the poor after being inspired by the teachings of liberation theology and pedagogy in college. Over the previous two decades, Marxist ideas had begun to spread like wildfire across Latin America in response to growing urban inequality in industrializing cities. Ideas of revolution and equality had inspired guerrilla revolts against pro-capitalist dictatorial regimes<sup>8</sup> and massive protests among poor industrial workers, as well as rural peasants. In Brazil, the dictatorship had briskly repressed labor union activists and other political dissenters in its first year (Carvalho 2001), though Marxist ideas continued to spread, albeit in less visible locations. The Catholic Church—and Catholic universities, like the one attended by Geovana—embraced the fight against political and economic oppression, ascribing to a religious-ideological perspective called liberation theology. This perspective had their start in the late 1800s in Europe when Pope Leo XIII became concerned with the horrible living and working conditions of the urban poor and in a social doctrine called *Rerum Novarum* positioned himself against exploitation (Kirylo 2011). The Catholic church continued to maintain its stance against poverty and oppression through much of the 1900s. In 1968, two conferences were sponsored by Catholic priests in Latin America—one in Peru and the other in Colombia—from which various

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the most successful revolutions included the Mexican revolution in the 1930s and the Cuban revolution of 1959.

official statements were issued decrying the violence of dictatorial regimes and unjust economic policies and advocating that Christians commit themselves to the pursuit of justice. Through the “Pastoral das Favelas,”

That same year, Paulo Freire published “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” which later became one of the most influential texts in Latin American revolutionary history. In it, he laid out a theory of praxis, which required both raising awareness about oppression through progressive education and joining in the fight against it. Freire argued that:

Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture. If what characterizes the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master, as Hegel affirms, true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these “beings for another”. The oppressor is in solidarity with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor — when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce (Freire 2000:49–50).

Paulo Freire had grown up in the northeast city of Recife, Brazil surrounded by poor children, had later attended law school, and by the 1940s had been hired as the Director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service in the state of Pernambuco (Brazil), through which he worked with the illiterate poor who, at the time, were not allowed to vote. He began to develop a pedagogical methodology for teaching both literacy and awareness of structural injustice, which he began to apply on a larger scale when he was appointed director of the Department of Cultural Extension of Recife University in 1961. In 1964, Freire was imprisoned as a traitor by the new military dictatorship and then exiled, first to Bolivia, then Chile, and finally the United States, where he translated some of his work into English and

continued to produce new work until he returned to Brazil in 1980 as a member of the Worker's Party.

During Brazil's dictatorship, universities had been one of the few safe places in which these ideas could be discussed, and they had a powerful influence on Geovana, who decided to leave her middle-class home and move to the City of God with her new husband in order to help the poor in the struggle for their rights. Geovana's husband, a native Carioca, had been working as a seminarian in the Praia do Pinto, an informal settlement in Rio's south zone, that had burned down in the 1960s. When residents were taken to the City of God, Geovana's husband had accompanied them, taking only a brief hiatus to study in the same university as Geovana. Once married, Geovana moved into his small home in the City of God. According to Geovana, she had to lie to her family about where she was moving because, according to her uncle who lived in Rio de Janeiro, "the City of God wasn't worth anything, it's a place of *favelados*, it's dangerous...[He said] that I could move anywhere but there." Only six months later when her mother came to visit did her family learn the truth; by then it was too late to force her to leave.

Geovana recalled feeling very afraid during her first years in the City of God because of the "Mão Branca," the "White Hand," one of several death squads composed of off-duty police officers and other vigilante groups who tortured and killed "criminal" favela residents and political dissidents. Geovana mostly left her house to attend meetings at a local residents' council, the Residents' Collaborative Organization, or RCO, which met at a local Catholic church. At the time, her husband was the president of RCO. In 1976, two months after her son was born, Geovana's husband passed away. Upon her attempt to change the title of his house to her name, she discovered the state of Rio de Janeiro had never provided her husband with the title to his home, though he had paid it off many years early. Geovana discovered that residents

in twenty-four other blocks in the City of God had been similarly denied the title to their homes. Around the same time, residents had heard rumors that developers were planning to tear down the City of God to make room for the growing beachfront elite neighborhood of Barra da Tijuca. Thanks to the rising violence of local drug gangs, several local residents had already been convinced to sell their homes for what Geovana described as “the price of bananas.” In response, the RCO had begun a campaign to convince City of God’s residents not to sell their homes and Geovana joined their efforts as a member of the Housing Commission. That same year, Geovana was elected to her first of two three-year terms as the president of the RCO. Therein began Geovana’s long, and often painful journey into the heart of City of God’s social mobilization efforts over the following forty years.

In the 1970s, most of their activism was aimed at housing legalization. Some of their main strategies included raising awareness about residents’ housing rights by going door-to-door and taking the collective demands of residents to representatives in municipal government and state bureaucrats in administrative positions. The RCO also made demands for the construction of additional public housing and improvements in infrastructure, especially in the distribution of water, trash collection, and a dysfunctional sewage system which ran through open waterways across the neighborhood. These efforts would take off in the 1980s along with the political openings of a weakening dictatorship and a shift in urban politics that favored investments in favelas.

## 1980s: Turf wars and state investments

While the sale of illegal drugs, primarily marijuana, existed in Rio’s *favelas* for many decades, the 1980s witnessed the consolidation of neighborhood gangs and the proliferation of

organized criminal factions (Leeds 1996). The first, and largest drug faction in Rio de Janeiro was called the *Comando Vermelho*, the “Red Command,” popularly referred to as the “CV.” According to Ben Penglase, the CV was the “bastard child” of the dictatorship, a “group of social actors responding to different costs and opportunities generated by a changing criminal marketplace” (Penglase 2008:125). The CV was formed in Rio’s prisons, where people imprisoned for crimes ranging from petty theft to homicide were jailed with political “subversives” in extremely brutal conditions. William da Silva Lima, one of the survivors of Rio’s prison system during the dictatorship, recounted how packs of twenty or more men were squeezed into cells built for five and tortured on a near-daily basis by guards demanding the names of other political dissidents in the name of “national security” (Lima 2016). According to Lima, political prisoners devised a system in which prisoners would collaborate to survive. They also organized political debates and discussed books about wealth, inequality, and political violence. Under the leadership of political activists, prisoners began to organize signed petitions to demand that guards be punished for abusing inmates. They also adopted a code of non-violence amongst each other, except for those who acted in their own self-interest and violated the rules of the collective. When prison administrators attempted to weaken solidarity between prisoners by transferring political leaders to other prisons, these efforts had the opposite effect: solidarity between prisoners spread to other locations. Lima writes:

The repercussion was enormous in the entire system. In little time, the rules of the old Fundão were adopted in the prisons: death to those who assaulted or raped a “companheiro” (a “partner,” the political term used among political revolutionaries); disagreements brought [into the prison] from the streets should be resolved in the streets; violence only if attempting to escape; permanent struggle against repression and abuse (Lima 2016:124).

Prisoners who adhered to these shared practices labeled themselves the “Comando Vermelho,” or “Red Command.” Lima explained the significance of this name:

The chase against us took full steam; we were demonized. The words [i.e. Comando Vermelho] were not innocent: we were a command, which in the language of the military designates the active center, whose destruction is necessary to paralyze the enemy; if that were not enough, we were also red, adjective that awakens old and mortal reflexes in police and the military (Lima 2016:136).

As a collective identity based on notions of solidarity, non-violence (under certain conditions), resistance, and punishment for violators of the collective were becoming consolidated within Rio's prisons, important external changes were also taking place. For one, increasing market de-regulation under the capitalist dictatorship and the strengthening of communication and transportation to, from, and across Rio had facilitated the entrance of mass shipments of cocaine into—and out of—the city. Corruption already embedded in Brazil's electoral and bureaucratic structures made it easy for drug traffickers to pay off guards at the borders with Paraguay, through which they could import the raw material for cocaine from Colombia and Peru, as well as at shipping ports from Rio to Mexico and other areas. Furthermore, by the early 1980s, the strength of the dictatorship was beginning to wane as the “economic miracle” provoked by rapid industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to massive inflation, unemployment, and poverty, sparking widespread discontent. At the same time, many regimes across Latin America had already begun to transition to representative government and pressure was mounting for Brazil's military regime to open elections. By 1984, massive street protests emerged across major Brazilian cities as Brazilians demanded “Diretas Já!,” referring to direct representative presidential elections. The United States and European nations were also coming to terms with the atrocities committed by Latin America's dictatorships. International human rights organizations—with support from activists within Latin America—spread accounts of abuses and called for accountability of repressive regimes and open elections.

With increasing pressure from below and above, Rio's prisoners were being released with renewed contempt for the state, a sense of solidarity, and contacts with profitable drug networks. Rio's favelas became the ideal locations in which to process cocaine and other drugs and prepare them for sale or export. According to de Souza, most of Rio's favelas, located in twisty hillsides, could not be easily accessed by police patrol vehicles; drug traffickers could easily hide their operations (de Souza 2005). Furthermore, informal criminal gangs, like the ones in the City of God, provided drug traffickers access to the manpower of young unemployed young men to process and sell drugs and to provide security and resistance against police. Drug traffickers also adopted principles of mutual respect and community support, wherein they offered residents protection from rape, theft, and other types of criminal activity in exchange for their complicity in the drug trade. Termed the "law of the favela," this primarily required that residents refuse to disclose information about the drug trade to police or other government authorities; at times it also required that they allow drug traffickers to use their homes and other property to store drugs, guns, money, or drug traffickers hiding from the police (Amorim 1993). The code of the CV also required that drug traffickers invest in their communities by helping to mediate conflicts between residents, treating local residents with respect, and providing financial assistance to local social service efforts. As drug traffickers became integrated into local favelas, and local residents became increasingly embedded within local drug organizations, contributing to the neighborhood was not just critical for maintaining residents' complicity; their own parents, children, neighbors, and friends used local schools, health clinics, roads, and stores. While the interests of the drug trade and the needs of local residents often conflicted, at least in principle members of the CV were expected to honor their commitments to the well-being of the community (Zaluar 1994). Thiago Rodrigues argues that this "organizational form fixed their

authority over favelas cariocas through assistance and coercion, the Maquiavellian formula for the maintenance of power that aligns admiration, respect, dependence, and fear” (Rodrigues 2002:105).

While the CV was the first major organized drug faction in Rio, rival drug factions soon emerged. The two most powerful were the *Amigo dos Amigos* (Friend of Friends), and the *Três Amigos* (Three Friends). Fights between rival drug factions exploded in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to many deaths among both armed and non-armed residents. Police invasions of favelas increased and became increasingly aggressive further exacerbating armed conflict. In some favelas and other neighborhoods, retired police officers and firefighters began to provide “protection” from drug traffickers in exchange for heavy fees. Known in Rio de Janeiro as *milicias*, or militias, these para-military groups now control dozens of poor neighborhoods across the city and have become a significant contributor to homicide rates in favelas.

For the City of God, however, the rise of the CV put a needed stop to the violent conflicts between rival gangs. Though the City of God was not technically a favela and did not have the same hillside, narrow alleyways where drug traffickers could easily hide, the growing rates of poverty and unemployment provided them access to a large workforce of young men, many of whom had already begun to engage in criminal activities and drug sales. Furthermore, its location next to many growing middle and upper class neighborhoods provided drug traffickers with easy access to customers who could easily drive in to purchase drugs. Esther recalled when Tubarão—the now-deceased father of one of her son’s friends—was appointed by the CV to consolidate power between rival gangs in the mid-1980s. According to Esther, Tubarão’s grandparents had migrated to the City of God from Italy; his father had later moved to Bolivia, and Tubarão transited frequently between the City of God and Bolivia, which likely facilitated

his entry into the CV and his appointment to run their drug operations in the City of God. Tubarão and other members of the CV forced local rival gangs to come to a peace agreement. Residents were finally allowed to transit across the different parts of the neighborhood. In exchange, gang leaders of each area of the City of God were appointed as “managers” to oversee the processing, distribution, and sale of drugs in their part of the neighborhood. Thus, the CV both unified the neighborhood by establishing their control over all of its “parts,” while also reinforcing spatial divisions through a perverse capitalist logic. For local residents, this was a welcome improvement from the daily shootouts between neighboring rivals, though the consolidation of the CV’s power in the City of God had many problematic ramifications as well.

Two important shifts occurred in the 1980s outside the City of God which conspired to have significant implications for residents’ safety and political access. In both an international and urban context, the War on Drugs was beginning to consolidate, in part as a response to the expansion of the drug trade across South, Central, and North America. There had also been an historic concern among many Americans and Brazilian elites for the moral consequences of drug use, which had in decades past inspired various prohibition laws. In 1986, Ronald Reagan released the National Security Decision Directive on Narcotics and National Security (NSDD-221), in which the United States “officialized its perception that the principle threat to the United States and the occidental hemisphere w[as] viewed as the symbiosis between leftist terrorism and narco-trafficking” (Rodrigues 2002:105). While Brazil was not the primary target of US intervention—Central American countries, which were closer, smaller, and easier to infiltrate received greatest US attention—Reagan’s initiative promoted an ideological shift across Latin America. Allegiance between the US and newly emerging Latin American democracies would rely, at least in part, of states’ willingness to join them in the fight against “narco-terrorism.”

At the same time, Brazil's dictatorship regime was crumbling in response to growing internal pressures and a national debt crisis. In 1982, direct elections were held for state governors for the first time since 1965. The military regime hoped they would win elections, thereby reinforcing their power through "legitimate" means. While many allies of the military regime were elected, opposition parties also won seats, gaining critical access to power. In 1985, the first presidential election in 20 years was held through an indirect electoral vote. President-elect Tancredo Neves died before he could take office, however; José Sarney, the representative of the opposing party who had been listed on the ballot as vice-president to appease the opposition, took office. At the same time, Brazil underwent major economic restructuring in order to accommodate the interests of foreign markets and to address its growing recession. Some measures adopted in the 1980s and 1990s included cutbacks in the labor force, a reduction of import tariffs, increased reliance on contracted, part-time, and temporary employment, and a shift away from industrial production and towards service work (Antunes 2001). The currency changed four times in the midst of six experiments with economic stabilization, and unemployment skyrocketed. Mary Kinzo argues that "the succession of failures not only aggravated the economic and social crisis, but also compromised the capacity of the state to govern, making the problem of governance a permanent reality (Kinzo 2001:8).

However, democratic openings continued to emerge. The literacy conditions for voting were lifted, and rights to expression, press, and organization were reinstated. Brazil's 1988 Constitution was designed through an engaged process and is lauded as one of the most comprehensive and progressive documents in Brazilian history, guaranteeing a broad array of political, civil, and social rights, expanding entitlements related to retirement, people with disabilities, maternity and paternity leave. Penalties for racism and torture were increased. It

also guaranteed universal rights to health, which laid the foundation for the inauguration of a universal healthcare system two years later. In 1989, the first direct presidential election was held. In response to the restructuring of the industrial sector, rising unemployment, and decreased benefits for workers, Brazilian unionism expanded dramatically. In March 1989, 35 million Brazilian workers went on strike and the number of unions grew from 10,000 in 1989 to 16,000 by the mid 1990s (Antunes 2001).

This complex national landscape, of a politically and economically fragile democratic state, new political openings and social movements, and growing external pressure to combat “internal enemies” aligned with the drug trade, had vast implications for the City of God. For one, the police patrols that Esther recalled from the 1960s were replaced with direct and increasingly brutal confrontations with the state’s military police. The tactics used by death squads—of shootouts, torture, and extortion—under the dictatorship were imposed with greater force on Rio’s favelas (Ventura 1994); in response, drug traffickers amassed a growing arsenal of weapons, which further exacerbated the human destruction caused by conflicts between police and drug traffickers and helped to consolidate a territory-based security system, wherein the City of God (and other favelas) became both refuge and battlefield for disputes between state and non-state armed actors (Soares 2005).

The accessibility of drugs became problematic for Luz. In 1984, when Luz was 25 years old, her ex-husband kidnapped her three young children from her mother’s home when Luz was at work. For the next three years Luz tried to locate her children with the assistance of an attorney from the public bus company where she worked as a cashier. During this time, Luz became depressed and turned to drugs and alcohol, addictions that would haunt her for the next twenty-five years. She also worked several odd jobs, including as a domestic assistant, a street

vendor on Rio's beaches, and as a clerk at the bus offices. Finally in 1987, her attorney found her children and secured their return. By then, however, Luz's addiction had become difficult to shake.

Esther fared better during this time. She had secured a job as a nursing assistant at CAPEMI, a large philanthropic organization founded in 1960 by a coronel in the national army and his colleagues with the aim of providing services to members of the military, their families, and residents of neighboring communities. Their headquarters were near the City of God, and Esther recalled fondly her job, which mostly entailed providing physical therapy to infants learning to crawl and walk. CAPEMI, Esther noted, also made home visits to the children's families—some of whom were City of God residents—and provided them free medication. "It was a daycare," Esther explained, "but they had doctors for the family, you know, dentists, psychologists, consults for people who went there, everything was done there... Once a month they would visit the house, to see how people were doing, and they would check their hygiene." Two of Esther's brothers had received professional training there, one in mechanics and the other in operating lanterns.

CAPEMI was shut down in the late 1980s, however, due to a corruption scandal. Its role in the City of God provides, however, a useful example of the connections and gaps between the state and the City of God. On the one hand, Esther and the families served by CAPEMI were able to receive employment and services for a few years thanks to the philanthropic interests of private actors associated with the state. On the other hand, only a handful of families had been able to get accepted into the program, and the services were soon discontinued because of political issues. This model, of selective and discontinuous service, has guided the vast majority of social provisions for residents in the City of God. Only the most engaged and savvy residents

who were well-informed about new opportunities and had proficiency in navigating the bureaucratic processes for gaining entry could gain access them.

In 1988, Esther got pregnant with her first son, Leonardo, and moved out of her family's house temporarily due to her mother's disapproval. Though Esther was 26—much older than most of her friends who had gotten pregnant in adolescence and already had multiple children by their mid-20s—her mother did not approve of a child out of wedlock. Esther, already skilled at finding new employment opportunities, decided to move away to escape both the violence and her mother's dismay.

For Geovana, the 1980s were a time great mobilization, action, and political struggle. Political openings at the national level had made favela residents increasingly aware of their rights (McCann 2014). The growing influence of liberation theology and the leadership of Catholic priests and community leaders in favelas were helping to make the needs of Rio's urban poor increasingly visible. In 1982, leftist governor Leonel Brizola was elected with strong support from Rio's poor and working classes with promises to invest in the social needs of these groups. At the same time, City of God's population was rapidly outgrowing available public housing and clusters of shacks were sprouting up across the neighborhood. Infrastructure was strained and unable to serve the entire neighborhood, especially informal settlements.

Serving her second term as RCO president, Geovana organized a number of efforts. Geovana was especially proud of a partnership the RCO had established with the architecture department at UERJ, the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro, or Rio de Janeiro State University. Students and faculty from the department had met with residents of various *triagens*, the temporary homes like the one in which Luz had grown up, and together they had designed a housing plan, and the actual layout of the desired homes, for the City of God. The RCO also

organized regular meetings with local residents to inform them of their rights of the Brizola's empty promises:

[Brizola] made residents of the City of God feel wonderful. So much so that the City of God was considered *brizolista*. Most of the residents voted for Brizola. But he did not attend to anything that we wanted, nothing. Or almost nothing, to not say nothing, he did a few things, you know, but in our meetings we talked about the lack of action by the government.

On one occasion, the RCO bused over two hundred families—mostly women and children—to the governor's office, where they staged an all-day sit-in waiting to speak to the governor to ask for more investments in housing. The governor never arrived, but instead provided the families a hearty lunch. "When the lunch was over, he had someone tell us that he would not be able to meet with us because he had a meeting. I took so many punches in the back [figuratively] from residents saying 'Brizola, Geovana. Brizola in the head. He is the man! He is the man!', and the construction stayed paralyzed, it didn't continue." On another occasion, local residents made a coffin and, along with 200 other residents, staged the enactment of Brizola's burial in front of his own home. Ultimately, their accomplishments had been limited. After several meetings with COHAB, in which they requested 2,444 houses (a number determined after a neighborhood-wide survey), COHAB finally approved and built 285 homes. The victory had been better than nothing, but had come at a great cost and fallen far short of the neighborhood's needs. Importantly, many of RCO's efforts began to spread beyond the City of God at this time, joining forces with many other campaigns for housing, infrastructure, and social services across Jacarepaguá. However, the RCO's leadership in these campaigns helped to make the City of God center of region-wide mobilization projects.

While Geovana remembered Brizola primarily for his failure to fulfill his lofty promises, many improvements to infrastructure, housing, and social services were made in Rio's favelas

under his leadership. He also sought to distance itself from the violent policing practices of the dictatorship. He established a council for civilian oversight of the police called the State Counsel of Justice, Public Safety, and Human Rights (Conselho Estadual de Justica, Seguranga Publica e Direitos Humanos). Representatives of government, including Brizola, and of nongovernmental organizations held seats on the counsel and heard cases of police brutality. Brizola also declared that the police should treat all the residents of Rio as citizens, deviating from the national security discourse of the dictatorship (da Silva 2000:128). He appointed a Black man—Colonel Carlo Magno Nazareth de Cerqueira, who was not trained within the Armed Forces, to the post of General Commander of the Military Police, who introduced some of the first community policing experiments in the city. With little support from officers convinced that only a strong-arm approach could combat the drug trade, his efforts failed, though they provided a useful model for future experiments with community policing (Ramos 2015).

Geovana's political leadership in the City of God came to a brutal halt in 1988. Geovana's approach to political change, which hinged on direct pressure on government officials for the collective needs of her neighborhood, rather than on the more traditional clientelistic practices by which political change was usually conducted, had earned her a growing set of enemies in the City of God. Tensions between Geovana and the RCO and a rival local political group when she announced her candidacy for a major city-wide elected position.<sup>9</sup> She began receiving threats. One night, as Geovana was returning home from a meeting with her party in the center of city, she was brutally attacked and raped after being dragged from her front door to a nearby lake. Her assailant broke six of her teeth and several of her ribs. Geovana never discovered who, if anyone, had hired her assailant, though she remained fearful that if she

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<sup>9</sup> Details excluded to protect Geovana's identity.

maintained her political activities someone might come after her or her 12-year-old son. The drug traffickers from her block offered to kill her assailant, an offer that Geovana turned down because she was against violent retribution and she did not want to be indebted to the drug trade. For weeks, however, a young armed man was stationed at the corner of her block to ensure her safety.

Geovana lost the election two weeks later by only a few votes, choosing not to campaign or monitor voting stations. For the following few years Geovana remained engaged in mobilization efforts by organizing meetings with local female residents at her house, giving them advice about how to proceed but not taking on leadership roles herself. Shortly after, Geovana moved out of the City of God and the RCO was dismantled. As Geovana's case illustrates, politics and violence have a complicated and sometimes unpredictable relationship in the City of God. Violent actors were not always directly connected. Rivalries and alliances shifted, and often residents did not know for certain who was aligned with whom. Geovana saw the man who assaulted her three more times after that from a distance, but she had not disclosed his identity to drug traffickers or attempted to discover whether he had been hired by one of her opponents. Like most residents, keeping their distance from violent actors was deemed the most effective mechanism for increasing one's safety. Like in Geovana's case, keeping clear of violent actors—as either opponents or allies—was not easily done.

## 1990s: Stability, growth, and tragedy

The City of God continued to grow, and several new housing settlements emerged in the 1990s. Some were built by municipal government, thanks in part to the mobilization efforts of the RCO. Others were constructed by local residents, extending further south. By then, Luz had

needed a break from the City of God. She had managed to save enough money to build a home in an “invasion”—a forested area literally invaded by people searching for a place to build their homes—in Barra da Tijuca, a now-wealthy neighborhood in Rio that, at the time, was still under construction. Though several of her family members were purchasing homes in the City of God at the time, she resisted:

**Luz:** Back then, I would say that I never wanted to return to the City of God, no way, and I would say, I’m never going to live in the City of God [Luz chuckles in recognition of her “failed” dogmatism].

**Me:** Why did you say that?

**Luz:** I didn’t want to live here because I had a problem with a guy who tried to attack me. I went to the police station and filed a complaint, and they arrested him, and they put him in one of those rooms with a glass and asked me to identify him. I recognized him, I said, ‘that’s the guy, that’s him...’

**Me:** Was he part of the drug trade?

**Luz:** No, no, he wasn’t, he was a rapist really, and so I didn’t want to come back to the City of God.

**Me:** Did the drug trade have anything to do with your not wanting to return?

**Luz:** I saw people dying, you know. Here, a lot of people dying. Many of my friends who came here...died, you know.

**Me:** Why?

**Luz:** They would get involved with the drug trade, you know...and then it was that story I told you, I saw them dying and thought it was because they had eaten the mango from the *saci*, over in Inhaúma, and I thought that he would get me too. But they all died, and I lost my taste for [the City of God], and I would say, “I don’t want to live in this place anymore.”

The year before, Luz had discovered a passion for sculpting, and she had proudly showed me her first sculpture, of a *saci*, a folkloric caricature of a black boy with one leg who smoked a pipe and wore a red bandana. The *saci* was believed to be the guardian of medicinal plants, among other legends. While some folkloric tales describe the *saci* as friendly, Luz had been told that he killed people by feeding them poisonous mangos. “I would see dead bodies, people killed in horrendous ways, and I believed the *saci* had done it,” she explained. “Until I was 30 I believed in the *saci*. I couldn’t accept that people could do such horrible things to each other,” Luz had explained, looking longingly at the *saci* sculpture in her hands. Years after discovering

that the *saci* was not real, its image had become a reminder of the blissful, child-like ignorance Luz had embraced to make sense of her reality.

In 1994, Luz decided to buy a house in the City of God after several of her family members bought houses in a newly-developing area. Out of her new home she began selling hamburgers, soda, beer, cigarettes, sugar cane water, and fried pastries. She had enjoyed finally working for herself. But Luz continued to struggle with addiction, which only worsened when her adult children moved out and she felt lonely. Luz did not have the schooling needed to secure formal employment and had been turned down from local social service projects because she was too old. The local environment didn't help:

Being raised inside the City of God, you live in the middle of these people, you think that all of this is normal, you think this is your life, it's what you see all the time, all day on the table, the drug traffickers out there, the police coming in, shooting at us, I always lived in this violence, you know? Fifty years, for fifty years, I lived in this violence and hardly ever left.

Luz's narrative, that blamed her addiction on the surrounding culture of violence rather than on externally-imposed factors, reflects the powerful effect of the drug trade on residents' perceptions of the City of God. Things finally began to turn around for Luz in 1995 when a spiritual awakening helped her gain sobriety from drugs. Though Luz was not a regular church-goer when I met her in 2015, the church had been the only local institution with the resources to offer help with her addiction. She also found refuge in a newfound passion for art. Images, she felt, could communicate stories and ideas as effectively as words and were much more accessible to people with low literacy levels. Furthermore, while Luz had not managed to find an adult course to complete primary or secondary school in the City of God, the neighborhood was teaming with two or three-month-long art courses, and she took every one of them, from photography and cinema to painting and sculpture. While Luz often suggested that she needed

professional courses in order to be a professional artist—a claim that I emphatically rejected, pointing at her incredible paintings and sculptures—Luz found a new purpose in her art: to give others hope by showing them that they could also overcome addiction. She hoped that if others saw her sober, happy, and successful they might be able to get sober themselves.

For Esther, the 90s were a time of great individual and collective pain. By the early 1990s she had split up with her son's father and moved back to her parents' home. She worked at a pharmacy for a few years, as a cashier, administering injections, and then in management until she quit to care for her ill mother and her young son (her father had died several years earlier). Esther had help from her much-younger sister, Maria Rita, still an adolescent at the time. In 1994, her mother passed away. The following year, Esther opened her own restaurant on Rua da Penha, City of God's main commercial avenue, until her co-owner pushed her out by spreading rumors about her across town and "fazendo uma macumba contra mim," conducting a spiritist ritual to put a curse on her. Though Esther remembered the betrayal as one of the most painful moments in her life, she eventually rallied and became a party planner and caterer. Wealthy local drug traffickers were among her most reliable clients. One of her favorite stories, which she told me many times during my stays at her house, was of when she was asked to make a cake the size of a door for a party for Children's Day, a national Brazilian holiday. Block parties hosted by local drug traffickers were intended to show residents their solidarity with them while also reaffirming their "ownership" of the area. "They brought a door," Esther recounted, "and asked me to make a cake the size of that door, and I baked and baked and baked, and...I made the cake." Esther spent three straight days making the cake, assisted by Maria Rita and Leonardo. "We'd pull one sheet out and put another one in, and this house was crazy!" she recalled, giggling with pride at the feat. "They took it in a car, on top of a truck." I asked Esther

if they paid her well. “Yes, they paid well. They’d say, ‘Oh auntie, so-and-so also wants a cake.’”

Esther’s story provides a useful example of the ways in which residents were both intricately connected to, and yet separate from, the drug trade. Technically, Esther was working for the drug trade in that she was paid to provide them a service. The same might have been said for restaurant owners where drug traffickers bought lunch, the barbers who cut their hair, mothers who ironed their drug-dealing son’s shirts, or even the teachers who educated their children. Residents actually had no choice in the matter; they both depended financially on having drug dealing clients, but also risked being punished if they refused to serve them. These dynamics of power were well-understood, and no one viewed Esther or other vendors to be part of the drug trade. People were considered complicit in (or members of) the drug trade if they helped to make or sell drugs, served as “lookouts” for incoming police vehicles, or carried guns to “secure” the drug business. In a neighborhood where members of the drug trade were local residents like everyone else, these distinctions, which often labeled residents as either “workers” or “bandits,” was crucial, if not always clearly demarcated. Esther’s activities (i.e. catering for parties) were understood among local residents as both practically and morally distinct from direct engagement in or complicity with the drug trade. Esther’s provision of a cake to drug traffickers would have been widely interpreted as the function of a “worker.” The performance of neighborhood citizenship in the City of God relied as much on affirming one’s status as a local resident as on engaging in “moral” activities not directly implicated in drugs or violence. At the same time, residents were expected to treat drug traffickers with politeness and distance, exchanging just enough pleasantries to show their respect for their presence but not too much conversation to suggest to drug traffickers or others nearby that they were friendly (i.e. complicit

in drug trafficking). These subtle distinctions in public comportment around drug traffickers was critical to the performance of citizenship, and ultimately to staying safe in the City of God.

However, relations between what I will call “non-violent residents,” those not directly engaged in drug trafficking, and members of the drug trade were often tense, complicated, and never equal. Again, Esther’s story provides a case in point. In 1997, Leonardo’s father, from whom Esther had been separated for a few years, was murdered by local members of the drug trade. According to Esther, Leonardo’s father was not a bandit, but he had a fascination with guns, and would often broker gun sales between police officers and local drug traffickers. When a local drug trafficker was arrested by police, rumors circulated that Leonardo’s father had provided information to the police; snitching in the City of God was a crime punishable by death (often preceded by torture). He had been shot in his car in front of a large supermarket on the outskirts of the City of God. Esther had heard the rumors and walked over to confirm that the body in the car was his. The event severely affected Esther and her family:

I got really sick, I even got this pain, an ulcer, I lost a lot of weight, I couldn’t eat, you know, to have seen the suffering of my son. He was eight years old, he got really scared. Leonardo got really scared...He was convinced that the bandits [would kill him too]. He said when he grew up, he knew who had done it, and that he would grow up and kill everyone who killed his dad...he couldn’t sleep...when he would see a “bonde armado” [groups of drug traffickers who would literally parade in the streets displaying their guns over their heads to instill fear in residents], he would go into panic.”

Like Geovana, who saw her assailant several times in the years after her assault, Esther and her son had to live in the same neighborhood as the men who had killed Leonardo’s father. In some cases, family members would take revenge either by killing the perpetrator themselves or by asking the drug lord to kill the perpetrator, especially if the murder had happened without the drug lord’s orders. More often, however, their only solace was the fact that most drug traffickers died early from internal conflicts or shootouts with police, which relieved victims of

having to co-exist with perpetrators but reinscribed a perverse cycle of violence. The man who killed Leonardo's father, for instance, was himself killed a few years later.

In the midst of this violence, the City of God experienced a disastrous flood in 1996 that, twenty years later, has become inscribed as a major event in the history of the neighborhood. The City of God's untended sewage system, clogged with trash and tree trunks, overflowed after a few hours of heavy downpours, sending over a meter of muddy water into most homes, and completely destroying many informal settlements near open sewers. At the time, the city was in the midst of a major project to place a highway directly through the center of the City of God in order to connect the west zone to the downtown area. According to Esther, the city had closed some of the pathways of the river that ran through the City of God during the construction, which further exacerbated flooding. Accounts varied about the number of deaths: some estimated fifty, others one hundred, and Esther believed it was many more: "There are a lot of bodies that were left, they gave some estimates but not all the bodies were found... There was a lake that they had covered up (to build shacks over), where the *predinhos* (a recent public apartment complex) are, but that used to have a whole other community. People couldn't leave because of the lake... they were stuck and died... they were buried." For Esther, the tragedy was not only that they died, but that their lives were never counted: "They went away with their houses, documents, everything."

As Brodwyn Fischer has suggested, "citizenship" for Rio's urban poor was often defined by having formal documents: a birth certificate, employment card, driver's license, etc. The absence of documents not only prevented residents from accessing the "universal" rights guaranteed by the constitution, but denied their very existence as a member of the body politic (Fischer 2008). City of God's growing informal settlements were not only vulnerable to floods and other natural disasters, but their residents were at increased risk of operating on the

“margins” of the state (Perlman 1979). Even in death they had not counted as full citizens. In one of the many ironic twists that have paved City of God’s development trajectory, the flood brought a wealth of immediate services and provisions from the city and private businesses and citizens who donated new clothes, appliances, furniture, and mattresses. Residents, already accustomed to building and repairing their own homes and much of the public infrastructure, rebuilt the neighborhood quickly. The collective trauma of the event, however, lies among the many other tragedies that continue to haunt its people.

At the national level, Brazil continued on the slow and often painful road to democratization. Fernando Collor, its first president elected through direct vote, was impeached for embezzling public funds in the midst of high inflation and economic instability. The economy finally stabilized after President Henrique Cardoso, a sociologist well-known for his theories on third world dependency, created the Brazilian Real. Economic stability came at a cost, however. While Brazil’s shift towards neoliberalism happened later and less dramatically than in Chile and most other Latin American countries, Cardoso restricted the power of labor unions and decreased regulations for foreign investors, which contributed to high rates of unemployment, especially in large cities (Filgueiras 2006).

The city’s ambivalence towards favelas moved forward as well. On the one hand, several social development projects helped to urbanize many favela neighborhoods. Rio’s 1992 Master Plan explicitly declared the city’s objectives of “integrating the favelas into the formal city” and “preserving their local character.” With funding from the Inter-American Development Bank and the municipal government, the Program Favela-Bairro invested USD\$300 in upgrading thirty-eight favelas, with a focus on infrastructure and social services, mostly focused on mid-sized favelas (Urani 2008). The City of God, however, was not a recipient due to its legal status

as a “housing complex.” Relative to other favelas, the City of God was already much more urbanized. It benefited indirectly, however. The city’s stated commitment to improving favelas was an important detour from its historic approach of evictions and provided a symbolic reframing of its poor areas as spaces that needed investments, rather than expulsion (Atuesta and Soares 2016; Pereira 2008). Many of the improvements were made hastily and with cheap materials however, and after only a few years of wear and tear began to quickly disintegrate (Perlman 2010).

On the security side, Rio’s war against drugs escalated dramatically in the mid-1990s. In 1991, Gov. Brizola was re-elected and he and his predecessor, Nilo Batista (1994-1995) attempted to bring back a security policy focused on human rights. In preparation for the 1994 national election, however, the federal government sent in Army troops to invade Rio’s favelas, creating tension between the national and state governments. Around the same time, groups of military and civil police officers committed two *chacinas*, or mass public executions. The first was in the favela of Vigário Geral, where 21 innocent people were killed, supposedly in retaliation for the killing of four police officers earlier that week. The second was in front of the Roman Catholic church known as Candelária, where eight street children were assassinated after they had thrown rocks at police cars earlier in the day.

In 1995, newly elected Gov. Marcello Alencar appointed Newton Cerqueira as the Secretary of Security. Cerqueira had served in the national army under the dictatorship combatting leftist militants, and believed that only heavily-armed soldiers could stop the violence. Under his command, the BOPE adopted a policy of killing any criminals who surrendered, which significantly increased resistance among drug traffickers, who had little choice but to fight to the death. Drug traffickers became increasingly violent and began to

anticipate attacks (sometime prematurely), which led the police to attack first in order to prevent an attack. Not surprisingly, deaths by “acts of resistance” skyrocketed during this time and led the drug trade to invest heavily in armament (Ramos 2015:368). The homicide rate across the city rose to 62 murders per 100,000 and remained high into the early 2000s. Most of those killed were young black men (Zaluar 2007).

## 2000s to present: Insecurity and (Under) development

In many respects, the 2000s saw a continuation of the city’s contradictory approach to favelas. In 2002, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known popularly as “Lula,” was elected president of Brazil on a leftist platform. Originally a steel worker with a second-grade education who had moved to São Paulo at age seven from the northeast state of Pernambuco, Lula had risen through the ranks of the steel union. In 1980, he worked with intellectuals and union leaders to found the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), or Worker’s Party, which he represented in three unsuccessful bids for president until he was finally elected in 2002. Under Lula’s governance, several national programs were funded that improved the social landscape in the City of God. One of these was the highly controversial *Bolsa Familia*, or Family Purse, a welfare program that provided—and continues to provide—direct cash transfers to families living below the poverty line. Participating families are required to keep their children enrolled in school and take their children to regular medical checkups, among other obligations. Rio’s municipal and state governments also began providing a number of benefits to low-income families, including free or reduced-fare bus passes and low-cost electricity and internet. In the survey I administered in 2017, 19% of City of God’s households received income from Bolsa Familia, and a total of 48% received some kind of public assistance, such as through public housing, transportation passes, or

reduced electricity costs. Lula also spearheaded the Growth Acceleration Program, or PAC, which provided money to municipal governments to invest in social and urban infrastructure improvements. PAC money has supported several urbanization efforts in the City of God in recent years, including the construction of new housing and the installation of a local emergency room, or UPA.

In an effort to improve the national security landscape, Lula also launched PRONASCI, which has been described as the “PAC of Security.” Its objective was to both reform public security through prison reform, the re-training of police officers in non-violent forms of conflict resolution, as well as the “defense of health, education, equality, and youth for the consolidation of a new mode of life.” Social projects included rehabilitative services for youth and prisons for women and young adults, and focused in the 11 most violent cities in Brazil (Urani 2008). When Lula’s second term as president ended in 2010, his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff, also a member of the Worker’s Party, maintained these and many other programs initiated under Lula.

In Rio, Governor Anthony Garotinho (1999-2002) and then his wife Rosinha Mateus (2003-2007) aligned themselves with Lula and promoted several social development initiatives, including subsidized meals at “popular restaurants,” 35,000 additional affordable homes, and a monthly “citizen’s check” to poor families. Notably, families were selected by a network of religious—primarily evangelical—organizations. The city also used PAC and PRONASCI funds for urbanization projects in favelas. The City of God, for instance, was the recipient of the project “Território da Paz,” or “Territory of Peace,” and the “Espaço Urbano Seguro,” the “Safe Urban Spaces.” Both of these programs funded various infrastructure improvements, such as the construction of parks, soccer fields, paved roads, and expansion of sewer systems, as well as social services and cultural activities. Notably, as the titles of these projects indicate, urban

upgrading in the City of God is directly tied to its insecurity; high rates of violence have qualified it to receive social development funds. While City of God's historic exclusion from state development made it vulnerable to the violence of the drug trade and the police, this same violence many years later has made it a prime target for investments.

The national and municipal trajectory towards favela upgrading was not immediately accompanied by a shift in policing. Under the leadership of Garotinho and Mateus, rates of homicide continued to rise. On the one hand, the government employed a discourse of human rights; at the same time, special-ops teams, known as the BOPE—Special Operations Policing Battalion—were created to combat armed drug traffickers in favelas. Under the auspices of the state military police, the BOPE received training in urban warfare (including torture) and was equipped with armored vehicles, grenades, high-caliber weapons. BOPE raids in favelas led to increased homicides, including several high-profile *chacinas*, and tensions between favelas and the state continued to fray. With strong support from favela residents, Sergio Cabral was elected governor in 2007 with a promise to respect human rights, combat police corruption and impunity, and get rid of the use of armored vehicles in favelas. In 2008, Cabral fulfilled his promise, implementing the UPP, or Pacifying Policing Units, in dozens of Rio's favelas, a topic to which I turn in the following chapter. The City of God came to epitomize this shifting policing landscape. In the early 2000s, policing raids became increasingly violent as the BOPE invaded the neighborhood regularly, often engaging in shootouts with drug traffickers. Stories also circulated of BOPE officers physically assaulting local residents, especially young black men who “looked like” drug traffickers, and for torturing drug traffickers or other residents for information about drug activities.

If the 1990s were a period of great transition for Luz, the 2000s were a time of stability as she immersed herself deeply into her art. She had built several “kitinetes,” or small studio apartments, in the back of her house and was able to rent them out, mostly to single men, to cover her monthly expenses. This offered her financial stability and the time to pursue her passions: education and art. Despite relentless searching, Luz had been unable to find a free or low-cost high-school equivalency program for adults, but the many social investments by the government had funded a growing number of 6- or 8-week art classes and various community-related workshops. Luz had taken every course she could find. She proudly flipped through a thick binder of her certificates of completion during one of my visits. “This one is for...[Luz scanned the certificate]...conflict mediation. Let’s see, this one was for graffiti...This one for diagramming newspapers.” In the last fifteen years, Luz had also taken courses in audiovisual production, preventing drug addiction in her community, advocacy for women’s rights, sculpture, photography, painting, computer skills, and a host of other topics, many of which she could barely recall. They had a collective impact on her, however. For one, they gave Luz the status of “student” for which she had so forcefully longed. They also gave her an identity as community activist and artist, an identity that she claimed proudly and passionately: “In the last ten years I became a sculptor, a writer, a book illustrator, I have a community newspaper, I’m an editor, journalist, painter, plastic artist, I run workshops with kids” Luz counted each on her fingers. She was proud of her accomplishments. These courses also brought Luz into a growing network of cultural activists, people who used artistic expression as a form of political resistance, a subject to which I return in Chapter 7. At the same time, while these courses gave Luz a sense of purpose as an artist and activist, she continued without a high school diploma, and she had been unable to access the types of courses that would have prepared her for the college entrance

exams or a well-paid profession. Art classes and community workshops were a step in the right direction for offering local residents useful skills and activities, but they were wholly insufficient for significant economic or social mobility in the formal economy.

By 2004, Esther had started a relationship with another man who soon moved in with her, and had her second child, André. She had been forty-three when she unexpectedly got pregnant, a fact that Esther loved to joke about. André's father had brought his share of complications to Esther's life. He had three young boys by another woman already. He had bought a house in the City of God for the three boys and their mother, which she lost when her brother used it to store drugs and guns for local drug traffickers until he made off with them one night. In response, drug traffickers had taken possession of the apartment and threatened to kill him if he ever returned. André's three boys, now homeless, went to live with their grandmother, and for a while Esther had also helped to care for them. In 2012, the boys' mother passed away from pneumonia, likely caused by years of exposure to air pollution in the factory where she worked, and the boys were jostled between the homes of various relatives, some inside the City of God, some far away. When I met Esther in 2015, she had recently kicked André's father out of the house because he was both unwilling to help with everyday chores and had lately become extremely jealous and controlling. He came around from time to time, and occasionally offered some financial support, but overall did very little to help Esther, André, or his three other sons. Esther continued to take advantage of new employment opportunities, working full-time as a nanny and selling pizza, lasagna, and other homemade food from her house. Her sister, Maria Rita, had gotten a full scholarship to a mechanical engineering program at one of Rio's prestigious public universities and, after completing her degree, took up employment at a Youth Promise, a local community-based organization founded in 2006, where she taught computer

classes, among other things. I return to Maria Rita and the story of Youth Promise in Chapter 5. Together, Maria Rita and Esther had managed to pay their bills and raise André, Leonardo, and, at various times, André's three half-brothers and many other children who were somehow related to them and needed a place to stay or to have dinner from time to time.

While Geovana never moved back to the City of God, she remained active in housing rights issues and other advocacy projects in the City of God and Jacarepaguá more broadly. Thanks to her expertise and contacts in activism around housing rights, she had been recruited to work as a full-time consultant on housing issues for a federal housing and education organization. She had overseen the distribution of funds for a local public housing initiative and was working on several other housing-related projects, some of which were in the City of God. In 2003, Geovana had also helped to found the Residents' Board, a not-for-profit organization in the City of God to advocate for the social development needs of the neighborhood and to ensure that federal and municipal urbanization funds were channeled to permanent neighborhood improvements, rather than short-term projects like the workshops Luz had participated in. The Residents' Board is the topic of Chapter 6.

## Conclusion

The stories of Luz, Esther, and Geovana by no means encompass the heterogeneity of experiences in the City of God, but they provide valuable evidence of the tremendous effects of global, national, and urban changes on local experiences of violence and possibilities for agency within them. Structural violence has become one of the most powerful forces shaping everyday life chances in the neighborhood, particularly as the population grew without accompanying infrastructure or social services. In contrast to the common belief that conflict zones are spaces

in which the state was absent, Rio's favelas had ongoing intervention by the state. Some of this intervention was harmful, such as those by aggressive policing forces; others were simply insufficient. Furthermore, the presence of the state did not decrease when the state shifted to a neoliberal economic-political model. If anything, resources have increased during this time, in part as a result of the dramatic expansion of favelas that made the earlier policy of removal an impossibility. However, rising urban violence also motivated social investments, though, as my participants' stories suggest, these were far from sufficient. While all three women were able to find ways of making money, only Geovana, who already had a college degree before arriving to the City of God, was able to secure a stable, well-paying job.

Symbolic violence has also had an effect on the trajectory of the City of God, though not always in obvious ways. As many scholars have argued, Brazil's inequality is often blamed on class inequality, rather than racism. The myth of "racial democracy" suggests that intermarriage between races has resulted in such a colorful spectrum of Brazilian bodies, including in Rio's favelas, that racism could not be to blame for inequality. In fact, Luz—the worst off of my participants in many respects—was white. Esther was black, and Geovana was mixed-race. I often struggled to find clear race-based patterns of suffering in the City of God. However, many of my dark-skinned participants had been victims of racial discrimination, like when Esther was followed at a wealthy shopping center. Outside of the City of God, Luz and Geovana could "pass" as middle-class due to her whiteness in a way that Esther could not. And the historical inequalities caused by slavery and other forms of race-based discrimination continue to structure inequality in profound ways and result in visible forms of racial inequality in politics and education. Furthermore, violence is highly racialized: most homicides are committed against

dark-skinned men. Perhaps more importantly, and which I discuss later in this dissertation, racial politics have become a core strategy for inserting favela issues into national debates.

Political violence operates in much less subtle ways than symbolic violence. The violence perpetrated by military-sponsored death squads and the military police has been a primary instigator of shootouts and tensions between favela residents and the state. In indirect ways, as well, the legacies of the dictatorship helped to produce the conditions under which drug factions consolidated and took over favelas. All of these have culminated in the criminal violence of drug traffickers that have become such a central element in residents' everyday lives. What is often left unaddressed in the literature on Rio's violence, however, are the many forms of gender-based violence that permeated Esther, Luz, and Geovana's stories. Whether at the hands of drug traffickers, political actors, or romantic partners, all three women had to contend with a violent landscape that threatened their physical, sexual, and psychological integrity in ways that further stymied their personal and professional well-being.

Despite these deep political, economic, and physical obstacles, all three women survived and found ways to assert their agency: Luz through her art, Esther through her commitments to caring for needy children, and Geovana through organized mobilization. In each instance, they took advantage of the resources at their disposal to construct an identity and a relationship to their neighborhood that sought to move past their personal and collective limitations. In the rest of this dissertation, I focus on the collective efforts of residents to combat structural, symbolic, political, and criminal violence within a context of resource scarcity, discrimination, police brutality, drug trafficking, and many other challenges.

# **Chapter 4**

## **The Politics of Insecurity**

## Introduction

In the last chapter, I examined the historical trajectory leading up to Sérgio Cabral's election in 2008 under great pressure from multiple groups to address the ongoing security issues in favelas. Favela residents were tired of heavy-handed police invasions into their neighborhoods and of the control of drug traffickers over their territory. Rates of violence in the rest of the city were high as well, particularly in muggings, robberies, and home invasions, many of which ended in the physical assault of the victim(s). The media further exacerbated fear, particularly among middle and upper class urban residents who attributed all urban crime to the drug trade and the culture of violence produced within favelas (Penglase 2011). The international community also turned its attention to Rio's insecurity in 2008 when the city was selected to host soccer matches for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Once in office, Cabral and his newly appointed Secretary of Security Mariano Beltrame worked out a plan for imposing what Beltrame has called a "policing of proximity" in Rio's favelas which rejected the conflict approach to policing and imposed instead permanent policing precincts staffed round the clock with military police specially-trained in community policing tactics. The precincts were called UPPs, or Pacifying Policing Units. The first UPPs were installed in the small Santa Marta favela, on the hills of Botafogo, a wealthy neighborhood in the city's south zone in December, 2008. In February, 2009, the City of God was the second favela to be "pacified" by the UPP. Over the following five years, UPPs were installed in 38 favelas or favela complexes. According to the city, almost half of Rio's 1.6 million favela residents lived in an area "occupied" by the UPP in 2014 (Governo do Rio de Janeiro 2014).

I arrived in the City of God in 2014, five years after the UPP occupation. At the time, the City of God had looked like an ordinary neighborhood, relatively urbanized, with paved roads,

two and three-story cement houses painted in bright greens, oranges, and blues, electricity, running water, and a functioning sewer system. Roads hummed with activity as residents walked, biked, or drove to the store, work, and school. Storefronts were busy with customers shopping for groceries, sandals, clothes, and a host of other goods. While UPP patrol cars drove past me on a handful of occasions, I saw no markings of a violent landscape. There were no men selling drugs or carrying rifles, no shootouts, and no reports of homicide. From an outsider's perspective, it seemed as though the City of God had transformed.

Sadly, over the following three years I witnessed the rapid deterioration of this public security as UPP officers gradually lost control over the territory and drug traffickers retook control, first of the more hidden areas of the neighborhood and then over the main street corners. In response, the BOPE began launching the notorious invasions in armored vehicles, which often resulted in shootouts with drug traffickers and aggression against residents. Rates of homicide increased, and then skyrocketed: by 2017, nearly every week I heard a report of at least one homicide (often more). Other favelas that had been "pacified" by the UPP experienced a similar transformation. Homicides rates across the city tripled between 2015 and 2017 (Fábio 2017).

As I watched the rise and fall of the UPP, talked to residents about their perspectives, and observed how their behavior did—and did—change between 2014 and 2017, I gained valuable insight into the politics of insecurity in Rio de Janeiro. For one, I found that security in the City of God operates at two levels which, although connected do not always operate in tandem. Between 2009 and 2014, the UPP had impacted *public insecurity*, or the physical risks on the street and other public spaces. By expelling drug traffickers from street corners and forcing them to either leave the neighborhood or hide their weapons and drugs, the streets had become safe spaces. Residents could navigate them without fear of being hit by a stray bullet, having a

conflict with a drug trafficker, or running into a dead body. What the UPP was unable to do, however, was significantly impact *violent governance*, the underlying political, legal, and social structures that governed behavior in the City of God. Even in 2014, residents still followed the “laws of the favela” and firmly believed that the drug trade still ran the neighborhood even if they were not visible in the streets. While most residents I met in 2014 were enthusiastic about the public security imposed by the UPP, they saw these changes as temporary, and believed that, like other community policing efforts in the past, the UPP would not last. If they violated the laws of drug traffickers’ violent governance at any point, they would have to pay for these once the UPP failed. In other words, even at the height of UPP control over the City of God, residents continued to follow the laws of the drug trade. The security landscape that I witnessed between 2014 and 2017 allowed me to see these laws even more clearly because they had become temporarily disembedded from public security.

Second, I found that, in many respects, the City of God operated like a separate state from the formal Brazilian state apparatus. It had its own laws (and penalties), codes of conduct, and processes for claims-making. Local laws and their consequences were not written down, however, and were therefore a product of collective understandings and dynamic (and often contentious) negotiations. Maria Rita and I often joked that we were going to be the first to produce a manual for how to navigate these unspoken rules. My constant questions about how to behave in different contexts would throw her into a state of pensiveness as she tried to consciously articulate laws that had been so deeply internalized she was often unaware of her own mastery of them. Because these were not written down, however, each resident had their own interpretation of local laws and their own ways of negotiating them. Violent actors themselves were constantly changing as local “managers” were killed in shootouts or expelled if

they were believed to have snitched on other drug traffickers or have stolen drugs, among other offenses. The “guys” who carried guns and bestowed punishment for violators of the laws were often barely of voting age, few had a high school degree, and many were either addicted to drugs or raised in households with drug use, poverty, or other kinds of neglect. Their own understandings of the “rules” could vary day to day or between themselves, and stories abounded of drug traffickers arguing amongst themselves about whether someone had broken the rules and how they should be punished. In this highly dynamic, nebulous, and volatile political landscape, survival relied on a constant and exhausting process of discussion between residents about what they had seen and heard and what these observations implied for shifts in local rules and punishments. Ultimately, however, actual behaviors were less a product of the actual political dynamics of the City of God—which were constantly shifting and usually beyond view to most residents—and more an outcome of collective and negotiated perceptions.

While the City of God operated in many ways as a separate state, the actual Brazilian government was constantly present in the City of God. In addition to the UPP and other security officers, there were several public institutions in the City of God, such as a welfare office, a health clinic, an emergency room, twenty-six public schools, a youth center, and a regional administrative branch of the municipal government, among others. There were also various semi-formal governance structures commonly found in neighborhoods under democratic regimes, such as neighborhood associations, not-for-profit organizations, and semi-organized groups of local religious and business leaders. Private economic actors were also present in the City of God, including several large grocery stores and a bank, and multiple social projects funded by the philanthropic branch of public-private partnerships. What became increasingly clear as the UPP lost control of public security, however, was that state actors in the City of God

were forced to follow the laws and logic of violent governance. Many public administrators I interviewed were even more afraid of the drug trade than local residents, and realized that they operated at constant risk of being threatened or killed if they violated the laws of the favela.

The goal of this chapter is to paint a picture of the politics of insecurity in the City of God in order to highlight the perceived political openings and closures under the violent governance of the drug trade. I begin with a description of the UPP Program and how the politics of security did (and did not) change under this intervention. I then draw on data from the survey I conducted in 2017 to describe the social and security landscape in order to demonstrate the ways in which fear and physical risk permeated every aspect of social and economic life in the City of God, and how these varied across gender, age, and other categories of difference. I then provide a detailed description of the formal political structures in and outside the City of God and how, in theory, these two levels of governance were connected. I conclude with an analysis of how residents have made sense of their observations. I am especially interested in considering the processes by which they construct shared understandings of the political landscape, the gendered dynamics of these processes, and how their shared understandings structure their views of the possibilities for and limitations to non-violent collective action.

## The UPP Program

According to the state government, the objectives of the UPP were (1) to expel drug traffickers from favelas; (2) to impose law and order and state control over these “territories”; and (3) to promote the inclusion of favelas in the city through the provision of social services and resources. The UPP Program was intended to be implemented in several stages. It began, in theory, with months-long military-style operations to apprehend, kill, or expel drug traffickers.

Once the territory was declared “pacified,” UPP precincts were to be installed around the area and public spaces would be patrolled by UPP officers to ensure drug traffickers did not return. UPP officers were military police, governed by the protocols and tactics of the national army, but who would be recruited and trained separately from other police in tactics of both urban warfare and community policing. In a third phase, state administrators and private investors would implement various social and economic projects in the area to benefit residents and promote development. The actual implementation of the UPP varied dramatically across favelas, however, due to their differences in size, location, drug traffickers’ access to weapons, and their ties to (or conflicts with state officials and vigilante *milicia* groups (Burgos et al. 2011).

The UPP Program sparked fervent debate between policy-makers and activists. Activists feared that the permanent occupation of favelas by the military police would further exacerbate human rights abuses against local residents and reinforce the notion of favelas as sites that needed to be “pacified” through strong-arm policing rather than supported through long-term social development. Policy-makers contended that imposing military control over favelas was critical for asserting state control in a context of heavily-armed drug traffickers. They had also promised to train UPP officers in conflict resolution, to encourage dialogue between police and community leaders, and to invest in social services, which would mediate against some of historic conflicts between residents and police.

By the time I arrived in the City of God in 2014, reports had begun to emerge providing evidence for both sides of the debate. Studies conducted in 2012 and 2013 suggested that the UPP had in fact brought some important changes to pacified communities. A 2009 study by the Fundação Getulio Vargas found that 60% of heads of household in Santa Marta and the City of God—the first two communities to be occupied—reported that security had improved as a result

of the recent military intervention (Vasconcelos 2010). A 2010 study that also included the City of God found that 83% of interviewees believed their community had gotten safer in the previous year. A 2014 study of reports of homicides in the first 13 communities to be pacified found that rates of homicide decreased by 75% after the entrance of the UPP, while armed robbery decreased by 50% (Cano, Borges, and Ribeiro 2012). These findings were echoed by dozens of other studies (Oosterbaan and van Wijk 2015). Participants had identified several signs that their communities were safer. In a study commissioned by *O Globo*, Brazil's media giant, 79% of residents in CDD and Batan reported that armed men had disappeared from the streets, 65% reported that the sale of drugs had ended, and 85% reported that shootouts had ceased (O Globo 2011). These numbers were even higher in subsequent studies that included other pacified communities.

The news was not all good, however. In 2013, a resident of Rocinha, Rio's largest favela, went missing after neighbors overheard him being tortured by UPP officers. Residents took to the streets in protest with signs that read "Cadê Amarildo?," or "Where is Amarildo?" His wife appeared on news conferences decrying the UPP, and a movement of activists and residents in other occupied favelas across the city joined the protest against the UPP. Other cases of deaths of innocent civilians began to surface. Scholars studying the social investments in occupied favelas argued that funds were being used primarily to map the areas, rather than to actually improve them (Henriques and Ramos 2011), while others worried that rising prices in some favelas would lead to gentrification and, ultimately, the dispossession of the poor of their land (Freeman 2012; Frischtak and Mandel 2012). In this climate of debate, I set off to study the politics of insecurity in the City of God.

## The Rise and Fall of the UPP in the City of God

When I first descended the 368 bus from Anil—a nearby middle-class neighborhood where I was lodged—onto the main avenue that cuts through the City of God, I was apprehensive. In the four years before arriving in Rio de Janeiro, I had been accompanying the Brazilian news, watching clips of heavily armed, soldier-like police officers weaving their way through narrow alleys shooting at drug traffickers, breaking down doors, interrogating local residents, and driving armored vehicles past small children holding tightly to their mothers' legs. I had also spoken with several anti-UPP activists who decried the militarization of poor urban neighborhood, and despite my efforts to remain unbiased, had arrived in the City of God harboring resentment and suspicion towards the UPP.

To my surprise, however, CDD in 2014 looked nothing like I had predicted. On my first day, I did not see a single UPP officer on the streets surveilling the area or searching residents for guns or weapons. Instead, the City of God looked peaceful and lively. The crowded commercial streets buzzed with shoppers perusing the stores and merchants beckoning hurried pedestrians to check out merchandise. Residential streets were calm, as many residents sat on their front stoops observing passersby and chatting casually. Others scurried to work on bicycles or moto-taxis, while children played in the many renovated public playgrounds and soccer fields. While the officers stationed outside the main UPP precinct appeared intimidating—dressed in combat boots and bullet-proof vests and hoisting AK-47s—they were barely noticeable beyond the precinct limits. Five years after occupation, the presence of the UPP and the drug trade in the City of God appeared subdued at best.

## The Golden Years of Militarization

In my early interviews, many residents confirmed what I had suspected: the streets of the City of God were safer than ever before. Despite the critiques of well-intentioned activists, what most stood out about the military occupation for most residents was the sense of peace and calm they felt in public spaces that they had not experienced since the 1970s. Solange, the director of a community-based NGO who had resided in the City of God since she was 12, described the first few weeks after the occupation:

When the UPP first came in, on the first day, the first week I will never forget...I felt a difference, seeing people in the streets, talking, saw this thing called freedom, saw that there was another aura, to have it be almost 11 o'clock at night and not have boys on the corner [i.e. lookouts working for drug traffickers], but people sitting on their porches talking, children playing. It was totally different than what we had before.

This sentiment was echoed, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by nearly every person with whom I spoke. Seu Edson, a middle-aged man I interviewed in 2014 who worked as a welder and painter, was among the most exuberant: “Compared to before, it’s better, because before around this time (early afternoon) the guys (drug traffickers) would walk around with guns, the police would invade... Now it’s calmer, 1000 times. 100%!” Dona Otávia, a feisty 82-year-old woman who had moved to the City of God when it was first being built in the 1960s, reflected on how things had been before the UPP:

Before [the occupation] they were armed to the teeth, the criminals (“os caras do bicho”). They drove around on their moto-taxis, showing off their guns above their heads...they would hang out on the corner dancing with their rifles...they would display their drugs, put them over there (on the sidewalks), promoting their merchandise.

The UPP takeover had brought several important changes to the public security landscape of the neighborhood. Not only did the sale of drugs and the ostentatious display of weapons disappear from the streets, but many of the other signs of the drug trade decreased as well. These included the barriers, including tree branches or old couches, that drug traffickers once placed at

street entrances to prevent the police from entering, which also made it impossible for residents with cars to enter as well. After the barriers were removed and shootouts decreased, residents were able to come and go from their neighborhood safely and easily. Furthermore, the all-night “baile funk,” parties, in which drug traffickers would sell drugs and play extremely loud music, had also been forbidden by the UPP, many residents, especially adults and the elderly, were relieved they could sleep soundly at night. Schools and businesses no longer shut down because of shootouts. In 2014, things seemed overall to be functioning smoothly.

The City of God also witnessed an improvement in social services between 2009 and 2015 due to increased state investments. During this time, several new social and educational programs were established including SESI Cidadania—an organization funded through a private/public partnership that offered various courses for children and adults, including volleyball classes, computer trainings, and a children’s library, among others. A Youth Center was also built which offered college prep courses and other certificate classes, courses for modeling, dance, martial arts, and even a support group for LGBT youth. Other institutions that were inaugurated after the occupation included the “House of Rights,” in which residents could apply for a birth certificate, driver’s license, employment card, and a host of other legal documents; a “popular restaurant,” which provided meals for R\$1 (around USD\$0.30); an emergency room, known as an UPA; and a technical school that also offered high school training at night. Many of these services were implemented under a new program that was first labeled UPP Social (to reflect the social arm of the state working in conjunction with its security arm), and was later changed to Rio+Social when its administration was transferred from the state government to the municipal government. Many of residents I interviewed in 2014 were excited about the sudden influx of resources, but others viewed the services as little more than an

opportunity for Rio's elected officials to get their picture in the newspaper. They were doubtful that the new services would remain open or well-funded in the long-run. Additionally, Stephanie Savell argued that these new services reflected a kind of "humanitarian militarism," a strategy to earn residents' support for an otherwise pernicious security intervention (Savell 2016).

While there is likely much truth to this claim, many residents remained suspicious of, or opposed to, the UPP. Young black men, for instance, were frequent targets of aggressive searches by the UPP police, and many of them had enjoyed dancing at the baile funk parties. I met several young people who resented the control of the UPP over the area and the constant risk of being harassed (Abramovay and Castro 2014). Many residents had also become concerned with the declining efforts by the UPP to patrol the area in recent years. By the time I began my fieldwork in 2014, the UPP were rarely visible beyond precinct limits and many residents complained about the absence of the UPP from the streets. According to my participants, police were decreasingly active in intervening in neighbor disputes, did not dialogue with community leaders or attend community-related meetings, and were largely invisible from City of God's public life. On the one hand, this helped preserve the sense that the UPP did not control the everyday life of the community in the way that the drug trade once had. On the other hand, the absence of the UPP from the streets and the community exacerbated residents' feelings of vulnerability. Residents noted that in the early years of pacification, the UPP had been an active presence in the community, patrolling the streets in their vehicles or on foot. They had responded to emergency calls, assisted residents who had been seriously injured, and intervened in some domestic disputes. By 2014, residents complained that the UPP was no longer present in the more dangerous areas of the neighborhood and were barely engaged in enforcing public safety. Residents believed that their absence from the streets had enabled a series of recent

robberies, including of a local bank and several small businesses on the main avenue, “directly in front of the UPP station!” one resident had exclaimed with derision. Fear that the weakening control of the UPP over public security would provide an opening for drug traffickers to retake the territory. Their predictions proved correct.

### Resurgence of the Drug Trade

In 2014, there were already signs that the drug trade was returning. Residents reported hearing gun shots at night, others complained that they had been offered drugs on their way to work on a street corner that had been clear of drug sales for years. Residents of Meriti, one of the poorer parts of the neighborhood, had begun seeing men walking around with guns visibly displayed tucked into the backs of their pants. In May, 2014, two armed men on a motorcycle shot up a small police station in City of God’s main park, and rumors spread that the attack was ordered by one of City of God’s drug lords. For residents, the attack became a symbol of the drug trade’s declaration of power, a message of “we’re back and we will not back down this time.” In my interviews, it became common for residents to refer to this event as evidence that the tenuous power equilibrium had shifted and that it was only a matter of time before the drug trade would run the streets and the political landscape of CDD.

Between 2014 and 2016, this foreboding materialized as drug traffickers began carrying weapons openly and selling drugs on street corners. In 2015, much of this activity was located in some of the peripheral areas of the neighborhood. By 2016, drug sales points could be found on popular street corners and near main avenues, only blocks from the UPP stations. Two drug sales points were set up a few blocks apart on either side of Esther’s house, and a third across the main road on the same street. Police behavior changed as well. The UPP maintained a presence in the City of God, though they seemed to have come to some accord with local drug traffickers

about who occupied which areas and at which times. For instance, it was common to see UPP officers patrolling the streets during the day but leaving in the early evening, at which time drug traffickers would arrive to sell drugs. One of my participants had pointed to a UPP vehicle stationed across the street from his organization: “At 4pm, they leave and the guys (“os caras”, meaning drug traffickers) arrive.” He rubbed his thumb and index fingers together to indicate there was an exchange of money during these transitions.

On another occasion when Esther and I were walking home from another part of the City of God, we passed by a group of heavily armed men posted at a table covered in packets of drugs for sale. Only four blocks up on the same street we passed a group of five or six UPP officers sitting quietly on a half-wall in front of the local bank which had already closed for the night. There was little doubt that UPP officers and drug traffickers knew of each other’s presence and had reached an agreement about a peaceful division of the territory for that evening. When I asked one of the residents why the UPP allowed drug traffickers to sell so close to their posts, he replied: “Do you know what would happen if they tried to arrest them? All hell would break loose. They [the UPP] would be shot and killed immediately!” I had a hard time arguing with this statement. For many residents, as the drug trade retook the neighborhood, the illegal transactions between them and the UPP provided all parties some peace, albeit tenuous, temporary, and at a high cost.

While the UPP seemed to be managing to co-exist with the growing control of the drug trade, the BOPE became increasingly intrusive and violent. By 2015, “military operations” were launched several times a week. During operations, police officers from the BOPE, with support from the UPP and other police forces, would enter together, usually heavily armed in patrol cars, trucks, or armored vehicles. Some operations resulted in shootouts with drug traffickers, some

went more smoothly. But the unpredictability of what police or drug traffickers would do created fear and stress for local residents. Often, schools in the areas where operations were conducted would close just in case a shootout occurred, and local residents might get stuck at home waiting for the operation to end. Some operations were over by mid-morning, when the police cars would clear out and life as usual would resume. Other operations lasted into the afternoon or evening, making it especially challenging for residents to get home.

When I asked residents about the purpose of these operations, I was told that they were mostly for show. In theory, police had a warrant to search a house for drugs or to arrest some for trafficking or for overstaying his prison leave,<sup>10</sup> though often police invaded homes without showing a warrant. Often, the stated reason for their entrance had nothing to do with the drug trade. On one occasion, for instance, I had walked past several police vehicles parked down the street, their blue and red lights flashing and officers clustered around, rifles in hand. Later that night I asked Esther and Maria Rita about it and found out that they were arresting a man who had not paid his child support. We had chuckled together at the irony. Rather than seeing these operations as the state's genuine effort to prevent the drug trade from retaking control of the neighborhood, residents perceived these as little more than a performance, a display of physical power that did little to subdue the drug trade but jeopardized residents' safety and threw the neighborhood into chaos as schools and businesses closed. Rafael, a 28-year-old man who had lived in the City of God his entire life and had seen many friends join the drug trade explained the police landscape to me: "The UPP come for money; the BOPE come to kill."

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<sup>10</sup> Brazil's prison system allows prisoners with good behavior to take short leaves of absence for family events, such as weddings or funerals. While prisoners are expected to report back to jail after their leave, many did not and stayed in hiding in the City of God.

## City of God in Flames

By the end of 2016, the differences between the UPP and the BOPE had become irrelevant as the tenuous coexistence between the UPP and drug traffickers ceased, police operations increased in frequency and intensity, and the neighborhood became a literal battlefield between the police and the drug trade. On a Saturday afternoon in November, 2016, a police helicopter went down on the outskirts of the City of God during a police operation. Immediately, reports on both the news and social media began to circulate suggesting that drug traffickers had shot down the helicopter. For two days, police and drug traffickers engaged in heavy combat. Homemade videos by residents proliferated Facebook and WhatsApp. Some videos captured the sounds of bullets, others showed images of deserted streets and trash cans on fire. On Sunday morning, the bodies of seven young men were discovered in the swamplands in the back of the City of God; some had been tortured, all had been shot behind the head (Aless and Rio 2016). There was little doubt among residents that the deaths had been committed by police officers in retaliation for the helicopter.

On Monday, a preliminary report was issued stating that the helicopter had no bullet holes; it had likely gone down due to mechanical malfunctioning (this was later confirmed). On the same day, a judge issues suspension of habeus corpus in the City of God and granted the police permission to enter (by force, if necessary) the homes of any residents suspected of involvement with the helicopter (Consultor Jurídico 2016). Again, residents took to social media to share images of broken doors and destroyed private property. The following day, residents took to the streets to protest the violation of their civil rights and the escalation of police violence. Several residents contacted human rights attorneys in the state government, and by Wednesday the judge's order had been reversed. Things calmed down for a few days, but

military operations remained constant into the City of God. In March, 2017, a 70-year-old man was shot and killed during a police operation, and several other civilians were wounded. A few months later, an adolescent boy was shot in the head by a stray bullet while he slept. The death toll was even higher among members of the drug trade, and several police officers were killed as well.

Across Rio, other favelas were witnessing a similar resurgence of the drug trade and increasingly aggressive police operations (HuffPost Brasil 2016; O Globo 2016). Homicides rates began to grow, particularly after the 2016 Summer Olympics (Barbara 2016; HuffPost Brasil 2016). The decline of the UPP has been attributed to a number of factors, including Rio's dismal economic situation in the wake of two expensive mega-events, the lack of political will to sustain the UPP after the events, and unwillingness among legal and political actors to hold police accountable for human rights violations, which weakened support among favela residents (Deutsche Welle 2016). Local residents suggested to me that the longer UPP officers stayed in the City of God and got to "make friends" with drug traffickers, the easier it had been to buy their complacency. Residents, already accustomed to the government's temporary fixes, had been anticipating the fall of the UPP since its inception.

The spike in homicides in the last two years in the City of God was only the tip of the iceberg, however. Esther's son, André, for instance, had missed a full week of school during the crisis with the helicopter and Esther and Maria Rita had missed many days of work. The local emergency room became overrun with bullet-wound victims, as well as people with high blood pressure, panic attacks, and anxiety. Sonia, a human rights activist whose story I describe in Chapter 7, died of a heart attack after getting stuck outside during a shootout. I knew of at least three other women who had died under similar circumstances. Additionally, many of the

services inaugurated at the height of the military occupation began to shut down. The House of Rights was the first to close, followed by the Popular Restaurant. The Youth Center remained officially open, but closed so often due to shootouts that it could no longer offer reliable services. The UPA was the only institution that continued to function at full capacity. In a meeting I attended with the new director of the UPA in September, 2017, he informed the group that the UPA was now functioning as a war hospital, having to attend multiple shooting victims a week. By 2017, it had become impossible to deny the deep, pernicious effects of the war between the police and drug traffickers on social development in the City of God.

As the news of the UPP decline in the City of God and other “militarized” favelas began to spread across Rio de Janeiro, scholars and journalists offered multiple explanations for the weakening of the UPP. These included including a lack of urban planning and investment in infrastructure, decreasing financial investments in the UPP due to the financial crisis of the State of Rio de Janeiro, lack of political support for the prosecution of police brutality in occupied areas, the withdrawal of the national army from some of the larger occupied territories, and loss of support for the UPP by local residents in response to violations of human rights (Deutsche Welle 2016; Fábio 2016). For City of God residents, the UPP’s control over the territory weakened because they became “friends” with local drug traffickers: they have formed relations with drug traffickers based on the exchange of control for money. The explanation is likely some combination of all of these factors, but most important is that, because City of God residents had little faith that the UPP would maintain control over the neighborhood, they continued to abide by the “laws of the favela” even during the “golden years” of militarization. The improvements in public security ultimately did little to encourage residents to directly

engage with political actors, to build partnerships with the police, or to speak out against the drug trade. Shootouts had decreased, but the political landscape remained largely unchanged.

## Social development in the context of public insecurity

Urbanization and development in the City of God have not taken the trajectory that is typically associated with a “favela” or “shantytown.” The most common measures of underdevelopment—housing informality, lack of electricity or water, rates of illiteracy or children unenrolled in school, etc—are much higher in the City of God than in the slums of Africa or southeast Asia. City of God’s struggles with infrastructure and social development remain pervasive however, though these operate in complex ways that are unlikely to be captured by many of the survey measures commonly used to study underdevelopment. As I described in Chapter 2, I worked with a team of residents to develop a questionnaire capable of capturing some of the challenges in their everyday lives. I describe these below, providing examples from my ethnographic research. Taken together, they demonstrate how unreliable public investments, dysfunctional bureaucracies, and insecurity work together to limit residents’ access to much-needed social goods.

The most noticeable feature upon entering the City of God as a foreigner is that it does not look like a slum. For one, only one tenth of households are informally constructed, and the vast majority of residents have access to electricity, running water, the sewage system, and cable TV (Souza 2010). Most roads are paved, and several households own a motorcycle or car. Unlike most favelas which wind into steep hills, the City of God is flat, which allows for easy access to nearly all areas of the neighborhood. The City of God is not highly transient. According to the survey I conducted in 2017, three-quarters lived in a home or apartment they

owned, and only 13% were renters. Many of the participants in my ethnographic study had lived in the same house their entire lives. While most homes had extensions built onto them by the homeowners for extended family members or friends, it was uncommon to find houses with than two or three-stories. Unlike other favelas, where building multiple stories up had become a major hazard, most housing infrastructure in the City of God was not at risk of collapsing. Because most homes were made of cement, the City of God rarely had issues with house fires, which are common in other informal settlements.

In addition to physical infrastructure, City of God residents had access to many of the services necessary for everyday living. The main areas of the neighborhood had shops that sold groceries, clothes, shoes, toys, and small appliances, and there was no shortage of nail salons, barbershops, gyms. Nearly every block had a bar, a restaurant, or a small storefront where people could buy hamburgers, *salgadinhos* (fried pastries filled with meat or cheese), açaí, ice cream, or other Brazilian munchables. As mentioned, the City of God had its own health clinic and emergency room, known as an UPA (Unit of Immediate Service). It also had a local welfare office, or CRAS (Reference Center for Social Assistance), a Youth Center, and many community-based, non-governmental organizations. Buses ran along the main avenue which cuts through the City of God, giving residents access to large commercial areas, universities, the city's business and cultural districts, beaches, shopping centers, and other urban amenities. The City of God also had twenty-six public preschool and primary schools (which went up through eighth grade). COMLURB, the municipal government's trash collection company, regularly picked up trash on most City of God streets, and, at least in theory, the mail service functioned there as well. On its face, the City of God appeared urbanized and well-serviced.

Gaining access to these services and getting ones' needs met, however, was a much more complicated affair. For instance, until the UPA was inaugurated in 2015, parents were required to arrive at the health clinic several hours before it opened to wait in line outside with their sick children. While the UPA had helped to address some of the immediate health needs of the population, many residents were turned away because they did not have the proper identification or did not reside in UPA's catchment area—an area that was constantly changing and caused much confusion for staff and residents. Often residents could not access a doctor with the right specialty. Camilla, in her early forties when I met her, had raised three children in the City of God. One day we were talking about her recent visit to the UPA with her 12-year-old son Marcos who had broken his arm: “The orthopedist only works on Thursday,” Camilla reported. “I told Marcos, next time you have to break your arm on a Thursday!” Camilla laughed, pleased with her joke. But the experience had not been so funny: she had lost an entire day of work shuffling him from the UPA to the public hospital in Barra, a 20-minute bus ride away, where he was finally seen by the orthopedist.

While City of God's most persistent residents were eventually able to get the services they needed, they were often required to argue with assistants, call friends for information or advice, and travel to multiple places before they were attended to. Often this process took several days, and resulted in missed work and a great deal of frustration. In our study, 34% of respondents had had to “fazer um barraco,” a colloquial term for ‘making a rucus,’ to be seen at the UPA. Even when seen, often doctors did not give patients a full exam, a situation that residents had term the “olheiro,” or “the once over,” which meant that they were diagnosed after a quick look from the doctor (no questions asked or body parts touched). In our study, 40% of residents had received at least one diagnosis this way, and in one third of cases, their medical

condition worsened following the diagnosis. Even more problematic were the long wait times for medical operations. While Brazil has one of the most extensive universal healthcare systems in the world, it is extremely difficult to navigate, has long waitlists, regularly runs low on staff and supplies, and routinely denies patients care for arbitrary administrative reasons. In our sample, 43% of households had at some point had a family member on a waitlist for surgery or other medical treatment, and 54% were still on a list. The average wait time for those who were eventually treated was two years.

The actual stories were horrendous. One man in his 60s had been limping and in pain for the last four years as he waited for his name to make it to the top of the waitlist for a much-needed knee surgery. I also heard cases of people who had not been home to receive the call when their name made it to the top of the list, and they had been bumped back to the beginning. At least one person I met refused to leave her phone unattended for this reason. For the last two years, she and her family members had “babysat” their home phone round the clock in order to avoid getting bumped. The fear of missing the call and the physical limits of being stuck at home for years because of a simple phone call surely impacted their economic mobility and social welfare. For others, the consequences were even more severe. In our study, eleven people had died while waiting for medical treatment. I also knew many people who had been unable to get basic health screenings, and by the time they discovered they had cancer or another serious condition, it was too late to be treated and they died shortly thereafter. While many wealthier Brazilian residents opted to pay for costly private health insurance to avoid these issues, only 14% of our sample had any private insurance. The people I knew personally who had private insurance, like Esther, got discounts on medication and preventative check-ups, but not on major surgeries.

While Brazil's dysfunctional bureaucracy created extreme problems for residents' physical well-being, the increasing insecurity had significantly impacted residents' physical and mental welfare by 2017. Over three quarters of our sample reported that at least one member of their household had mental or physical problems related to security issues. Sixty percent reported experiencing fear, 46% felt stress, and one third had anxiety, difficulty sleeping, sadness, or high blood pressure. Five percent of our sample had a household member hospitalized because of security issues, and three percent had a family member die as a result. The war in the City of God had many other consequences. In 2016, 88% of children had missed school because of shootouts, and 45% had missed more than ten days of school. Three quarters of children had also missed school because of teacher absences and maintenance issues. While our team hypothesized that teacher absences were probably also a consequence of shootouts, maintenance issues were likely a result of poorly-built infrastructure, bureaucratic and inattentive public utility companies, and insecurity, which often made it difficult for utility workers to enter the neighborhood to address maintenance issues. Although André, Esther's younger son, attended a private school, it seemed like at least once a week, if not more, I woke up to find stuck at home because of shootouts. While André was usually content to have the day off, I could tell from his challenges with completing homework that these unanticipated absences would severely affect his ability to compete in college entrance exams.

The repercussions of this frequency of school closings, which was itself a persistent problem in City of God's history, could be witnessed in its adult population: one third of our participants reported not completing primary school,<sup>11</sup> and only thirty percent had completed

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<sup>11</sup> I suspect the rate is closer to 45% of adults. 102 people did not answer this question, which was probably because they did not complete primary school but were embarrassed to answer.

secondary (high) school. A 2009 report claimed that 61% of all female heads of household in the City of God were illiterate (Cardoso et al. 2009). Not surprisingly, one quarter of our sample had struggled to secure employment due to lack of educational qualification. An additional 14% had been denied employment because they lived in a neighborhood considered a “favela,” and 10% of our participants had opted to not get a job outside the City of God so they could keep an eye on their children. Camilla, for instance, had been very fearful of leaving her home and leaving Marcos unattended. Marcos spent a lot of time with friends at their homes or in the street, and Camilla worried that he might get stuck in the middle of a shootout. She had nearly had a nervous breakdown in 2016 when it had taken her several hours to locate Marcos after a deadly shootout. Additionally, it was widely believed that a boy’s likelihood of joining the drug trade increased substantially if his mother was not around to keep an eye on him. While to my knowledge there has not been a study to confirm this, it seemed like a plausible assumption, and it created a great deal of pressure on mothers to turn down employment options outside the neighborhood, thereby sacrificing the possibility of making better money. Instead, many opted to do informal work from or near their home. While Camilla had eventually run out of options and taken a job cleaning a hair salon in a nearby middle-class neighborhood, it had come at a heavy cost: Marcos was left home unattended and Camilla spent much of her time at work worrying about his safety and texting him and her neighbors to make sure he was safe.

Our survey uncovered many more consequences of these overlapping issues with infrastructure, dysfunctional government services, and insecurity. For instance, while 70% of residents received their mail regularly, 40% of residents in the poor Karatê area (where about 34% of residents lived and which were notorious for frequent shootouts) did not receive their mail regularly. In an area where much was still done through paper, this could have major

implications. For instance, Leonardo, Esther's older son, had not received his mail in over a month, and as a result had not received the necessary paperwork to withdraw money from his latest paycheck. He had spent a month borrowing money from friends and family members to cover his expenses while he waited for the mail to arrive. Mobility was also an issue. Most respondents had trouble getting around the neighborhood or leaving the area because of shootouts. Mobility issues were compounded by changes in bus routes around the time of the Olympics. Many popular bus routes from the City of God to key points around the city had been discontinued and were never returned. Sixty percent of our respondents had witnessed an increase in commute times by more than an hour as a result of these changes, and many people had to quit their jobs or continuing education courses because they were no longer able to get there. Those who stayed had to sacrifice time with their families or other activities to stand on a crowded bus for an extra hour each way.

Furthermore, despite the city's investments in urbanization over the years, securing basic services was often challenging, and infrastructure was constantly breaking and plagued with delayed, costly, and incomplete repairs. In February, 2017, 85% of our respondents had lost power at least once, and one quarter had lost power at least five days in the previous month. If we had done the survey in January, the rates would have been much higher: much of City of God's energy (and water) was diverted to Barra during the holidays and major events to support the influx of tourists. When I had visited the City of God in January, the lights went out multiple times a day almost every day, sometimes for several hours and we were left with no lights internet, to power to charge our phones or computers, and therefore no way for residents to communicate with each other or to complete any work projects that relied on technology.

Almost three quarters of residents also had issues with overflowing sewers, clogged water pipes, roads that flooded or had major potholes, among other public infrastructure issues. Parks were also in disrepair, and one quarter of households had a child injured by broken play equipment in public parks. These problems were exacerbated by the challenge for utility repair people to enter the neighborhood during shootouts, which by 2016 had become a near-daily affair. Half of all City of God's residents had been officially denied service due to their residence in an "area of risk." As a result, residents had to repair many of these issues themselves. Camilla, for instance, had worked with her neighbors to pave their road several times because of flooding issues. In our survey, we asked residents how much they had spent from their own income to repair public infrastructure: our 989 respondents had spent a total of R\$26,000 on repairs in one year; in a population of 60,000, this number would exceed R\$1.5 million!

Not surprisingly, many residents I knew were desperate to leave the City of God. In our sample, one third of respondents had concrete plans to leave the City of God in 2017. Most of them were unlikely to succeed, however. Every year that I knew Esther she had declared that this would definitely be the year she would leave the City of God. However, it had been impossible to find a house outside the neighborhood for the amount she would make selling her current house or renting it. Nearly sixty percent of respondents reported that their household had devalued in the last two years; 45% of households devalued by more than R\$45,000, which approximates \$15,000 in US dollars, but is about equal in purchasing power parity. Rio's real estate prices are notoriously high and out of reach to most City of God residents, most of whom had a combined household income of less than two minimum monthly salaries (approximately R\$1800 or USD\$600). In fact, 40% of our respondents were not engaged in any paid work, and

only 20% had formal employment. Many relied on the forms of informal labor possible in the City of God, such as selling homemade food, doing nails or cutting hair, fixing cars, or working on construction projects for neighbors. I did meet one young woman who had managed to move out of the City of God with her mother. It had been a difficult decision for her, as she missed her friends and family members and the solidarity she had felt while in the City of God. To compensate, she maintained constant contact with the neighborhood by running professional tours of the cultural landscape in the City of God. She had come to refer to herself as a “refugee” who had been forced to evacuate the City of God because of its internal war. Meanwhile, Esther continued to concoct plans for how she might someday escape and bring her family with her.

### The Violences of Underdevelopment

Taken together, this survey and ethnographic data suggests that underdevelopment in the City of God was a product of intersecting forms of violence. For one, City of God’s residents faced multiple layers of structural violence, as witnessed by the overlapping barriers to their physical, psychological, social, and economic well-being, which were much more severe than among residents in Rio’s non-favela neighborhoods. Their close geographic proximity to middle-class neighborhoods and their constant interaction with non-favela residents (as employers, colleagues, friends, or on bus rides, in shopping centers, and in the media) provided them a constant reminder of the unequal distribution of resources and risk. It also exacerbated symbolic violence: middle and upper-class residents witnessed (often from the media or second-hand accounts) the differences between favela and non-favela neighborhoods, and often took these differences to be a result of moral depravity in favelas. As a result, favela residents—especially darker-skinned people who “looked” like “favelados” (the pejorative term for favela

residents)—were often discriminated by other city residents (Rocha, Pessoa, and Machado 2011). As the public security landscape became increasingly dangerous, many residents reported being denied jobs, supposedly because employers feared they would miss too much work because of being stuck at home due to shootouts. Media accounts increasingly reported violence in favelas, exacerbating perceptions of favelas as sites of marginality (Penglase 2007).

Furthermore, the above accounts demonstrate that the social underdevelopment of the neighborhood was directly affected by physical violence. This occurred directly, such as to those who were struck by a bullet or assaulted by a drug trafficker or police officer. More commonly, however, the effects of physical violence were a result of the chaos, unpredictability, and constant fear of violence. Even when state services were available, residents' actual access was significantly limited by the internal war. While our survey attempted to measure some of the ways in which insecurity impeded social development in the City of God, their overall effect was subtle, indirect, and cumulative. Any one of the issues we documented would be enough to cause challenges to residents' economic and social mobility; taken together they made it nearly impossible for people to escape violence and poverty.

Finally, political violence heavily exacerbated underdevelopment and insecurity in the neighborhood. Most obvious were the aggressive military operations conducted by the police, and the BOPE in particular. Not only were residents at risk of being hit by a stray bullet; many were also victims of violent police searches or saw their homes violently invaded. According to our survey, 42% of residents had been searched by the police and 14% had been victims of violent force during searches. We also documented hundreds of slurs—many racially-based—that police had shouted at local residents. While these issues were in themselves appalling and extremely harmful, political violence played out in an even more pernicious way: through the

close ties between violent drug traffickers and state actors, which made local governance structures virtually inaccessible to most local residents. I discuss these more in-depth in the following section.

## Governance in the context of insecurity

The relationship between the City of God and the state was a complicated one. An extensive body of scholarship has attempted to theorize this relationship, with two approaches dominating the field (Arias 2006a). While one body of literature views favelas as “feudal authoritarian states” that are politically and culturally separated, or “divided,” from the city (Rocha 2005; Ventura 1994), others point to the clientelistic practices that connect local drug lords with various licit state actors (Arias 2006b; Gay 1993). My objective in this section is to make two interventions in these approaches. First, I argue that while both of these claims have merit, what mattered more than the “objective reality” of the connections between illicit and state actors was how residents perceived openings and closures within and beyond local governance structures. Second, I make the obvious but often overlooked point that the Brazilian “state” in fact operates at multiple levels and is composed of multiple actors, and the relationships between these and the City of God is similarly varied. In fact, while local governance structures were largely perceived as inaccessible, many state actors were viewed as safe, or even as allies. I then offer a framework for understanding how residents distinguished between safe and dangerous political relationships, which will lay the foundation for the following three chapters, in which I analyze City of God’s micro-movements and the strategies and allegiances they leveraged in their mobilization efforts.

## Local governance structures in the City of God

Much has been written about the political closures in local governance structures in Rio's favelas. I define local governance structures as the network of institutions and actors—both public and private—who oversee decision-making, the administration of resources, and the enforcement of laws across the neighborhood. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, governance in favelas was mostly informal: local residents organized into residents' associations (or RAs) to discuss and resolve collective issues and conflicts, to organize infrastructure development, to distribute resources, and to bring collective demands to municipal and state government officials (Fischer 2008). These associations were informal insofar as they were not always formally registered or officially recognized by the state, though in many favelas they operated in an organized semi-democratic structure, holding regular elections and opening up discussions to all residents (McCann 2014). Associations would often collaborate with religious and other civic groups, particularly those organized by members of the Catholic church or favela residents working around housing rights. As the drug trade became increasingly consolidated and entrenched within favelas in the 1980s, however, elections were halted and association presidents who stood up to drug traffickers or refused to exchange their support for bribes were either expelled from the neighborhood or killed (Perlman 2010). Rather than dismantle the RAs, many drug lords put in their allies, who were charged with ensuring that neighborhoods decisions, resources, and mobilization efforts remained friends to the interests of the drug trade, whatever those may be.

As the argument goes, civil society in favelas unraveled under the drug trade as the main avenue for collective claims-making was cut off (McCann 2014). This happened in many ways. For one, social capital began to deteriorate as residents became distrustful of their neighbors and

fearful of the extremely brutal punishments that befell anyone who attempted to improve the neighborhood in ways that contradicted the interests of drug traffickers (Perlman 2010). At the same time, drug traffickers employed a range of strategies to maintain control, which further destabilized the social and political landscape. These included engaging in neo-clientelist tactics, wherein drug traffickers coerced favela residents to vote for politicians willing to do favors for drug traffickers (Arias 2013) and generating chaos and unpredictability by both creating “everyday emergencies” and also jumping in to resolve conflicts in order to remind residents of both their power and their beneficence (Penglase 2009). Drug traffickers also took over much of the distribution of local government resources, determining which residents would gain access to public housing, government grants, educational and social services, etc and took charge of enforcing the “laws of the favela” (Zaluar 1994), often in arbitrary and violent ways that further reinforced their control over residents through tactics of terror (Silva 2008).

Notably, the consolidation of the power of the drug trade from the 1980s to the present coincided with the consolidation of Brazil’s democratic state and the formalization and bureaucratization of the state apparatus, which sought to offer new openings for political engagement and an increased presence in favelas. In addition to the Residents’ Associations, the municipal government established Regional Administrations, which were charged with overseeing the establishment and maintenance of infrastructure, public housing, parks, and some of the schools and health care facilities, among other services. Public administrators from the various “Secretariats” in the municipal and state government began entering favelas like never before, relying heavily on local contacts to determine the needs of the neighborhood and how to distribute funds. The expansion of voting rights allowed favela residents to participate in municipal elections as both voters and candidates, and many candidates relied heavily on support

from favela residents. Not only were drug traffickers more powerful than before, but they had more avenues through which to access the state and control the distribution of resources in favelas.

Ultimately, these changes both exacerbated the divisions between the city and favelas while also creating new and stronger ties between the state and illicit favela actors. On the one hand, it produced a state within a state, leading some scholars to equate favelas with “narco-states,” wherein drug lords governed in opposition to the formal Brazilian state and imposed a set of rules, practices, and constraints on residents based on the interests of the drug industry and on violent forms of law enforcement (Larkins 2015). In my own fieldwork, there was little doubt that the rules governing behavior in the City of God were dramatically different from those in surrounding neighborhoods, and it was commonly understood that favelas were no-go zones for anyone other than local residents. At the same time, the ties between drug traffickers and state actors created a kind of “perverse integration” between the favela and the city (Zaluar 2004), wherein political actors conspired to maintain the power of the drug trade and to silence those attempting to change local conditions. The informal but legitimate governance structures that once characterized favela politics transitioned to a kind of formal and illicit governance apparatus that was officially recognized by the state but corrupt, illegitimate, and inaccessible to local residents.

In my formal interviews and informal conversations with residents, examples of the close ties between the drug trade and local political institutions and actors were rampant, though rarely were these first-hand accounts based on hard evidence of bribery or coercion. Residents were rarely able to directly observe the exchanges of money, favors, or threats that resulted in the uneven distribution of government money and resources in the neighborhood, but they could see

the consequences of these: people believed to be associated with drug traffickers often ended up with more than everyone else, and were often vested with the power to distribute resources to their friends, family members, and other allies. There was also a circular logic, however: anyone overseeing the distribution of resources was presumed to be complicit with the drug trade. The one reinforced the other in the collective imaginary of the neighborhood. For the sake of my residents' (and my own) safety, I have chosen not to offer specific examples of these here or to hypothesize about which specific actors were and were not engaged in criminal activities. In any event, it is not necessary. The actual conversations, agreements, bribes and threats that took place behind the scenes were not what determined residents' social or political behavior. Instead, these were determined by the shared assumptions about who was in charge, what their rules were, and what consequences might result from the violation of laws. I turn to this next.

### Public Security, Violent Governance

Even in 2014, at the height of UPP control over public security, it was widely believed that the drug trade continued to govern the neighborhood. Although the drug trade was still barely visible in most public spaces, residents believed that drug traffickers had lookouts who kept an eye on whether residents were still abiding by the laws of the favela and if anyone was giving information to the police. They feared that if the UPP eventually lost control over the City of God and the drug trade returned, they would have to pay for these violations. Even in 2014, when no drug sales or weapons were visible on the streets, I had been shocked to see how residents' demeanor changed when I asked them about the drug trade. Often my interviewees' shoulders rounded as they leaned in, hovering over their laps and glancing sideways over their shoulders to ensure that passersby were not listening to our conversation. Their expression and manner of speaking changed from an animated, clear, and sometimes loud and inflective

diatribe—about the government, the UPP, their noisy neighbors—to a soft, barely intelligible series of code words, pauses, half-stories, and unfinished sentences. Admittedly, I spent the first dozen interviews asking questions about these codes and stories in an effort to clarify what they meant. My questions often sounded ridiculous to my interviewees as I attempted to attach clear descriptions to their codes. Take this instance, in 2014, with a middle-aged woman who had been living in the City of since she was 18:

Me: Who makes, who do you think makes the decisions about the City of God?

Participant: Ih, ih, ih... (Solange raises her eyebrows, then looks down anxiously at her hands).

Me: Or maybe there are various different groups...?

Participant: There are many different groups. So, then they come, you know, those parallel powers<sup>12</sup>, right? They are the ones who decide, right? It's not us (shakes her head), it's not us. So there are, there are many transactions, many negotiations that are not by the residents, we are weak, we have to follow the orders.

Me: And who gives the orders?

Participant: Well, unfortunately the people in power, who are not the government... (Solange gives me a look, glances outside, looks back at me so as to send me a message without speaking it aloud).

Me: Even with the UPP?

Participant: Even with the UPP, even with the UPP.

Me: And are the orders specific or are they, like, understandings?

Participant: Understandings (she sighs). The UPP doesn't control much around here.

If the excerpt above seems leading, it was. Residents were often so fearful of speaking about the drug trade that I often opted to speak the words aloud myself rather than pressure them

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<sup>12</sup> In 1996, Elizabeth Leeds, an influential sociologist among Brazilian scholars, published an article in which she termed the drug trade the “parallel power,” denoting the authority that the drug trade had in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, which threatened the control of the state over these communities. Her term has become popularized and is commonly utilized by favela residents to refer to the drug trade.

to do so. As this painful conversation demonstrates, even in the absence of the visible control of the drug trade, it maintained power through shared “understandings” about their power and what types of behaviors were expected of local residents. Drug traffickers seldom gave direct orders, and these were rarely written down.<sup>13</sup> These understandings were produced by an ongoing and dynamic process of observation, information sharing, discussion, and trial and error. Maria Rita described this process to me once. Camilla, described above, had become one of her key “informants” because Camilla lived near several drug traffickers, had several contacts with people in the drug trade (including her adolescent daughter, who dated a member of the drug trade), and tended to hear a lot of the gossip:

Me: How do you know what’s going on?

Maria Rita: For example, I always ask Camilla, ‘what is happening?’

Me: Camilla always knows?

Maria Rita: Camilla always knows: ‘This is this, and this was this.’ Then I say, ‘Well I heard this and this,’ and then Antonio says, ‘Well I heard something different,’ and then we start putting things together and are like, ‘Oh, ok, so it’s this.’ We start synchronizing [our stories]. (Maria Rita chuckles)

On a daily basis, I observed this process of collective knowledge construction as residents discussed what they had witnessed, heard, or read about on Facebook or WhatsApp text messaging groups to figure out which drug lords were in charge of which areas, who had been killed recently and for what reason, which government grants or resources had gone to whom, which politicians had come to visit and who they had been seen talking to, and more. While residents relied heavily on rumors, gossip, and these informal processes of truth-making, much

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<sup>13</sup> One exception were the “notices” spray-painted on walls by drug traffickers instructing residents to keep the area clear of trash. On one occasion I walked past an enormous pile of garbage in front of a government sign that said “Trash Forbidden Here.” The local resident walking with me said, “If the sign had been from the CV (Comando Vermelho), this would all be clean.” In fact, I had walked past several spots in the neighborhood with spray-painted signs by the CV commanding the area to be kept clean—they were always clean.

of this information was unreliable. Maria Rita was especially conscious of the issues that arose from these collective narratives: “Sometimes messages get spread on WhatsApp that the *milicia* is coming to invade, or that some other drug faction is going to invade, and people get all worked up and anxious and it turns out not to be true.” At other times, misinformation could lead to more direct consequences. On one occasion, a photo circulated on WhatsApp of a man raping a young child, though the man’s face could not be made out. A woman accused her ex-husband’s cousin, and his name and picture began to circulate social media. He claimed innocence, but he was forced to flee from his home before drug traffickers arrived to punish him for the supposed infraction. Some accused were unable to escape. Maria Rita’s sister-in-law’s brother was accused by his ex-wife of raping her daughter—a claim that was later disproved, but only after he was brutally tortured and killed. What these stories suggest is that much of what happened in the City of God was determined by shared perceptions and beliefs, produced by rumors and lack of investigative work into the veracity of each claim. While they sometimes led to dire consequences for individuals, they also constructed a larger narrative of politics and insecurity in the neighborhood.

In the City of God, the product of shared understandings was a perception that all local political actors with access to resources—including leaders in Residents’ Associations, the Regional Administration, wealthy religious leaders or the presidents of community-based organizations with a lot of money or political clout—must be in cahoots with drug traffickers and corrupt politicians. This sentiment was not unique to favelas, as Brazilians are extremely distrustful of politicians and people with great wealth and power in general thanks to a long history of clientelist politics. Distrust of politicians had recently worsened after multiple corruption scandals implicating nearly all top politicians, including former President Dilma

Rouseff (who was impeached for misallocation of funds in 2016), the current President Michel Temer, and hundreds of others. The difference, however, was that the governance structures in the City of God were viewed as not just corrupt and ineffective, but extremely dangerous. Getting involved with any actors who might have ties to the drug trade could result in torture and death.

This is not say that residents did not become engaged in clietelist practices in the City of God. To the contrary, the rumors I heard suggested that close ties between the drug trade and many local residents—including religious leaders, small business owners, directors of community-based organizations, and other community leaders—were quite common. While these ties were risky, there was much to be gained from them, and it was clear that much of the decision-making and resource allocation in the neighborhood traveled across these networks. My argument is that this was not the only mechanism through which claims were made, resources were distributed, and rights were enforced. In fact, an alternative political system existed in the City of God which has been overlooked by scholars of urban violence because its actors were not members of, or complicit with, violent governance structures. Ideologically, this political system operated in direct opposition to the violent and corrupt political practices of local governance. In practice, it almost entirely bypassed these networks.

### **Moral Politics: The Counter-Sphere of Violent Politics**

Not only were City of God's local governance structures viewed as violent and corrupt, they were also viewed as illegitimate. Most residents I met saw local political institutions and actors as morally distinct from (even if connect to) the legitimate foundations of a liberal democratic state, which was, at least in theory, governed by a constitutional framework, a set of political, civil, and social rights, and a system of laws and law enforcement. *Moral politics* were

those that most closely reflected these foundations of democratic governance. Said differently, moral politics were counter-institutional: they were those most distant from the devices used to govern the City of God under the drug trade and the corrupt and opaque channels of Brazilian politics. The organized movements I describe in the following three chapters ascribed to a shared understanding of moral politics in both ideology and practice. While they varied in terms of *how* to improve the neighborhood and effect broader social change, and were not always successful in fulfilling the ideals of moral politics, there was a solid and clearly identifiable shared narrative that inspired and guided their efforts.

### Non-Violence

For one, moral politics hinged on a discourse of non-violence. At its most basic, this meant an ideological rejection of all physical forms of violence and their renunciation as a tool for gaining resources, power, or allies. The only exception, in theory, was the police, who, they believed, should use the threat of violence to enforce the laws (though, in practice, police were often violators of the very laws they were supposed to enforce). Among (civilian) residents, however, professions of being opposed to violence were common throughout the neighborhood among both activists and non-activists insofar as it helped to distinguish themselves from the “bandits.” Among the activists I met, however, their opposition to violence extended beyond physical aggression to a fight against structural, symbolic, and political violence, which they saw as both producers and products of the physical violence of the police and drug traffickers. For instance, Clara, a middle-aged black woman who ran a small community-based organization and had helped to found an umbrella organization in the City of God, is a case in point. Clara had lost four of her relatives—a brother, a brother-in-law and two nephews—who had been assassinated due to involvement with the drug trade. Her brother, 21-years-old at the time of his death, had

been shot 25 times. Clara blamed these deaths and the struggles of favela residents directly on the state:

A lot of the families, like, they were involved [in the drug trade] because they didn't have a crib (a supportive upbringing), they didn't have support. I saw it like this, my mother's sadness, and I started to understand that my mom would leave, my dad would leave, because they had to work. And I understood the necessity and the support that my brothers didn't have in that moment because my parents had to leave to put bread on the table, you know?

For Clara, poverty had forced both of her parents to work long hours, depriving her brother of strong role models and the familial support needed to keep him out of the drug trade. Despite years of working to help poor families in the City of God by providing free daycare services to local children, Clara had routinely felt undervalued by government authorities who were unwilling to fund her organization. For Clara, this was tied to racism embedded within the state that made the government disregard the work of favela residents:

They (the government) don't respect our work. They don't see our work as work. Sometimes I think to myself: "Man, we talk about the abolition of slavery, right? That Princess Isabel freed the slaves..." I think we continue in chains. Because our labor today, still today is not recognized. I think we continue chained. Because if they understood, if they understood our territory and recognized our work... [her voice trails as she pauses in thought]... Because our work needs to be recognized, that we are builders. That we are builders of our history of work in our territory.

The relationship between physical violence, racism, and economic inequality permeated the discourses of many residents. Vasconcelo, a middle-aged black man who had lived in the City of God since it was founded in 1966, was extremely critical of the state's role in promoting physical, structural, and symbolic violence. According to Vasconcelo:

There is an important question... the racial question. You know? And the second question is this question of violence, you know? Violence within the job market, because, when you tell people that you live in the City of God,... you know? And then is the question of being a woman, you know? And this is really heavy... Unemployment, disrespect by the police. There are police who at night... how can I explain this? Rape, actually. You know? Depending on where you go at night in here, if you are alone, it's dangerous.

Vasconcelo, having suffered harassment by the police many times as a result of his race and gender, was especially aware of the racism of the state. His personal experiences of violence as a black favela resident informed a broader understanding of how other factors, like gender, also promoted vulnerability. By identifying the myriad mechanisms through which risk and inequality structured daily life in the City of God, Vasconcelo and Clara were able to connect the symbolic, structural and physical violence of the state to the victimizations in their neighborhood. Like Clara, Vasconcelo had founded a small organization that promoted racial pride and provided residents with basic employment skills.

### Legitimacy

Second, moral politics depended, in both ideology and practice, on legitimacy. Because City of God's activists eschewed the use of weapons or ties to violent actors as resources for power, their capital in the City of God was their reputation for operating outside violent and corrupt governance structures. In order to gain support from other residents, their most potent tool was their appeal to residents' moral rejection of violence and their promise to fight for a neighborhood governed by just, transparent, democratic governance processes. In other words, they operated on an anti-institutional logic. This was not an easy status to maintain. In a neighborhood where allegiances were constantly shifting and new actors were being co-opted by illicit actors, simply declaring oneself an activist or starting a social service organization were not sufficient to "prove" one's commitment to moral politics. Particularly in a neighborhood where "truth" was constructed through hearsay and rumors, what activists actually did mattered less than what people believed they did. Many social service organizations (and their staff) lost their legitimacy among residents when rumors spread that government grants they had received had gone into their own pockets rather than the promised activities. In other cases, organizations

with too many resources were presumed to offer favors to the drug trade in exchange, such as allowing them to store guns, drugs, or money for local drug traffickers or using the organization as a front to launder money.

As a result, one's legitimacy was constantly in doubt. A reputation as a moral actor was not something one could simply attain: it had to be constantly fought for and maintained.

Consider the case of Solange, the director of Youth Promise, the subject of Chapter 5. Youth Promise was founded in 2006 and provided recreational activities and civic education to children and adolescents. After a few years of running one of the most well-respected community-based agencies in the City of God, a local politician called her office with an offer to donate T-shirts for the children in her organization. She politely declined. "No way!" Solange exclaimed when she hung up the phone. "How come?" I asked. "Because then my picture shows up next to his in the newspaper with the new t-shirts, and then a month later he gets arrested for some corruption scheme, and there I am, like an idiot, smiling into the camera, next to him. What will people say? That I was involved also." On another occasion, Solange was approached by a resident with known ties to the drug trade who offered to let her use his vacant building to provide dance and karate lessons for the children in her program. Although Solange needed the space, she had declined the offer, "Because then, soon enough, he would start asking me for favors (for the drug trade) and I would have no choice but to do them." Solange preferred to limit her resources and visibility, even if it meant sacrificing the full potential of Youth Promise, in order to avoid any connection with the drug trade. In both practice and appearance, Solange guarded the legitimacy of her organization as if it were a fragile vase that could shatter at any moment.

The need to distance oneself from the drug trade created other problems. In the City of God, any individual or agency viewed as well-resourced was seen with suspicion, since residents knew well how difficult it was to come by resources through fully legal channels. Because Youth Promise had managed to provide a range of activities for hundreds of children free of cost for many years, her organization had become an object of suspicion:

Solange: People don't understand how we can accomplish what we accomplish without money. 'Humph, it is not possible'... Before, people even said, that I made a lot [of money], right?...So because of that people were always worried...It's like I said, sometimes I get worries about this. People are like: "Man, how is it that Youth Promise is able to do a bunch of stuff without money?"

Me: So there is suspicion? They get suspicious that you are involved with something like that [drug trade]?

Solange: Yeah, yeah. 'How can this be?' And I say, 'People, I've been doing this since 2002, since 2002!'

Solange went on to describe the myriad resources she pieced together to make ends meet, relying heavily on donations and volunteers. On many occasions Solange and I sat on her couch while she told me, often through teary eyes, about her stress and exhaustion from having to constantly look for resources to keep things running. Despite her constant refusal to take favors from politicians or drug traffickers, she had been unable to fully avoid the suspicions of some local residents. In fact, the perceived ties between success and the drug trade created a larger culture that pressured service providers to keep their efforts small and unobtrusive for the sake of legitimacy. This became a barrier around which residents had to navigate in order to avoid being linked in the public imaginary with the "immoral" economy of violent politics. Additionally, the real threat of being brought into a relationship with illicit actors forced residents to remain under the radar and to avoid close ties with anyone who might be tied to local violent political actors. The fear of losing one's legitimacy because of an appearance of success provoked a deep and

often subconscious self-surveillance among City of God's organizations. This self-surveillance also kept them small and fragmented, unable to work together to organize into a more cohesive and structured social movement

### Avoidance

Moral politics in the City of God relied on a third, related strategy: near-total avoidance of direct confrontation with local governance institutions and actors, especially the drug trade. Not only were activists required to avoid ties to the drug trade, they also had to avoid becoming their enemies. While the ideological sphere that motivated City of God's moral political landscape operated in direct opposition to violence and corruption, in practice local activists who attempted to challenge local drug traffickers or political actors with ties to the drug trade were likely to be expelled, tortured, or killed, and there had been plenty of examples of this. Even some of the activists I interviewed had received threats. For instance, one of my participants started to speak out against the loud, all-night *baile funk* parties hosted by drug traffickers. A few days later, she received a knock at her door by members of the drug trade, warning her that if she did not stop talking about the parties she would have to “unwind”<sup>14</sup> with the local drug lord. Other residents had heard bits and pieces of her story, and it had served as a warning to them to be extremely careful in avoiding any local issues that might be perceived as a direct affront to the drug trade.

Geovana's long history of activism in the City of God is instructive of how, in practice, residents avoided the drug trade. During one of our interviews, Geovana told me the story of a

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<sup>14</sup> The “desenrolo,” or “unwinding” entailed being taken (sometimes by force) to the home of the local drug lord or some secluded location in the City of God where, at best, they would be reminded of the consequences that might befall them if they continued their activities. At worst, the “unwinding” could—and often did—result in rape, torture, or death.

young man, João do Cabo, who had been killed by drug traffickers in the late 1980s. Like Geovana, João helped to organize local residents to advocate for housing rights. Instead of mobilizing political action aimed at the municipal government, João organized a housing cooperative, in which he gathered money from residents and put it towards the construction of new homes. João had initially received tacit permission from the drug trade, who wanted to see improvements in the availability of housing but could not themselves be the public face of the movement. However, according to Geovana, João began to “conscientizar os moradores,” to raise awareness about political issues among residents. He began holding secret meetings in his house at night, when he knew the drug traffickers would be out selling drugs, talking about how residents should have the power in the community and that they should not allow the drug trade in their neighborhood. His plan backfired. According to Geovana:

They [the drug traffickers] went and got him at his house, put a hood over his head, took him out of his house and made him dig his own grave, put a gun in the hand of a young boy [and made him shoot him]. He died, was buried. The women came to my house [to tell me. He was shot] in front of the women. He was dead and buried.

During one of our informal after-dinner chats, Esther and Maria Rita began talking about João do Cabo without my bringing it up. Apparently, his murder had become a part of City of God’s collective memory. According to Esther, he had been brutally tortured before he was finally killed. While the details that Esther recalled of his death seemed to vary from Geovana’s account, João’s death had served as an enduring reminder of what happened to those who attempted to challenge the drug trade.

I asked Geovana how she had managed to avoid the same fate as João. According to Geovana, “I always, always had the wisdom to never directly attack them head on (“bater de frente com eles”). I never challenged them directly.” At one point in the late 90s, Geovana and several colleagues had run a talk show on City of God’s community radio station:

I'd get home and the drug traffickers [from my block] would cluster around me on my way home, and say, "Miss Geovana, we are listening to you." So it was a message. I did my work that didn't deal [with the drug trade]. But we also didn't announce the baile funk, or the deaths of [drug traffickers]. We didn't announce any deaths actually, so we wouldn't have to announce theirs either, you understand? So you had to have wisdom to not affront [them]...Our philosophy was the following: we are not police, we are not the justice department, we are not responsible for security. This issue was not our business.

I asked Geovana if they were conscious of this approach, if it required explicit discussion to navigate when and how to talk about security issues or anything related to the drug trade:

No, it was just common knowledge, it was understood...I just learned it...You notice that people are not talking about that. And sometimes people from the City of God would come and say 'Oh, we want to talk about this,' and [we'd say], 'No, we don't talk about that issue. Not that issue.'

As Geovana's response suggests, City of God's activists survived by completely avoiding any discussion of security issues or the drug trade. Instead, they focused on social development issues and explicitly rejected requests by residents to bring up matters of insecurity.

Furthermore, like Solange, Geovana also avoided any collaborations with drug traffickers and did not allow them to participate in her mobilization efforts insofar as she could avoid it. The drug trade and other participants of local governance structures were to be avoided at all costs. Fortunately, there were many resources at their disposal beyond local political institutions, a theme I return to below.

### A gendered landscape of power

A note on the gendered dynamics of moral politics must be made. The strength of violence as a structuring element in the everyday life of the City of God helped to produce a gendered political landscape that pitted a hypermasculine security landscape against a "feminized" social landscape where residents—and women in particular—could take charge. The links between masculinity and insecurity in the City of God could be viewed through (a) the sexed and gendered bodies of the primary aggressors; (b) the violent practices that were

employed to maintain dominance over the physical territory; and (c) the narratives that residents constructed around violent actors that defined them as aggressive and immoral. By constructing this set of bodies, actions, and narratives as the primary obstacle to the well-being of the neighborhood, space opened up for an alternative politics that employed more “feminized” attributes, including (a) female leaders; (b) “feminine” social and political actions that focused on kindness, assistance, and patience; and (c) a feminist politics that linked women’s vulnerability to other forms of violence.

Violence and masculinity are closely linked, and are often viewed as mutually constitutive. Raewyn Connell defines masculinity as a socially constructed set of practices within a system of gender relations that are intended to sustain inequality both between men and women and among men (Connell 2005). While masculine power can be achieved through many forms depending on which elements are valued in any given context (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), violence is one of the most potent tools for men to attain status and guarantee their dominance over women and other men (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Messerschmidt 2000). The use of violence to gain power can be found in interpersonal interactions, such as through sexual assault (Hearn 1998; Kaufman 1987), intimate partner abuse (Anderson 2013; Yllö and Bograd 1988), as well as through group conflict, like in gang violence (Baird 2012) and warfare (Cockburn 2004; Enloe 2007; Hutchings 2008). In each of these cases, the local dynamics and the specific uses of violence help to produce contextually-specific notions of masculinity, thereby defining the people, practices, and narratives critical in establishing dominance.

In the City of God, violence structured gendered relations in several ways. For one, the vast majority of “experts in violence”—police officers and armed drug traffickers—were men.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, most of Brazil’s politicians are men, and the vast majority of corruption scandals or arrests also involved men. As a consequence, the perpetration of violence provided men in both the police and the drug trade greater belonging, status, and “proof” of their ability to enact a locally-sanctioned form of masculinity. Male residents often complained about harassment from (male) police officers, who frisked them aggressively in public as a display of power and control. Additionally, several young men I met who had opted to stay out of the drug trade complained that they had a much harder time finding a girlfriend because “the girls go after the guys with guns” (Nascimento, Gomes, and Rebello 2009). Alba Zaluar (2001) has also documented the ways in which young men in Rio’s favelas utilized guns and violence as a way to enact masculinity when other avenues—such as status or money through formal employment—were inaccessible to them (see also (Bourgois 2003a)). While there were women engaged in violence as police officers, members of the drug trade, or participants in clientelism or corruption schemes, the dynamics of local (and national) politics were decisively masculine. Ultimately, the discursive ties between physical violence and illegal and immoral negotiations helped to place much of the local political system within the symbolic and moral masculine sphere.

While the local governance landscape in the City of God was deeply masculine, the counter-sphere of moral politics was decidedly feminine. With few exceptions, most of the formal and informal leaders of City of God’s movements were women, and more than half of its

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<sup>15</sup> There were a few female UPP officers, but among the BOPE and the CORI, the police teams best known for brutality and aggression, there were virtually no female officers. While many women participated in the drug trade by helping to transport drug cargo or passing along information between incarcerated traffickers and those on the ground, they were rarely the perpetrators of physical violence and rarely were allowed to carry or fire weapons. Physical aggression and shootouts were therefore perceived as activities belonging to men.

active members were also women. Female leaders were active in constructing their own narratives and practices of change, making key decisions about their organization's activities and strategies that were, with few exceptions, well-respected by male and female participants. In other words, women had both organizational and symbolic power within City of God's spheres of social action.

In many respects, however, this was not a choice: the visible activities and public discourses allowed within the landscape of moral politics *had* to be feminine. If discourses or activities associated with masculinity or hyper-masculinity were employed, these were likely to be seen as a direct challenge to violent masculine politics and would have endangered activists. As a result, most activities employed by the City of God were either explicitly feminine, or were disguised as feminine. Much of the everyday activities conducted by City of God's organized movements included caring for children or other vulnerable members of the community, making art and poetry, and focusing mobilization on social services (housing, healthcare, education, etc) rather than security. Leaders and participants also emphasized, at least in discourse, principles of service and self-sacrifice, mutual support, and commitment to nurturing and giving a helping hand. In more private settings—such as between the core groups of activists or in interviews with me—many activists employed more politicized terminology and often eschewed traditional feminine notions and practices. In public, however, feminized talk and activities were necessary for survival. As a result, it would be easy for scholars or outsiders to confuse these movements as apolitical and normative forms of social resilience, rather than as collective political action.

One device that residents were able to use to speak politically in the public realm was to discursively link local issues with the politics of feminism and racial justice, two struggles that did not directly challenge violent politics in the City of God but did make demands for structural

and symbolic change. Many activists in the City of God employed a discourse of social change that explicitly rejected violent forms of attaining power and that embraced a feminist perspective that valued equality across genders, as well as class, race, and sexual orientation. Consider this comment by Jordana, a 21-year-old college student who had recently written a report on a new group called *Fighting Women*, started by young women in the City of God offering self-defense classes to other women:

The Fighting Women, I consider a political act, you know, when you realize the violence that women suffer, especially women from the periphery, and that most of these women are black and you know when we see this violence daily, I think it's necessary to have this kind of defense, of resistance. Because this is a form of resistance for women.

In her reflection on these efforts, Jordana linked violence to the affront on black women from favelas and described the importance of self-defense and resistance. At the same time, she was careful to not highlight the ways in which drug traffickers explicitly hurt women. By focusing on gender and race discourses, Jordana was able to oppose violence without becoming engaged in a battle with or about local political actors. Taken together, these discourses helped to produce a narrative of social change that rejected violence as a way to address identity politics and to attain power and status within the community. Ultimately, City of God's social movements reflected a new kind of "parallel power" (Leeds 2006), wherein female bodies, feminized practices, and feminist/raced discourses played a core structuring role in moral politics that took violent masculinity as its main object of change. Though they did not directly challenge local violent actors, these narratives played an important role in disrupting traditional notions of violence, politics, and masculinity, and offering alternative political forms, as Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian similarly found in her work on Palestine (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005).

## Governance beyond the local

While much of the literature on politics in favelas focuses on the closures in local governance structures, the Brazilian state actually operates at multiple levels by actors in various roles and with varying access to resources and illicit actors. Since activists in City of God's social movements were unable to engage local governance structures, they identified and capitalized on other points of entry into the state. While the following three chapters provide detailed examples of how residents leveraged their relationships with state actors, I briefly lay out a framework for identifying the mechanisms by which activists determined which resources could be demanded, under what conditions, and to which state actors.

## Demand and Distribution of Resources

Because drug traffickers were also local residents and had family and friends in the neighborhood, they had a personal interest in seeing an expansion of resources, particularly in relation to social development and infrastructure. For activists, finding those shared interests allowed them to advocate for resources without causing issues with drug traffickers. For instance, organized campaigns by residents demanding more public housing, more (or better) schools, improvements in services at the health clinic, or better infrastructure were, to a point, tacitly supported by drug traffickers who also wanted to benefit from these services. In fact, several armed men had stopped our research assistants while we were conducting door-to-door surveys to ask about the project, and we told them the survey was about the "social needs of the community." Many had expressed their approval of our efforts, and a few even asked to be interviewed for the survey. On my final day in the City of God, one of our research assistants videotaped me in the street as I explained the survey for a documentary we planned to make. Three armed men walked over and stood, arms crossed, behind the research assistant watching

me talk into the camera. When I was done speaking, they asked what we were doing. I ran inside to grab some flyers of our findings and handed them to the drug traffickers while the RA—a local resident—explained what we had had done. “Wow!” one had exclaimed, looking at the colorful flyer. “This is really cool what you guys are doing, trying to make our community better. We need a lot of stuff. Nice work.” They walked away, reading through the flyer attentively.

However, drug traffickers only supported these initiatives insofar as they did not jeopardize their drug operations or their territorial control. As Leonardo put it once: “The guys [drug traffickers] will support us, but only as long as it helps them.” According to Leonardo, drug traffickers “depend on the City of God remaining a favela. It’s because we are favela, because we are poor and don’t function properly, that they are able to sell drugs here. If we improve too much, they won’t be able to do that. So they want to live here, and want to show that they care about the neighborhood, but they also want it to stay like it is.” I suspect that individual drug traffickers did want to see their children attend good schools and their parents receive good medical care. But as a collective, they relied on the absence of strong state institutions to maintain control over the neighborhood. Organized campaigns for resources were allowed, but only as long as they weren’t *too* successful.

While the demand for more urban services from the state could mostly be conducted without interference from the drug trade, the actual distribution of resources, once they arrived could be contentious and violent. The distribution of public resources followed a complex logic which activists understood well and had to constantly negotiate. There were two important patterns of distribution that impacted where residents could intervene and where they could not. The first was the *spatialization* of resources, the second was the *materiality* of resources.

Not all resources are distributed at the neighborhood level. Some are channeled directly through the federal government, such as welfare checks from *Bolsa Familia*, which were deposited directly into individual checking accounts, or access to hospitals or medical treatment administered by *SUS*, the national healthcare system. Other resources were overseen by the state or municipal government with almost no involvement from neighborhood administrators, such as schools, the local health clinic, trash collection, and mail distribution. While the latter were more permeable to unfair “redistribution” at the neighborhood level, there was usually very little that could be controlled at the local level. Some resources, however, were distinctly neighborhood resources, such as public housing units or small government grants to support local resources that had been slated *specifically for the City of God*. These had a distinctly spatial logic, and were often hotly contested. Neighborhood-level decision-making, like which streets would get paved first or which families would get access to new public housing, could be controlled by local actors. For activists, the struggles over non-spatialized resources could be waged directly with the state, while battles over spatialized resources would have to be fought with local violent actors. Needless to say, the former were much safer than the latter. Attempts by activists seeking to enforce a more even distribution of neighborhood-based resources could be a deadly affair.

Furthermore, not all resources are material. In fact, many of the services that City of God’s residents needed, such as better care by doctors, higher-quality teaching, functioning water and electricity, or regular trash collections, were not things that one could take home or exchange for favors. Usually, improvements in these services meant that everyone benefitted. Other resources, such as money, the title to a public housing unit, or a slot in the best preschool in the City of God, were more tangible goods that could be fought over. While activists often

advocated for material goods, as well as improvements in service provision, their actual distribution was much more contentious. As a result, activists rarely engaged in the struggle over the distribution of neighborhood-based material resources.

## Engaging the State

Although local governance structures were essentially impermeable in the City of God, Brazil's extensive state apparatus extended far beyond and below this level of governance. In fact, the state was constituted by a range of institutions, networks, and actors, each of which had a different function and relationship to the City of God. These included elected officials, administrators appointed by elected officials, and civil servants who were hired based on their scores on public exams. They included bureaucrats (administrators, managers, etc), direct service workers (such as doctors, trash collectors, and teachers), and police officers. Some state actors, such as the mayor and the "secretaries" in charge of each municipal office, had a great deal of power to make decisions, distribute resources, and oversee the implementation of projects and services. Others, like garbage collectors, had virtually no say in how the state functioned.

As I describe in the following chapters, activists directly engaged a range of state institutions and individual actors. I identified two distinct logics of state engagement among activists. The first were mostly-collaborative relationships with state actors either stationed in or regularly engaged in the City of God but who had little access to neighborhood-level material resources. These usually included low or mid-level administrators or direct staff at schools, healthcare facilities, the welfare office, or the youth center who could offer information, ideas, and contacts to more powerful actors in the state but who themselves had little access to the resources that drug traffickers or corrupt community leaders might want. Lacking control over

resources, there would be little reason for drug traffickers to attempt to co-opt them. They were likely to be trusted allies.

The second group of state actors whom City of God activists targeted were politicians or powerful bureaucrats *outside the neighborhood* who were unlikely to have direct ties to local governance structures or to be deeply involved in neighborhood-level disputes. These included elected or appointed officials at the federal, state, and municipal levels of government, or bureaucrats who oversaw the various public agencies operating public services. While City of God activists presumed that many of these state actors were probably being “bought” by someone for something, and that these illicit connections might complicate their ability to be fairly attended to, their political and physical distance from the neighborhood minimized the risk that they were specifically engaged in relations with drug traffickers or corrupt political actors in the City of God. In other words, these relationships were often based on distrust and contention, but were rarely dangerous. However, targeting political actors with actual power was critical to making demands for social change and for improvements in the neighborhood.

### [Demanding security](#)

A brief note should be made on the possibilities for demanding security within the City of God. As previously noted, residents were explicitly forbidden from mobilizing against the drug trade. Even more indirect efforts to decrease the political power of the drug trade were quickly suppressed, such as when my participant began speaking out against the *baile funk*. However, there were some important openings for non-violent activists to demand security. For one, mobilizing against police brutality was not only allowed, but encouraged. Drug traffickers were, for obvious reasons, opposed to police interventions into the neighborhood; any organized activities that advocated against the police was welcomed. Imprisoned drug traffickers have

even drawn publically on the narratives of racial justice against police racism and brutality to accuse the state of violating their human rights (Holston 2008). Furthermore, residents have, at times, successfully waged small-scale protests against “violence and insecurity” stated generally. The survey I helped to organize contained several questions about the effects of “insecurity” on individuals, and even drug traffickers who participated in the survey had answered the questions with no qualms. These more general discourses of “insecurity” were not always allowed, however, especially if activists became especially vocal or if their support base got too large. As I have previously noted, many mobilization efforts were tolerated as long as they remained small and unobtrusive. The same was true for the police. Small protests against police brutality were tolerated by police officers, who saw these groups as having little direct power over them. However, more vocal advocates against police brutality, particularly those in mainstream media or with ties to politicians, judges, or lawyers working on police corruption at the city or state level, were often threatened. The larger point is that, within certain limits, organized demands for security were possible, even in the context of City of God’s extremely violent political landscape.

## Conclusion

The overarching argument presented in this chapter is that the politics of insecurity were not limited to the closures of violent and corrupt local governance structures. In both ideology and practice, a counter-sphere of politics based on non-violence, moral legitimacy, avoidance of the drug trade, and feminized discourses and practices operated in direct opposition to masculinized violent politics. While the object of protest for activists in this alternative political sphere were limited by the physical and symbolic implications of violent politics, the logics of

resource distribution, the multiple levels of state presence, and the possibilities for demanding security offered critical openings for claims-making. In the following three chapters, I offer three case studies of the varied ways in which local residents navigated these openings and closures to combat violence by demanding their rights and working to improve the neighborhood.

# Chapter 5

## **Transformative *Assistencialismo*:** Social Change through Community-Based Organizations

## Introduction: Youth Promise

Rosangela and I stood in front of a bright yellow aluminum door surrounded by a sky-blue cement wall with yellow trim. On the door was a poster announcing an upcoming computer class. It was my first day in the City of God, and Rosangela had kindly offered to bring me to Youth Promise. I had met Rosangela twenty years earlier when she and my mother had teamed up to offer support groups to victims of domestic violence in the City of God, and I had reestablished contact with her in 2013 when I began planning my fieldwork. Rosangela had lived most of her life in the City of God. She had spent the last forty years working as an administrator for an NGO just outside the neighborhood and, after retirement, a volunteer for several NGOs and community-based organizations inside the City of God. Even though she had moved to a middle-class neighborhood nearby, she seemed to have contacts in almost all the local organizations. We had multiple skype conversations in the year leading up to my first trip to the City of God, and she offered me a valuable overview of the various social service providers in the neighborhood, punctuated by her often outlandish remarks about the problems with each of them. She had recommended I speak to Solange, the founder and director of Youth Promise, an organization in which Rosangela volunteered and respected. Solange, she claimed, was a community leader that effectively negotiated relationships between the neighborhood's many organizations despite her occasional proclivities for taking too much credit for these.

Rosangela rang the buzzer and a voice came on: "Good afternoon?" "Hi, it's Rosangela and Anjuli," Rosangela responded. The door buzzed open and we made our way through an open veranda with shiny white tiles and the same sky blue-colored walls to a narrow hallway and turned a sharp right up uneven cement stairs to the second floor. We came to a small landing packed with over a dozen children chatting animatedly. Some stood, others sat squished together

onto the three chairs lining the hallway. Over their heads we could see into the main office, which was also packed with children around two large office desks. Rosangela nodded her head towards Solange, a white, middle-aged woman with short curly blonde hair sitting behind a large desk in swivel chair she had turned to face two girls of about ten years of age. It had been impossible to hear her over the laughter and chatter of the other children, but from the girls' bowed heads and the stern look on Solange's face it seemed clear that they were being scolded. After a minute, she pointed at the two girls and they turned to each other and uttered what appeared to be half-hearted apologies. "Come get your snacks!" a woman's voice resounded over the noise from the kitchen next door. Excused, the two girls ran off to join the other children lining up to receive their snacks—a juice box, saltine crackers, and a piece of chocolate packaged into small paper bags.

Solange made her way out of the office and over to us and gave me a warm hug, welcoming me to Youth Promise. The two girls, she told us with a sigh, had exchanged some unpleasant words and a few pushes before the teacher intervened and sent them down to the office. We watched as the sea of children dispersed down the steps with their snacks. "Good-bye, Tia Solange!" some of the children shouted,<sup>16</sup> glancing at me with curiosity. Within five minutes, the children were gone along with the giddy chaos and Youth Promise fell silent. Solange apologized for the craziness and proceeded to introduce me to the two women in the kitchen: Andressa, who had been handing out snacks, and Rosenilda, who helped with cooking and cleaning. "Sure smells good in here" Solange noted as she lifted the lid of a pot of steaming

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<sup>16</sup> "Tia" and "Tio" mean "Aunt" and "Uncle" respectively, and are terms of endearment and respect used by children when speaking to adults.

chicken. A tall man with abnormally smooth ears characteristic of martial arts competitors<sup>17</sup> descended from the third floor. “This is our wonderful jiu-jitsu teacher,” Solange smiled as she made the introduction. After I greeted each of the staff with the typical kiss on each cheek, Solange and I made our way back to the office where we spent the next hour catching up and talking about Youth Promise and how I might be of help.

Several months earlier, Rosangela had helped me connect with Solange, and we had spoken on the phone and exchanged many emails since then. I had told Solange about my research project and asked if I could volunteer for Youth Promise, a request she readily agreed to. My first assignment had been to design an evaluation for a domestic violence workshop they had just organized, a task which I had completed and emailed to her a few weeks before my arrival. I don’t believe she ever used them, but they helped demonstrate my commitment and allowed us to begin building a relationship. Now, finally in the City of God, I was eager to help with something more substantial and get to know Solange and the other staff and volunteers at Youth Promise.

Youth Promise provided a number of services to City of God’s children, adolescents, and their caretakers. They offered dozens of classes each week: jiu jitsu, percussion, hip hop, computer classes, *cidadania* (literally, “citizenship,” which focused on their human rights and their responsibility to be respectful towards others), physical and sexual health (the latter was for the adolescents), art, photography, communications, and professional development classes, to name a few. They also organized regular field trips for the children to attend museums, plays, art festivals and other cultural events outside the City of God. Youth Promise had a second building

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<sup>17</sup> The ear lobes get smoothed from being rubbed on the tatami by opponents. Martial arts is a very common activity among City of God’s residents, and several were sponsored to live and compete in Europe and the United States.

a few blocks away in which they offered sewing classes and workshops for parents on employment, child-rearing, and other topics, as well as some of the children's activities. The total space was not large, however, and neither was their shoestring budget. As a result, they could only provide regular services to about 150 children and adolescents in total.

While Youth Promise was one of the most well-known organizations in the City of God, it was only one of approximately two dozen community-based organizations (or CBOs), a term I use to define semi-formal, non-governmental associations established usually by local residents for the explicit purpose of engaging in social actions to benefit the “community,” which to them primarily meant the City of God. During my fieldwork, I visited many of these CBOs and met the founders or staff from several others. I attended many classes and staff meetings, interviewed dozens of CBO workers, and had informal conversations with parents, children, and elderly residents who participated in the activities hosted by CBOs.

In this chapter, I take the case of Youth Promise, the organization I came to know best, as well as stories and observations from other CBOs, to identify the ways in which service provision by organized groups of local residents were utilized to fill the void left by insufficient public services, to make demands for their rights—especially social rights—and to work towards social change by educating participants about violence and non-violence. Though each CBO operated separately from (and sometimes in tension with) other CBOs, their founders and support staff shared a similar political imaginary and engaged in similar logics of action. They ascribed to a vision of social change that I call “transformative *assistencialismo*,” wherein the provision of social services coupled with education was believed to produce the kinds of healthy, productive, and reflexive individuals that could address the multiple forms of violence they experienced and make society safe, healthy, and just. Solange's ongoing efforts to teach children

about non-violence and cooperation, such as in the disciplinary strategy I observed on my first day, and her constant positive affirmations towards her staff fed into this larger vision of the connection between teaching respect and kindness to individuals in the hopes that they would internalize these, refuse to engage in violence, and someday work more directly to improve society.

Like Youth Promise, City of God's other CBOs sought to accomplish this by offering a range of services and resources to needy residents, which included social, educational, and professional activities for children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. They also offered assistance to residents in navigating complex bureaucracies to secure employment, education, health care, transportation vouchers, and myriad other needs. Many also helped to collect and distribute material goods, including "cesta básica," or "basket of goods" of basic food and hygiene products, as well as clothing and toy drives, and more. While a vast literature has documented the ways in which non-governmental organizations have helped to provide services to address the gaps left by the state, I found that City of God's CBOs did much more than just give material and social supports: service provision was used as a platform for teaching non-violence. In a neighborhood where speaking directly against the drug trade or corruption was extremely dangerous, the moments in between dance routines, during computer class, or while handing out snacks were used to raise awareness about violence in its many forms and to teach residents about their rights.

Some CBO educators were bolder than others in their consciousness-raising efforts. Solange, for instance, fell on the more cautious end, focusing primarily on teaching kindness and respect and saying virtually nothing about the drug trade or corruption, while some of the other staff at Youth Promise employed a more radical discourse against corruption and the drug trade

(which Solange did not censor). This spectrum of public narratives within and across CBOs was critical to their survival. As the representative of Youth Promise, Solange's public appeal to normative ("feminine") values of care and nurturing helped to neutralize her organization, ensuring that it remained decidedly outside the field of local, masculine politics and firmly in the realm of social work. This allowed her staff to more safely (if quietly) speak out against violence. Ultimately, Youth Promise, like the other CBOs I visited, used service provision to construct safe zones for a more subversive politics wherein educators raised their participants' consciousness about multiple forms of violence and possibilities for fighting against these.

### Action within Limits

CBOs ranged from those that were relatively formal, well-organized, well-staffed, and therefore able to run consistent activities (like Youth Promise) to those which ran sporadic activities when staff had free time and when resources became available. These twenty-some CBOs had some kind of formal registry with the state, as well as a name and physical building where they ran activities. In addition to these more formal CBOs, there were dozens of "projetos," literally translated as "projects," a term that residents used to denote some form of organized effort (sometimes led by one or two individuals, sometimes more) to offer at least one free activity, such as two friends who offered soccer training to children for a few hours on Saturday mornings or a group of local residents who got together during the holidays to host a toy drive for children from very poor families. Often these *projetos* were never officially registered, named, or funded, and rarely had a fixed physical space in which to run activities. Sometimes the actual activities never happened, though many residents took great pride in talking about the *projeto* they were in the process of establishing or planned to form in the future.

CBOs and *projetos* were an important part of the civic life of the City of God and provided many residents a semi-formal space for giving and receiving support to/from fellow residents facing similar challenges. In fact, two percent of the respondents from the survey I organized claimed to have founded their own NGO or *projeto* and eight percent of our participants reported being a volunteer for one of these in the last two years. In a population of 60,000, this would equate to nearly five thousand people. In total, just over sixty percent of respondents reported engagement in at least one activity aimed at improving their neighborhood,<sup>18</sup> suggesting that engagement in systems of mutual support is a core element of City of God's social life. While many residents looked at CBOs and *projetos* with suspicion, viewing them as possible sites for money laundering or, at the very least, as a tactic for attaining power and status, they also viewed them as integral to the well-being of the neighborhood.

In fact, working in a CBO or *projeto* was largely considered a socially acceptable (if not venerated) activity. For outsiders entering the City of God, participation in a CBO was recognized as one of the few acceptable motives for entry, as individuals who engaged in social service work were viewed as committed to the well-being of the poor but in a manner that was non-threatening to drug traffickers. The breadth of informal, organized social work in the City of God suggests that social capital in the City of God remains strong despite the proliferation of the drug trade, which contrasts to the argument by Janice Perlman (2010) and others that the erosion of trust in Residents' Associations and other political institutions reflected the decline of social capital in favelas. As survey data and my ethnographic research demonstrates, political

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<sup>18</sup> Social resilience activities listed on the survey included cleaning a public location, fixing public equipment, helping to transport or care for non-family members, volunteering in or founding a non-governmental organization or project, sharing information about the neighborhood on social media platforms, caring for street animals, and participating in public health campaigns.

activism was replaced by less politically-explicit forms of social action, which may be less effective in promoting democratic decision-making across the neighborhood but nonetheless serves to unite residents and reaffirm their sense of mutual caring. Since I am especially interested in the possibilities for non-violent collective action, the rest of this chapter will focus primarily on CBOs, which were much more organized and had a more formal governance hierarchy than *projetos*. As a consequence, CBOs allowed for an organized (if subtle) form of resistance and provided safe sites for non-violent politics not possible in unstructured *projetos*.

### The Uneven NGO Landscape

In principle, City of God's CBOs were similar to formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in that they were private, not-for-profit institutions dedicated to social actions to improve society. For this reason, most of the staff working in the institutions I refer to as CBOs called their institutions NGOs. However, there were several important distinctions between them. For one, CBOs were explicitly dedicated to their "community," a term that was popularly used to refer to the City of God.<sup>19</sup> While some CBOs offered services to needy families living just outside the City of God, there was a distinct neighborhood logic to their services. This was likely reinforced by the City of God's unique relationship to surrounding towns, which were mostly middle-class.

Additionally, few of City of God's community-based organizations had all the proper documentation required to officially claim the status of NGOs, and even those who did struggled

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<sup>19</sup> In Rio de Janeiro, a shift took place in the last two decades wherein the term "favela," largely considered pejorative, was replaced with "comunidade," or "community" in order to highlight the strong systems of mutual support, local culture and social practices, and vibrancy of favelas rather than emphasize their poverty and exclusion. More recently, favela activists (in particular those I describe in Chapters 6 and 7) began to employ the term "favela" instead of "comunidade" in describing these neighborhoods in order to politicize their existence and highlight their shared experiences of structural, symbolic, and political violence caused by the state.

to maintain their paperwork up to date. Rosangela, for instance, spent several hours a week traveling on long bus rides across the city attempting to obtain the proper signatures, letters, and documentation necessary to register the Center Dona Otávia, a small CBO in the City of God that offered sewing classes and other social activities to elderly women. Rosangela had recently retired after twenty-five years of working as the director of a large NGO on the outskirts of the City of God and was familiar with many of the processes of formalization, though even she struggled to find the time, energy, and information necessary to attain the paperwork needed to register the Center as an NGO. Few other CBOs had volunteers with the time or knowledge that Rosangela could offer and were therefore unable to become formal NGOs. Most CBOs also lacked the bureaucratic structures typical of formal NGOs (such as a budget or business plan, formal mission statement, employee or service protocols, website, etc) since few local residents had training in business or non-profit management, and the ones who did usually opted to work outside the neighborhood where they could make more money.

City of God's CBOs also occupied a substantially disadvantaged location within the wider urban landscape of private social service provisions. As a result of their status as semi-formal organizations and lack of training in securing grants or other types of funding, few CBOs were able to access substantial financial resources. Eloise, a professor at one of Rio's public universities who was helping to oversee the formalization process of an umbrella CBO in the City of God, offered an instructive analysis of how City of God's CBOs became excluded from accessing state funding. For one, Eloise noted that residents' lack of training and the temporality of grants limited their ability to offer consistent services:

The profile [of City of God's organizations] is sometimes technically good for organization and popular mobilization, but not necessarily for grant applications, or for accounting, for managing resources... You have to be trained in this, you know... What happened in this agency gets repeated in most organizations. They have some money,

like Lanza offers to fund a project, like a sporting activity for youth, or Capoeira.<sup>20</sup> And the funding is for one year. Sometimes it gets renewed, great. But if at the end of the year it's not renewed, who is going to pay the teacher? Who is going to pay for the snacks? The physical space? Maintenance?

As Eloise pointed out, the disconnect between what residents could offer and needed and what funders were willing to give severely limited the resources accessible to City of God's CBOs. Solange and Maria Rita—who over the years had become Solange's right-hand woman—were constantly worried about how they would fund their activities when their six-month or one-year grants ran out. They were among the lucky ones however: most CBO staff I met did not even have the internal structures or training needed to get these short-term grants. They operated mostly on volunteers and donated space and materials. The more “successful” CBO leaders—those able to keep their activities running consistently—were those who cultivated extensive social capital through emotional labor. Solange, for instance, invested heavily in her relationships with her volunteers. She could not provide them much in monetary payment (at best, her teachers and other staff received a stipend of a few hundred reais each month), but she could offer them her gratitude, emotional support, and a purpose. Perhaps not surprisingly, the CBOs run by women tended to last longer and have more committed volunteers than those run by men, reinforcing the feminization of this micro-movement.

Interestingly, many of the functioning CBOs in the City of God used buildings owned by the Catholic church. According to Vasconcelo, the founder of a CBO called the Center for Racial Justice, many of these buildings were erected in the 1970s and 80s when the Catholic church was active in popular mobilizations inspired by liberation theology. As priests withdrew from the realm of popular education and social services in the 1990s, they offered up these

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<sup>20</sup> Capoeira is a popular activity that combines dance and martial arts, and is derived from African cultures.

buildings up for use by local residents. The Center for Racial Justice was in one of these buildings (though it looked nearly abandoned when he took me to visit it, as their activities had been on hold for lack of funding). Youth Promise was in another one. Solange had a five-year renewable contract with the local diocese of the Catholic church. They were required to pay for their own electricity and other operating costs, but could use the building free of charge. While Solange had managed to renew their contract every time it expired, she constantly worried that they might sell the building or give it to another organization someday. Notably, the Catholic church remained an important asset in the support of City of God's social movements despite its withdrawal from political mobilization. Several other CBOs borrowed space from Youth Promise and other organizations with access to a permanent space. Rosangela, for instance, borrowed one of the meeting rooms at Youth Promise on Saturday mornings to organize a community newspaper called SpeakCDD!, which published stories about local residents and activities. While Solange's willingness to lend space to other CBOs allowed organizations with no (or almost no) funding to operate, it also helped to create a hierarchy of status and power between them. Rosangela regularly complained to me that Solange talked about the newspaper as if it were a part of Youth Promise, rather than an independent CBO that operated parallel to—rather than under—Youth Promise.

After conducting an informal assessment of City of God's many CBOs in 2016, Eloise concluded that the severe drought in funding for City of God's CBOs was a function of a structural problem which resulted from the inability or unwillingness of federal public and private funding organizations to make financial resources accessible to favela organizations:

What I noticed, is that there is a very big discrepancy today in the way of financing institutions. This is an issue with the funders. So Lanza, the National Bank for Social Development (i.e. two major NGO funders in Brazil), and all the others who today finance projects in the communities (favelas), need to hear that they are financing in the

wrong way...because today, the [favela] institutions, they can only receive support for *projetos*. There is no grant that finances [the actual] institution...So, what happens? For these projects to happen, the institution, it has to be structured. It has to have documentation up to date. It has to have the rent paid on time. It has to have technical staff to work...They have to have some [internal infra]structure, right? Since there is no funding for these institutions, what's going on? First the institution has to get funding for the project ... and then this project is an inversion. This project will support the institution. There is always a lot ... it's a lot .. it's very ... very difficult, because it's always a very complicated arrangement.

In other words, funding was distributed for “projects,” for activities, such as for an eight-week computer class or a three-month carpentry class, rather than to pay for staff or trainings, for building maintenance, for internet or electricity bills, or for any of the material and social infrastructure needed to sustain the activities. For Eloise, this was an inversion, requiring that CBO directors creatively reallocate funds that were supposed to pay for things like purchasing t-shirts or kimonos to also cover the costs of the electric bill or a stipend for the karate instructor. Without great attention to the fine print of the funding agreements, such creative restructuring could violate the terms of the contract, which was technically illegal and could result in CBOs losing what little funding they had or being prevented from applying for funding to other organizations. On many occasions I stayed up late at night with Maria Rita as she puzzled over the exact wording of funding applications to figure out how to redistribute funds to cover the costs of Youth Promise’s basic necessities. Maria Rita was often exasperated at being forced to spend, for instance, one thousand reais on backpacks for the children when what she really needed was to give the cook her monthly stipend. In their quest to avoid any illegal or potentially unethical practices, Maria Rita and Solange toiled over how to abide by the often arbitrary clauses of their agreements with funders. They usually succeeded, but often at great cost to their volunteers and to their own mental well-being. In a neighborhood where one third

of residents had not completed primary school, however, the good intention and dedication of local residents was not always sufficient to overcome these challenges.

For Eloise, the focus of funding institutions on “projects” rather than on organizational infrastructure was especially harmful to favela organizations, who had little access to private, wealthy donors. It would not be a stretch to label these funding practices as a form of structural violence that reinforced the uneven distribution of resources and prevented favela CBOs from providing necessary services to local residents. This had a secondary effect on the neighborhood: since outside NGO staff were often prevented by drug traffickers from entering the City of God without being accompanied by local residents, the ultimate consequence was that favela residents were often unable to benefit from federal or state-funded projects unless they were willing and able to travel outside their neighborhood to access them.

For Eloise, the dynamics of funding processes for NGOs was ultimately fueled by a deep form of symbolic violence:

Eloise: The people who work in the institutions (i.e CBOs), they are viewed by the funders, as a volunteer job. That is, [funders believe] they should not be rem[unrated]. They are not paid for that activity there.

Me: Why do they think that way?

Eloise: Because there is, in my opinion, a very perverse process of accountability... There is a perverse process of holding the poor accountable for their poverty. It's like privatization. A problem that should be treated as a public issue, a matter of public policy. It's treated as a private matter. Then you will see many institutions where... it is the parent, the parent and their children taking care of like twenty children because [their parents] need support, because otherwise they have nowhere to go, that mother has nowhere to leave those children ... Do you understand? As the government is withdrawing from these actions, the communities are having to voluntarily assume these responsibilities. This is very perverse, because [funders] use it as a compliment. I mean, “Ah! How beautiful, what an action! What a beautiful action! What a beautiful job!” But, in fact, it's not supposed to be beautiful. It's a need. It's a right.

For Eloise, the lack of accessible funding for City of God's CBOs reflected a broader view of social supports in favelas as "beautiful actions" that should be conducted by volunteer residents, rather than as rights that the state should be responsible for providing. By praising the work of organizations like Youth Promise, society offered moral capital in lieu of monetary capital. While the lack of financial resources created extreme challenges for the service capacity of CBOs and forced committed staff to endure enormous personal financial and mental costs, their lack of access to resources was also protective. Because the distribution of financial resources in the City of God was often vulnerable to co-optation by drug traffickers and their allies, Youth Promise would likely have been unable to avoid their intervention had they been able to access large grants. Ironically, their limitations were also critical to their survival.

### Making Do

Despite these constraints, however, City of God's CBOs were able to offer a vast array of social services. Youth Promise, for instance, offered morning and afternoon classes five days a week, every week of the year except during summer and winter holidays. The children who participated were given many valuable opportunities to engage in a range of educational, social, sport, and leisure activities, to visit other NGOs and cultural institutions outside the City of God, and to learn about a variety of trades and careers. They were also fed at least once, and often Maria Rita, Solange, or other staff would intervene on behalf of individual children whose families needed help finding shelter, food, employment, or other social supports. They also helped to place adolescents and young adults in internships or college preparation courses, and, when possible, offered similar assistance to parents and other caretakers.

City of God's residents benefited from many other services offered by other CBOs. The community-based newspaper SpeakCDD! that Rosangela helped to found provided residents

with stories about special events, activities, and accomplished individuals that reinforced their sense of community based on positive social and cultural accomplishments rather than violence. The Center Dona Otávia offered elderly women a place to learn sewing and other skills they could use to earn an income while also providing them an informal support system. The Center for Racial Justice, when it had the funds, offered percussion lessons to youth coupled with classes on African culture, and they had also led trainings for women to learn to make African hairstyles, a skill that could become lucrative. There were many others. The Environment League taught children and adolescents about recycling, caring for the environment, and using materials to create jewelry and other products using these skills. They also offered literacy classes and various projects that gave adolescents the skills and contacts needed to secure employment or do well on college entrance exams. Leonardo and two colleagues ran a theater group that offered adolescents acting classes and helped connect them to theaters and television producers across the city. There were also several dance groups that provided professional dance classes to young adults, many of whom performed in competitions and cultural centers across the state. Another offered the popular *forró* dance classes to adults. Several CBOs provided free child care to working parents, and the City of God also had a community bank where residents could exchange regular money for a local currency that had more value in local stores. While the bank had been closed during much of the time I was in the City of God, several local organizers and Eloise hoped to secure the funding needed to re-open it.

## Connections beyond the City of God

Most of the activities and resources offered by City of God's CBOs relied primarily on the volunteer work of local residents, donations from other residents, some limited private and

public grants, and the emotional labor of their leaders. However, CBOs also sustained ties to NGOs and wealthy individuals outside the City of God. In fact, these connections were an important source of support, offering local residents with access to information, financial resources, contacts, donations, volunteers, and other types of assistance without which they may not have been able to function.

Solange, for instance, cultivated strong ties with actors outside the City of God, extending her emotional labor beyond her local volunteers to sustain relationships with other social service agencies, public administrators, researchers in universities, and individuals from wealthy neighborhoods in and beyond Rio de Janeiro. In fact, many of the volunteers who taught classes at Youth Promise were not City of God residents. Two social workers working for the local welfare office ran weekly citizenship classes, staff from a large NGO based in another favela came to teach children percussion classes, Rosangela, who no longer lived in the City of God, taught poetry and writing, and several upper-class women—including a lawyer and a yoga instructor—provided classes on healthy relationships and physical activity, among others. Solange also had relationships with individuals in the United States and Europe, many of whom had found her off the internet after they watched the movie “The City of God” and became interested in visiting the neighborhood and donating to local organizations. Everyone with an interest in helping Youth Promise was welcome. Solange had hosted two exchange students from the Netherlands who volunteered at Youth Promise for several months. She also had a PhD student from Italy who ran workshops on gender issues, and many others helped by donating money either monthly or for Youth Promise’s annual Christmas party. It was little surprise that Solange had been so willing to host me as a volunteer: her relationships with outsiders were critical to sustaining her organization.

Though Solange put a great deal of energy into her relationships with outsiders, she was often frustrated by her allies and her sense of powerlessness to challenge them or sever ties with them. For example, in 2015 I accompanied Solange and a group of children and Youth Promise staff to the Communications Hub, a well-established NGO that had given Youth Promise over a dozen computers and funded some of their computer classes (including Maria Rita's stipend). It was the celebration of the Hub's 20-year anniversary and was held in one of their sites, a large open gymnasium in another favela. They had also bused in participants from CBOs in other favelas who had received donations and funding. We sat in the gymnasium for over an hour before we were finally served snacks. Claudette, the lawyer who volunteered regularly at Youth Promise, called it "the snack of the poor," as it consisted of coffee and crackers with ham and cheese rather than more substantial food. An hour later, Gilmar, the founder and president of the Communications Hub came on stage, a tall white middle-aged man. After showing us a video of the many accomplishments of his organization, he spent the following twenty minutes detailing his life story, the moments of inspiration that had led him to found the Hub, and all of the awards and accolades he had received for his work at the organization. Thanks to the success of his organization, Gilmar had been hired at a prominent international NGO based in the United States and had moved to the US for the new job. In his conclusion, he noted that all this success was owed to "us," (i.e. the people in the audience from the many CBOs that had received Hub funds), though he said little about how these CBOs had contributed to his success. In the car ride home, Solange rolled her eyes and complained that Gilmar had ridden to success on the coattails of her hard work and the work of many other favela organizations, though he took all the credit and received all the awards. Though Solange's antipathy towards Gilmar was tangible, she had little choice but to maintain a good relationship with him and the other staff the Hub. The little money

they gave them was critical to their ability to continue to offer services and to pay Maria Rita.

After the event, I reflected on the differences between Solange's work at Youth Promise and

Gilmar's performance. These are my field notes from that day:

It's really interesting to compare Solange's work with the Hub's. Solange avoids the limelight, money, and fame. In the City of God, these things are linked to corruption and low moral character, as well as individualism. Having worked (myself) in a large NGO, I can guess what the Hub was like: probably spends a ton of money on marketing and applying for new grants and fellowships and not enough on actual services. At the same time, this model probably keeps Gilmar and other staff from relying on local politicians and drug traffickers. When big money comes from the international community, local politics probably play a smaller role. Sure, any NGO occupying space in a favela must negotiate that space with local actors. But it is easier to negotiate when you are less dependent on local resources. Solange, on the other hand, gets around this constraint by operating on almost no resources. She is fearful of getting too much money and having rumors spread about how she went about receiving it. The easiest solution is not to have it. Rather, Solange relies almost entirely on volunteers. She has an amazing way of building social capital among local and international volunteers, though she hasn't quite figured out how to transform these into economic capital.

For both Gilmar and Solange, connections to international donors allowed them to access funds that were less tainted by local politics than federal or municipal funds distributed by local Regional Administrations, though it is possible that the Hub had been required to pay off local political actors or drug traffickers to continue to operate within the favela. Ultimately, Solange's decision to keep a low profile in the City of God was both protective and limiting. It allowed her to maintain her legitimacy as a "moral" political actor dedicated to social service, rather than to her own ambitions, and her lack of access to much money likely kept drug traffickers from asking her for a payoff. But it also prevented her own physical and economic mobility and kept Youth Promise from receiving major international grants or awards. The gender and race dynamics also could not be ignored. Though both Solange and Gilmar were white, most CBO leaders and staff in the City of God were black or "pardo," mixed-race. I did not know a single white male CBO leader in the City of God. Gilmar's ability to speak so enthusiastically about his own work and to be rewarded for it internationally was likely a product of both his race and

gender, both of which made his own self-advocacy much more acceptable, if not expected. Furthermore, if we refer back to Eloise's comment about how favela social services are often devalued as "beautiful" volunteer work, Gilmar's work—which came from a white male—was likely viewed as an extreme act of generosity towards Rio's poor, rather than an expected service to one's own community. The ultimate effect was that Youth Promise and City of God's other CBOs both relied heavily on their allies in wealthy NGOs while remaining subservient to them.

Solange's efforts to promote collaboration across social service actors became institutionalized in 2014 when she founded a network called *CDD Collaborates*, which met monthly where CBOs, state agencies, and other *projetos* in the community could meet, share information about their services and upcoming events, and discuss new partnership opportunities. The meetings were held in the Youth Center, a building owned and run by the municipal government in the City of God which had one of the few air conditioned meeting spaces in the neighborhood. It was a coveted space, but Solange's relationships with Youth Center staff had facilitated her ability to secure it for the meetings. Most meetings I attended had between fifteen and twenty-five participants, and included local residents, state employees working in City of God's public institutions (such as the welfare office or the health clinic), volunteers from Rio's wealthy neighborhoods, and even employees with the state's Secretary of Human and Social Services. Most representatives from the state were mid-level administrators, such as the directors of the welfare clinic or researchers for a federal research institute. They did not have the power to directly offer state funds to CBOs, but they did offer valuable information about which grants had recently been announced and how to apply for them. Though Solange kept the meetings on task, she welcomed input from all participants about how frequently to meet, which topics to discuss, which snacks should be served, and more. After the meetings,

participants chatted over coffee and cookies in which they discussed specific initiatives run by other agencies, how to handle issues with shared clients, or making plans for future partnerships. In addition to the physical spaces where *CDD Collaborates* met, Solange began a WhatsApp text messaging group where all members could share information about upcoming events and programs, as well as new funding opportunities that became available. I did observe one contentious moment during a meeting which I found particularly instructive of the logics of action among CBOs. It was of an exchange between a representative of the Children's Council, Rio de Janeiro's child protection services agency, and a City of God resident who had ran one of the *projetos* in the area. The exchange took place in 2015, when the UPP was still mostly functional. These were my field notes of the event:

Most interesting was a presentation by a social worker at the Children's Council (CC), who explained the process of getting the police to investigate a case [of child abuse]: you can call Disque Denuncia<sup>21</sup> or report suspected abuse to the UPP and they will contact the CC, who will interview relevant parties and follow up accordingly. At the end of her presentation, she noted that she was running for office (it turns out that the leadership of the CC is an elected position and quite political) and asked people to vote for her (this seemed like quite a conflict of interest). Suddenly one of the participants, a leader of another local CBO, asked if the CC ever actually did any of these steps, because he had experienced a similar case of a young girl who was abused and after several phone calls to the CC and filing reports with the police, nothing was ever done. The man was livid and quite frustrated, nearly accusing the presenter of lying about their services. She admitted that they were extremely understaffed, having only five social workers for the entire Jacarepagagua area (an area with over 150,000 residents) and that as a consequence they frequently prioritized the most severe cases—typically children already in an emergency room as a result of severe injuries. I almost felt bad for this woman, who was in a difficult position of having to espouse the myriad virtues of CC in order to justify her desire to be an elected official while recognizing its severe limitations that made it largely unable to do any of the things it was supposed to do. Perhaps if she hadn't been so well dressed (she stood out from the group in her tight business dress while others wore jeans and t-shirts) and had been less defensive I would have warmed up to her more. I also wondered if their priorities were determined in part by the class/race of the abused child.

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<sup>21</sup> Disque Denuncia was a project by the State of Rio de Janeiro overseen by the Secretariat for Public Security wherein any resident could call a hotline and report a crime anonymously. While I did not know of anyone who had called the hotline, several people had heard stories of friends who witnessed the police effectively respond to denunciations, especially during the height of the UPP.

The Children's Council representative was not a City of God resident. She appeared to be middle or upper-class and, as I noted, she stood out in the meeting due to her appearance. She was there as a representative of the state, though I suspect that the exchange became contentious due to her political ambitions and her attempt to minimize the deficiencies of her organization. I had witnessed many other state employees present their services to the group—often discussing openly many of the limitations they faced due to being short of staff and resources—and the other participants often nodded in solidarity and a shared sense of being devalued by the state and society. Overall, I found CDD Collaborates to be an amicable site for cooperation and mutual support in which state and private actors from multiple sectors bonded over their shared commitment to the City of God and their struggles to operate with few resources.

What is especially notable, however, was the space that CDD Collaborates provided for favela residents to openly challenge state actors and to work cooperatively with them as well. Even as armed drug traffickers sold drugs on the corner across from the Youth Center, CDD Collaborates was a site of “empowered participation” (Fung 2009), a “space of contestation as well as collaboration [between state and society] in which heterogeneous participants bring diverse interpretations of participation and democracy and divergent agendas” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007:2). In this micro-space, democratic participation was possible. While neither local residents nor state or private actors in CDD Collaborates could escape the threats of violent politics, they were able to construct a safe space for negotiation, debate, and collaboration. They were not impervious to larger class, race, and gender dynamics, but in some ways these categories of difference were sufficiently diluted to allow for open, and even contentious exchanges. At the same time, the members of CDD Collaborates had little power to transform the structural and symbolic inequalities that kept resources out of favelas. The participants I

interviewed had little faith that someday they would have the funding needed to address all the challenges in the neighborhood. Instead, they hoped to change their conditions indirectly: by investing in individual participants. In the following section, I examine the political imaginary that undergirded social service provision in the City of God and its potential for achieving broader social change.

## Transformative *Assistencialismo* in Theory and Practice

The term *assistencialismo* is popularly employed by Brazilian scholars of social services. It is most often translated as “welfare,” “assistance,” or “social services.” I first heard the term when Leonardo, an active member of the “Movimento Negro,” or the movement for the rights of black people in Rio de Janeiro, criticized CBOs for being too “assistencialista,” what he described as “too focused on charity.” He viewed this approach to social change as “atrasado,” or behind the times. For Leonardo, *assistencialismo* was a thing of the past, characteristic of the 1990s and early 2000s when NGOs were emerging to fill the voids left by the absence of sufficient government services under leftist President Lula. Leonardo believed that NGOs (among which he counted Youth Promise and City of God’s other CBOs) were great at addressing the immediate needs of desperate people, but did little to challenge inequality or violence in a more systemic way.

The scholarly literature on *assistencialismo* in Brazil largely ascribes to Leonardo’s perspective. For instance, Natália Lourenço and João Paulo dos Santos argue that *assistencialismo* among Brazil’s social service organizations prevents the poor from becoming conscious of their Constitutional rights, thereby retrenching their dependence on the State and their subordinate class status:

*Assistencialismo* has been following a trajectory that is sometimes permeated by political-ideological interests, the exchange of favors or the purchase of votes. However, for the less affluent and needy, the intentions do not matter, but rather the immediate measurement of their needs. It is in this sense that Brazilian education reveals itself as instrumental to the alienation of the nation: by denying the necessary knowledge about the rights and citizenship to which all must have access and an effective participation of its construction. The population conforms to the basic needs supplied by the immediate lack of knowledge of their real rights. *Assistencialismo* appears in this perspective as a kind of imposition of the interests of the ruling class on the dominated. Although there has been legislation in the country that has advanced in the field of social assistance, there are also actions that reflect the imminent interests of state leaders, the wealthy classes and those whose interests are not based on the emancipation of the people receiving assistance (Lourenço and dos Santos 2011:12).

For Lourenço and dos Santos, the “assistencialista” paradigm stands in opposition to an emancipatory approach to welfare provision, wherein participants are offered education about their constitutional rights and opportunities to organize collectively to make demands on the state for the fulfillment of these rights. Similarly, Farid Eid suggests that welfareism in Brazil seeks to control social movements, thereby limiting the construction of an autonomous and emancipatory form of citizenship (Eid 2007). Furthermore, the emphasis on social services has been charged with not only increasing the dependency of the poor on welfare assistance, but pathologizing and criminalizing their suffering (Pussetti and Brazzabeni 2011). Ultimately, the shift towards privatized, third-sector social service provision in Brazil and beyond is often thought of as a product of a “social interventionist model of the neoliberal policies in force,” wherein marginalized populations are given just enough resources to survive, but not enough to overcome their dependency on these or to challenge private or state actors (da Silva Porto 2005:1). At the same time, *assistencialismo* helps to destroy democratic processes by retrenching clientelistic practices, such as when specific politicians use the provision of social services to get votes (Instituto Millenium 2012).

Not all NGOs or community-based organizations follow a welfare approach, of course. In fact, many scholars have viewed civil society organizations as important actors in the expansion and deepening of democracy. For one, autonomous NGOs help to pluralize the institutional arena of civil society, allowing organized groups to have a voice about their interests and to hold the state accountable to democratic ideals (Mercer 2002). This can include holding democratic regimes accountable to constitutional obligations or to pressure authoritarian regimes to shift to more democratic practices. In Brazil, for instance, Herbert de Souza argued that NGOs were the “micro-organisms of the democratic process” during the democratic transition in the 1980s and 1990s, playing an important role in organizing large-scale protests for open elections (Souza 1992). NGOs also have the capacity to represent marginalized groups in the wider public arena, such as groups focused on demanding the rights of indigenous groups in Latin America (Cepek 2012; Yashar 2005) or survivors of Liberia’s civil war (Toure 2002). At the same time, NGOs depend heavily on state resources, and are often unable to remain fully autonomous from—and therefore operate in opposition to—the state (Johnston 2011). In practice, NGOs and other civil society organizations face many obstacles in their ability to directly oppose unjust state policies.

This is especially true in the context of political repression, such as those in authoritarian states or in the context of violent, contested sovereignty (such as in the City of God). In a study of the possibilities for grassroots NGO activities in China, Anthony Spire contended that NGO survival relied on a “contingent symbiosis,” wherein grassroots groups were tolerated as long as they refrained from democratic claims-making and focused instead on relieving the state of its social welfare responsibilities (Spire 2011). Writing on the possibilities for challenging the state within the context of dictatorship in Brazil, José Paulo Netto argues:

In a dictatorial context, the political will of the social class that exercises political power employs, for the implementation of its societal project, mechanisms that are especially coercive and repressive. It is only when fundamental political freedoms (of expression and manifestation of thought, of association, of voting and being elected, etc.) are won and guaranteed that different corporate projects can confront each other and dispute the adhesion of members of society (Netto 2006:3).

While a focus on *assistencialismo* in the City of God may have been necessary for the survival of local CBOs, this literature suggests that the consequence is that social service agencies under violent constraints are unable to challenge social norms or unjust state policies. To some extent, this claim reflected the obstacles faced by City of God's CBOs. In fact, most of the CBO directors and volunteers I interviewed were focused on individuals and families, and their relationships with government officials were mostly collaborative. Because they were focused on offering services to extremely needy people (of which the City of God had many), they were often willing to accept whatever little bits of money or resources were thrown their way, and this did in fact limit their ability to fight against the state and private actors upon whom they were so heavily reliant. They also had neither the resources nor the interest in engaging in large-scale media campaigns, protests, or lobbying for public policies. They were there to rescue desperate people from desperate situations, and this alone consumed more time and energy than they could muster. And, as previously discussed, challenging local state actors would have been extremely dangerous.

Beneath their emphasis on social assistance, however, was a subtler but nonetheless critical component of the logic of social action that undergirded the political imaginaries of City of God's CBOs: they believed that by transforming individuals, they could transform society. This was not a top-down approach to change; it was not even a bottom-up, grassroots approach because it did not involve community organizing. Their focus was heavily on the individual and, at most, the family. Yet they believed they offered much more than just charity: they offered the

social and psychological building blocks necessary to cultivate successful, politicized individuals who, at the very least, would practice the types of active citizenship characteristic of a just, non-violent society and, at best, might actually become leaders of these transformations. I heard many CBO staff refer to themselves as “community educators” or “social educators,” suggesting that they were not just teaching basic employment or social skills, but also teaching young people how to think critically about society and to identify the many ways in which structural, symbolic, and political violence led to resource scarcity, inequality, and the violence of the drug trade. And while some CBO staff articulated this vision more clearly and intentionally than others, the classes I observed and the informal conversations I had with dozens of CBO staff convinced me that their vision was much larger than traditional NGOs typically get credit for.

Solange’s perspective was a case in point. Solange had moved to the City of God at the age of eighteen after living in various favelas in Rio with her family, mostly in shacks. After completing secondary education, Solange got an advanced degree in psychology and received her licensing certificate. “I thought I’d get rich as a psychologist, thought I could set up my own office and make a lot of money” she told me, “but I was a typist. I ended up working as a typist.” She worked as a typist for twelve years until 2001, when the priest at her local church in the City of God asked her to offer counseling to other church members. Solange still recalled the conversation: “He said to me, ‘Solange, the problems they bring here are not problems, the sins they bring here are not sins, they are psychological problems. These are not issues for a priest to resolve.’” He offered Solange a space to attend clients for a “symbolic fee” along with another psychologist, and one of the priest’s contacts outside the City of God offered additional financial resources to support their efforts. “So that’s how I started working with social issues, I didn’t know anything, I didn’t want to work with social issues, I wanted to make money, but I started to

get involved in this social work as a volunteer, and here I am, twelve years later, still working as a volunteer. But it was a thing that I fell in love with, I am in love with my work till this day.”

According to Solange, what most drew her to social work were “the transformations that we see happening in people’s lives.” As she explained to me:

Solange: Before, I was more focused on the idea of pity, of poor thing, you know? [He/she] needs food, needs this, needs employment, I don’t know what else. But we can’t have pity for people, no, we need to tell people that they have the capacity, they can [succeed], you know? I didn’t understand things, I thought we had to give, give, give to people, you know? And we saw a lot of situations of children in our project (Youth Promise) who sometimes got sick, fainted because they didn’t have food at home. The snack we gave them sometimes was their main meal, we had all these issues. But on the other side, we saw that people sometimes didn’t have money for bread, but had money for cigarettes, for beer, you know? Nowadays I am more aware of this, I understand that we can’t have pity for people, we have to be helping people to pick themselves up, showing them that they can do it, you know? So what moves me to continue this work is the transformation we see in people, small as it is, but most of the time it is crucial for people to lift themselves up, you understand? This is what makes me love my job.

Me: Have you seen a lot of these transformations?

Solange: Oh boy! Many, many. I am grateful to a lot of people for this, to children, adolescents, adults. I get really happy when I hear people say, ‘Oh, that email you sent about the job opening I sent to a friend and she got the job.’ Or I run into a mom in the street: ‘Do you remember me? I am the mother of so-and-so, he is working at x place.’ Or the very student, we run into them, you know? And all happy he says: ‘Oh, I’m attending university because of that job I got.’” So, you see, there are a lot of people, a lot of people who, from the work that I do, who are grateful to me for what they were able to accomplish because of our activities, they were able to lift themselves up, know you? This makes me very happy.

Solange’s reflections above suggest that, for her, social work transcended the fulfillment of immediate needs and extended into the transformation of individuals such that they acquired the moral, social, and practical building blocks needed to gain access to education, employment, and autonomy. By helping individuals succeed, she hoped to reverse some of the barriers created by endemic structural, symbolic, political, and physical violence. At the same time, some elements of Solange’s narrative seemed to reinforce the very perspective she sought to reject, by placing much of the burden (and, by extension, the blame) on individuals for their

long-term outcomes. While this individualistic narrative ran the risk of overlooking the role of structural forces in residents' "bad choices," such as choosing to buy cigarettes instead of food, it was also critical to empowering her participants. At the same time, Solange embedded this emphasis on individual transformation on a broader understanding of social change that encompassed a commitment to working to improve her neighborhood. When I asked Solange how she understood citizenship, she explained:

Before anything, we need to know that we are protagonists of our history within the community, we need to recognize how much those who have [the social/financial means] are doing something to change their trajectory, their identity, something within the community, you know? We need to recognize that we have our rights and obligations, but we have to take advantage of these in a way that is good for us, because when we do something good for the community, we are doing something good for ourselves, for our children. And we need to awaken this critical consciousness in a manner so that we can later defend our community.

Solange hoped to change the trajectory of her neighborhood by offering individuals the social and emotional tools, as well as a critical consciousness needed to reject the violence and corruption that so deeply affected the well-being and mobility. Solange was not alone in this narrative. Most of the local CBO leaders in CDD articulated an understanding of social change through individual transformation that focused on creating productive, non-violent individuals who could contribute to a safe, respectful, and enriching neighborhood. Most explicitly, CBOs hoped to keep individuals, and children and adolescents in particular, away from drug addiction and participation in the drug trade, which they viewed as extremely harmful to individuals and one of the most visible and direct forms of violence in the City of God. They addressed the immediate risk by keeping children off the streets and inside social programs where they would be safe and away from the negative influences of family members and friends engaged in the drug trade. They also hoped to give young people a sense of possibility beyond the drug trade. Maria Rita, a computer teacher and administrator at Youth Promise, explained:

This generation, we have to start opening their horizons, open their eyes to something else, right? For when they choose, make a different choice, sometimes you come from a family that the father is a drug trafficker, the uncle is a drug trafficker, the mother is addicted, there are people who are like that. There are children like that here...He will choose, but he will choose what he is, what is his culture, what is closest perhaps. So the negative points add up so that they go to a negative side, and here we can get him in touch with other things, that he can amplify his vision: "No, I can be a computer programmer; I can be an athlete; I can be a teacher," so that he has these opportunities, and see that it is not at all impossible, that he can have it too.

For CBO staff, helping individuals find opportunities to engage in well-paid, licit employment would keep residents away from the drug trade and, hopefully, decrease physical violence in the City of God—and the nation—over time. Vasconcelo, the founder of the Center for Racial Justice noted that “It’s easy to resolve the problem of Brazil, right? It’s...it’s education. You identify, well, this youth is going to be a musician, this youth is going to be a doctor, this youth is going to be a dentist, this youth is going to be an electro-technician. It’s easy.” By providing people, especially young people, with the opportunity to become productive workers with access to professional employment, many CBO leaders and staff believed that the challenges of poverty and violence would be reversed and the City of God would come to be respected as an ordinary urban neighborhood, rather than a *favela*.

Jefferson, a Karate instructor and the president of the Art Loft, viewed these efforts as a process of transforming favela residents into protagonists, active citizens with the capacity and opportunity to express their unique identities and desires. According to Jefferson, the primary objective of the Art Loft “really is to work with culture, with a new vision, not simply seeing people as human beings, but also as protagonists of the process of cultural construction of the City of God.” Jefferson used Karate as a means to teach his students about learning discipline, respect for others, and the importance of working hard to accomplish personal goals. He proudly

noted that many of his students had decided to go to college or seek professional employment, rather than settle for low-paying low-skill jobs. Like Solange, Jefferson believed that education and social support helped create individuals with high moral values and the emotional, social, and professional capabilities required to be hard-working, productive and creative members of society. This, in turn, would elevate the moral, financial, and professional status of the neighborhood and, ultimately, reverse the symbolic, social, and economic exclusion of the City of God.

While the discourses that CBO leaders employed were highly apolitical, focusing primarily on giving individuals social, emotional, and professional skills rather than teaching them to directly challenge violent actors, several of the teachers whose classes I observed espoused a more politicized perspective. In September, 2017 one of my participants, Luis Henrique, invited me to participate in a course on communication and text production he ran twice a week for adolescents and young adults from the City of God. The students took this and three other courses as part of an educational series provided by Youth Promise and funded by a large NGO that offered various supports to Rio's poor population. The three other courses were photography, digital citizenship (taught by Maria Rita), and social development and citizenship (taught by a staff member of the sponsoring NGO). These are my field notes from that day:

[My] experience [today] (observing the class) was both mind-blowing and incredibly reflective of the possibilities for political subjectivity in CDD. Luis Henrique had begun the class talking about theories of communication, which apparently took off after WWII. He used a variety of examples of popular videos, ads, magazines, and newspaper articles to reflect on these theories. I was struck by something Luis Henrique had said to me: "We are not just here to spend down the time (i.e. to keep the youth occupied so they wouldn't join the drug trade), we want to develop the subjectivity of the youth." The students had been tasked the previous week with each taking a picture of something in their environment and developing a narrative about why they took the picture, what it was about, and why it mattered. All the projects had to be within the area of human rights. Or, as Luis Henrique explained, "our constitutional rights, of which we have many!" As I looked over the students' shoulders, I saw their themes: cruelty to animals, the environment, trash collection, the challenges faced by homeless people, leadership

roles among black women, public insecurity. Roberto (one of Esther's "adopted" teenagers) was doing his project on refugees in the City of God, with a focus on Haitians. I was especially struck by a short essay of one of the students, Jonathan (age 20). When I read it, it brought tears to my eyes. I asked him if I could cite his text in my book, and he said I could and emailed it to me. It turns out he is a poet, and he shared one of his poems about violence against black men in the favelas...Both were powerful texts. Even though Solange stays away from politics, and none of the texts written by Jonathan were directed at the drug traffickers or specific police officers, this was a great example of how politics gets produced within the City of God.

This was the picture and the text:



"Safety and the right to freedom in the favelas," photo by Jonathan Benedicto

### **Crooked Future**

Every day, at the end of the day, I take this path, which is from my girlfriend's house to mine. That is, from the home of my future wife - the woman I intend to have a life with - to the home where my mother and my brother are - people with whom I maintain a strong affective bond. And, along the way, a street sign always gets my attention, which identifies the name of the street, *Avenida Cidade de Deus*. My interest may seem strange, but the crooked (damaged) aspect of it seems to give me cause to reflect on the reason for why it was that way. What happened to the sign for it to be that distorted? Perhaps the entrance of the police, in the *caveirão* (armored vehicle), inside the favela? Maybe the...no. I can't stop thinking about this. The movement to "save" the community through the process of militarization of the favela, justified by the fight against the drug

trade, which directly affects the routine of the residents (working mothers, parents, students, children).

How much is our future and our freedom worth? Is the war against drug trafficking worth all this daily violence against the dignity of our residents? The damage is not merely structural, it is human. They hold us accountable for our obligations (to the law), but they distort our rights. Neglect is not accidental, it is daily. But why did I tell you about my family in the beginning? Simply because this street sign makes me think about the future, above all, of my relatives; will the future of my brothers be crooked too? And my children? My mother worked - and works - hard to give me some autonomy and strength to keep fighting. But this sign pounds in my head all day long: How long until our story falls? Our neighborhood? This struggle to hold ourselves up is daily and comes from every resident, every working mother. Every teacher. And as long as we have strength, we will resist to the end.

Jonathan, age 20, participant at Youth Promise

Within the safe space of Youth Promise's computer lab, Luis Henrique helped to cultivate among City of God's young people an ability to reflect critically on the limited resources and multiple forms of violence in the City of God. As the text above demonstrates, Jonathan connected the constant threat of violence faced by his family members with the brutality of the police, sponsored by the global war against drugs. In his essay, Jonathan identified the hypocrisies of state action, the disconnect between the state's harsh enforcement of laws but its failure to uphold favela residents' civil rights. He also emphasizes his commitment to join in the resistance against injustice. While Solange and City of God's other CBOs were not themselves articulating these ideas, at least not in public forums, they provided the spaces in which a critical consciousness could be constructed. By focusing on individual transformation through the provision of social services, City of God's CBOs promoted a multi-generational vision of social change. While Solange could not herself challenge systemic violence in the neighborhood, which would have likely resulted in threats by drug traffickers (or worse), she could provide the building blocks to promote resistance among future favela activists.

## Intersections of Opportunity and Inequality in CBOs

Race, class, gender, and other forms of difference had a subtle but important impact on the discourses, practices, and outcomes of City of God's CBOs. The racial and gender profiles of CBO leaders, volunteers, and participants were diverse and relatively reflective of the neighborhood. In the survey I administered, 49% of respondents identified as black, 31% as "pardo"—brown or mixed-race—and 19% as white. One percent identified as indigenous. There are also more women than men in the City of God: 53% and 47% respectively according to 2010 census data (Souza 2010)<sup>22</sup>. In our survey, volunteering in an NGO or projeto was strongest among black residents, while leadership was strongest among mixed-race residents: 5.8% of whites, 7.2% of "pardo," and 9.3% of blacks reported "helping" in an "NGO" or "projeto," while 1% of whites, 2.9% of mixed-race, and 1.2% of black residents reported "founding or having a leadership role" in an NGO or project. There are several possible explanations for this racialized landscape. For one, Brazil's black communities have a lengthy history of mutual support, such as those characterized by the *quilombola* settlements, which may have carried into present social engagement. Furthermore, black favela residents are more likely to experience police brutality, discrimination in the workforce, and racialized mistreatment in public places, such as on beaches or shopping centers. The shared sense of exclusion related to racial discrimination may motivate more engagement in social service work in favelas.

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<sup>22</sup> Women were overrepresented in our survey (accounting for 60% of respondents), likely because women were more likely to be home during the time of our survey. The actual number is likely closer to the 2010 census data. In our survey, we allowed respondents to select "transgender" and "other" for gender as well, though no respondents selected this option. I knew at least one transgender woman in the City of God—Esther's second cousin—and knew of several others, suggesting that "transgender" is a recognized identity in the City of God despite their lack of representation in our survey. The census data to which I had access did not provide a racial breakdown of the City of God; our survey is at present the most comprehensive representation of racial composition in the neighborhood.

The leadership of black and mixed-race residents was notable in the CBOs I observed, particularly in contrast to the larger and better funded NGOs outside the City of God which were much more likely to be managed by light-skinned staff members. Only one other CBO in the City of God was founded and run by a white woman; all the other leaders identified as *pardo* or black. In every CBO I visited, where I participated in staff meetings, courses, group activities, or events at staff members' homes, appeared to contain a diversity of racial demographics, and CBO leaders looked as diverse as their members. Many of the black CBO leaders I interviewed emphasized racial discrimination and injustice as a core motive undergirding their decision to start their own organization. Vasconcelo, the director of the Center for Racial Justice, for instance, explained that the organization originated in the Catholic Church during the 1980s to protect the rights of African religions and has continued to cultivate a sense of cultural and racial pride since then:

The evangelical churches, always discriminated against the churches, the religions of African ancestry... So with the support of Father Julio, right? who already died, and Father Valentino came, they implanted Liberation Theology here with this racial line. That lasted from 85, I think up to ninety, I think ninety-one... I do not remember how long it lasted here in the Church. We wanted the coordination to be all in the Brazilian Afro mold. With lots of dancing, lots of food, colorful. At the time, the Cardinal Dom Eugênio Sales, who was alive, did not let [the] celebration be in the Afro Brazilian culture. So then we left the church and the Center for Racial Justice became a Civil Society Organization, it became an NGO. That was in [19]89, right. And from there ... And we always continued doing various social actions, sports work, dance work, marial arts and such. But with this main focus on the racial issue, you know? ... Always, like this, with great difficulty, you know? Because the Brazilian society, it's silent, it's mean, it's a coward, it's a hypocrite. It tells you that it is not racist, right? but if you see where the black man is today, right? What is the black's position today in Brazilian society, in all aspects? He's just a helper, and if he's in the news, it's ... he's ... a victim of the police, a victim of violence, a woman victim of violence ... the victim's husband ... the child ... And [they say] it's not racist right? Society is not racist? Where is the Negro in this society? So we worked hard on that. As we saw that this racism, as it is masked, we started, then we decided to change the focus. Doing a lighter job that does not ... that focused on this racial issue, of racism, but with valuing, valuing more what the Negro does well.

When I met Vasconcelo and Amanda, a young woman who appeared to be his assistant, the Center for Racial Justice had begun to focus on beauty, cultivating pride in African hairstyles, dark skin, and overall pride in the strengths of the black community. This was coupled with a narrative about how blacks in Brazil continue to suffer discrimination despite the popular belief that Brazil was a “racial democracy,” wherein social hierarchies were not determined by racial differences. As many scholars have noted, racial inequality in Brazil operates much more subtly than in the United States and other countries with a history of institutionalized racism (Goldstein 2003; Telles 2014; Wade 2009).

According to Vasconcelo, for instance, racism remained prevalent in the overrepresentation of blacks in service work and as victims of crime, particularly by the police. At Youth Promise, these elements of “invisible” racism were frequently brought up, particularly by Luis Henrique, Maria Rita, and other black or *pardo* staff. Though CBOs were extremely under-resourced, they offered a site for black residents to gain some status and power and to work towards addressing racial discrimination, particularly by educating their participants about symbolic forms of racial violence.

At the same time, CBOs were not immune to racial inequalities. The whitening of CBO leadership relative to its volunteers suggests that lighter-skinned residents may have had more resources—monetary, social, or cultural—to lead an organization, rather than work as a volunteer. I observed this subtle form of power imbalance within CBOs in the relationship between Solange and Camilla, where the class and spatial inequalities overlapped to produce a distinctly racialized, and deeply pernicious, consequence for not only power within CBOs but life chances beyond them.

In the afternoon of my first day at Youth Promise, Solange introduced me to Camilla, whom she described as her “right hand.” Camilla, whose challenges with accessing healthcare for her son and getting her roads paved I described in Chapter 3, was a 42-year-old black woman with some indigenous features, including straight black hair and small lips. She lived with her 12-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter in a very small house in one of the poorest and more dangerous areas of the City of God. Although Camilla had not completed primary school, she had strong management skills and was in charge of Youth Promise whenever Solange was away at meetings or unable to attend due to church obligations or illness. Camilla and Solange had been close friends for decades, often relying heavily on each other for support during difficult times. Camilla, for instance, had helped Solange care for her dying husband many years earlier and continued to play an important role in the lives of Solange’s children. Since Solange was the public face of Youth Promise, she was often away at meetings while Camilla kept things running.

Their relationship became tense when Camilla began dating Mateus, an older man heavily involved in local politics in the City of God. Solange became fearful that Camilla’s relationship might jeopardize Youth Promise, though she never fully articulated the actual risks to me. When I asked Maria Rita, who was also close to Solange and Camilla, about the motives, she hypothesized that Solange feared that Mateus might ask Camilla for information about Youth Promise’s funds, or might ask her to steal from Youth Promise, neither of which Maria Rita thought were likely events. A more likely explanation was that Solange was so fearful of any relationship to the drug trade that her concerns were abstract and indirect: the worlds of violent governance and moral politics should never mix. Whatever the actual reason, Solange asked Camilla to end the relationship, and Camilla refused. Over the following few months, they

began to argue regularly and Solange gradually began to offer Camilla's duties to Andressa and other staff members until, finally, Camilla felt so excluded that she quit Youth Promise.

Both Solange and Camilla vented to me about what seemed to me like a breakup akin to a divorce. Solange attempted to justify her actions to me on multiple occasions, emphasizing the shifts in Camilla's mood and the increasing difficulties in working with her. Whatever psychological consternation the event created for Solange, the consequences for Camilla were much more severe. For one, Camilla lost her community. Youth Promise had become as much her home away from home as it had for Solange, and Camilla had many close ties to the volunteers, the children, and their parents. While Camilla attempted to maintain some of these, the tension between her and Solange made it difficult for anyone still at Youth Promise to remain close to both of them at once; their reliance on Youth Promise forced many to choose Solange over Camilla. Camilla also lost her income. While she had never made much at Youth Promise, it had been enough to cover her monthly expenses. Suddenly, Camilla was thrust into the job market with no high school diploma and few marketable skills or contacts with potential employers. The transition from her informal, albeit skilled work at Youth Promise to the field of formal employment was brutal, and Camilla suffered enormously to pay her bills and to regain her sense of competence and intelligence. Solange, in the meantime, continued to run Youth Promise with little changes to her personal life aside from the loss of her friend. Though I attempted to appear neutral as both of them confided in me about the breakup, I could not overlook how their differences in education, race, access to resources, and positions of power within Youth Promise led to deeply unequal outcomes. Camilla had a more placid response to the situation: "Youth Promise is Solange's, she can do what she wants."

The gendered dynamics within CBOs were as complex as its racial dynamics. According to my survey, nine percent of men and seven percent of women reported volunteering in an “ONG or *projeto*” in the City of God, and 2.3% of men and 1.3% of women reported having a leadership role in an “ONG or *projeto*.” These reports were inconsistent with my ethnographic observations. There were, in fact, many men involved in City of God’s CBOs, particularly as volunteer teachers of martial arts or in administrative capacities, most CBOs were run by women and most of the people in informal positions of power (such as Camilla or Maria Rita) were also women. I suspect that men’s higher rates of reporting on my survey may be related to their frequent engagement (or claims to be engaged) in *projetos*, which often included running soccer trainings or teaching martial arts to neighbors. In fact, most people who claimed to run a “projeto” in my ethnographic research were men. The small, semi-structured nature of *projetos* allowed for more leaders and fewer support staff. In other words, men preferred to run their own soccer training for a handful of youth—a project over which they could claim full ownership and leadership—than serve as a volunteer soccer instructor in Youth Promise (and under Solange or another female leader).

The leadership of men in CBOs was especially interesting. For instance, the Center for Racial Justice was run by Vasconcelo, though at the time of our interview it was not functional. A year later I ran into Vasconcelo and he reported to me proudly that he was about to start a percussion class in one of the parks nearby. While Vasconcelo claimed his status as “NGO president,” his activities were not nearly as robust as those of most CBOs (with female leaders). Furthermore, the actual activities he hoped to offer seemed to fall into the trap he hoped to avoid: he wanted to offer sports and music activities for boys, and classes on hairdressing and doing make-up for women. While, in theory, these classes were intended to give women skills they

could use to make a living, they were service jobs that would not likely make much money. The gendered undertones (wherein men were seen as athletes and women as concerned with beauty) also could not be ignored. In his attempt to provide activities that would support the black population in the City of God, he reaffirmed traditional gender norms that emphasized women's sexuality.

In the larger CBO landscape, however, Vasconcelo was not a major player. Solange and several other female leaders, many of whom are the subjects of the following chapter, were the key decision-makers around service provision in the City of God. Leonardo had pointed this out to me once when he noted that the NGO world in the City of God was heavily feminized. "There are so many men involved, though" I had retorted. "Yeah, but look at who makes the decisions," he argued, "Look at who does most of the work. Solange, Carmen, Clara, Maria Rita. They're all women. Look at the issues we talk about. We talk about women's rights. There are men involved, but this is all run by women." He was right. Not only were City of God's functioning organizations run primarily by women, they heavily incorporated classes and discussions about gender issues. Youth Promise regularly held classes on healthy relationships for youth in which sexual and domestic violence were openly discussed. There were also multiple groups run by various CBOs aimed at discussing the needs and rights of black women. Finally, CBOs offered women like Camilla, who did not have many marketable skills and who wished (or needed) to remain close to home to keep an eye on their children with a structured environment in which they could receive financial resources and status in the neighborhood. While CBOs could not directly address the financial and physical precarity of female favela residents, it played an important role in offering immediate services and supports to women while also promoting discourses about women's rights more generally.

## CBOs in the Landscape of Moral Politics

Community-based organizations in the City of God made up the most visible and least contentious social movement in the neighborhood. Because social service work was widely accepted as a normative, morally-sanctioned activity, residents with a desire to improve their neighborhood without jeopardizing their safety found CBOs to be a safe place to do so. Public narratives employed by CBO leaders drew on non-threatening discourses of non-violence which emphasized socially-sanctioned values around discipline, respect, caring, hard work, empathy, and compassion. Within the safe spaces of CBO classrooms, teachers were also able to critique violence more directly, if still focused on broader forms of violence, such as racism, sexism, police brutality, and unjust state policies and practices. In these ways, CBOs both helped to fill some of the gaps left by insufficient and inaccessible state resources while also arming individual participants with the social, professional, and critical thinking skills needed to challenge violence more directly.

Like most social movement actors, CBOs directly engaged state actors on a regular basis. Most of these relationships were collaborative. Their objective was to work together to capitalize on the few resources at their disposal, an approach that often resulted in access to lots of small and temporary pools of funding or donations rather than major grants or legal changes. At the same time, *CDD Collaborates* provided a space in which favela residents could directly challenge individual public officials. While City of God's CBOs remained in a subservient status relative to larger urban or state-wide NGOs, their ability to connect outside actors with favela residents offered them status and legitimacy in the City of God, enabling them to more directly confront state actors.

Their lack of access to major resources limited the extent of their service provision, as well as their ability to mobilize residents around more political projects, which prevented them from demanding large-scale resources or changes. However, their “micro-ness” offered them protection from drug traffickers and corrupt political actors who did not see them as a threat. This promoted both their safety and their legitimacy, two critical resources for survival within the City of God’s moral political arena. CBOs were also able to operate with little intervention from violent political actors thanks to the feminization of its leadership and public discourses, which were less likely to be viewed as directly threatening to drug traffickers or politicians than men. While there were exceptions to this rule, which I discuss in future chapters, the gendered landscape of moral politics created important, if limited, opportunities for women to lead City of God’s social movements and to generate spaces for the articulation and defense of women’s rights. At the same time, the fear of becoming enmeshed with local governance structures at times strained interpersonal relationships within CBOs. And while CBOs worked to cultivate critical reflection on structural, symbolic, and political violence, inequalities based on race, gender, class and educational differences were at times retrenched within the very agencies that sought to resist them.

# **Chapter 6**

## **Community Militants and the Fight for the City of God**

## Introduction

Solange sighed heavily as she read her WhatsApp messages off her computer screen. “What’s up?” I asked from across the room. I had just finished working on a grant application I had been helping Solange, Maria Rita, and Rosangela put together and was happy to sit and chat with Solange in between her phone calls and side conversations with other volunteers. “Ugh, I don’t want to go to the Residents’ Board meeting today,” she replied as she leaned her forehead on the palm of her hand dramatically. I chuckled. Solange never wanted to attend the Board meetings. “Are you going?” she asked me. “Yep!” I responded animatedly, “They are discussing the reorganization plan, I’m excited to go see what that’s all about.” Solange raised her eyebrows, looking at me like I was crazy. “Oh, it won’t be thaaaat bad,” I responded with a smile, “Come with me, keep me company!” Solange agreed to think about it and I headed off to a morning interview.

The Board meeting was scheduled for 2pm and I made sure to arrive few minutes early, still unsure of whether Solange would show up. My phone beeped. It was a WhatsApp message from Maria Rita instructing me to apologize to the Board that Solange would not be able to attend the meeting due to an “oncoming illness” (i.e. her allergies). I would be the representative for Youth Promise that day. After greeting some of the staff drinking coffee and taking calls on the first floor I was told the meeting would be upstairs in the conference room. I walked up and took my seat in a small room on the second floor with about twenty wooden chairs with small tables attached to the right side; they must have been hand-me-downs from a school. The air conditioner felt good on my back. It was another scorching day outside.

Beatriz, a thin woman with brown skin and a small afro hairstyle, introduced herself to me with a friendly smile and offered me a thin plastic cup for coffee. I declined, choosing water

instead. It was too hot to drink the Brazilian *cafezinho*, a dark, hot syrupy coffee filled with sugar. We chatted amiably as the participants slowly arrived. Beatriz had recently been hired as one of two paid administrative staff at the Institute for a Better Neighborhood, a CBO that the Residents' Board members referred to as their "executive branch." The two paid positions were being funded by a grant from the Institute for a Better Tomorrow (IBT), a large NGO that provided direct services to favela residents through job trainings and assistance on the job market, and also helped CBOs in favelas to streamline and formalize their legal status so they could apply for federal and private grants. Eloise, the professor whose perspective on the unequal grant landscape I referenced in Chapter 5, had also been hired under this project. The meeting for the day was to discuss the next steps of the restructuring of the Residents' Board and the IBT in order to make them "compliant" with federal regulations.

I recognized many of the people arriving to the meeting, several of whom I had already interviewed: Rafael, a white middle-aged man with a scruffy white beard and oversized clothes who founded the Designer&Co, a CBO dedicated to helping artists and clothing designers become lucrative by selling their goods and training them in commercial sales; Clara, a middle-aged black woman who started a free daycare in her home several years earlier and eventually found a separate building for it; Carmen, a tall, tan-skinned woman with dark, flowing hair who ran one of City of God's largest CBOs, the Environment League; Carlina, a frail black woman who walked with a slight hunchback and who was at the Institute every time I came over, though I was never clear exactly what she did; Isis, a light-skinned woman with straight brown hair cupped around her chin; and Geovana, profiled in Chapter 3, a short, light-skinned woman who ran a CBO dedicated to literacy. There were many others present as well who I did not recognize. This included two 30-some light-skinned women dressed in business attire who were

busy setting up the projector and computer (which required some troubleshooting) and a middle-aged white woman with short, light-brown hair in jeans and a t-shirt sitting near the front of the room by the two women preparing for their presentation. Her name was Simone, I later learned, and she was one of the directors of the Institute for a Better Tomorrow and in charge of overseeing the reorganization of the Residents' Board.

Finally, the meeting began. The two women were lawyers from a state institute charged with executing land policy, particularly around urban and rural settlements on public and private land. They had been commissioned by the Institute for a Better Tomorrow to review and edit the legal statute of the Residents' Board and the Institute for a Better Neighborhood in order to make their organization compliant with regulations for formal NGOs so they could apply for large federal grants. They projected the statute onto the screen. The "markup" option in Word had been activated, and their comments, cross-outs, deletes, and edits filled the right column on the screen and made the document glisten in red underlines. The founders of the Residents' Board had drafted the statute themselves nearly a decade ago and re-written it several times, though it seemed from the numerous red strikethroughs that their best efforts had come up short.

Cilene, the lawyer who appeared to be in charge, began at the top, reading the statute line by line and commenting on the areas they found problematic. It was important, she noted that the statute be "free and clear of conflicts of interest." They were concerned that members of the Residents' Board, the governing body, were also among the possible recipients of Institute funds. They were also concerned that the Board's requirement that all members be "juridical" people—representatives of registered CBOs—rather than "physical" people—i.e. individuals—created a number of conflicts. For one, it prevented people with no leadership role in a CBO to have a say in Board decisions. Second, many CBOs struggled to keep their paperwork up to date. What

happened if a CBO's registration papers expired? Would they be excluded from the Board? Could they continue to participate at meetings until they could renew their registration? The lawyers made their way through the document highlighting issues and attempting to explain inconsistencies and requirements through legal jargon that I found difficult to follow. "We are going to suggest we change it to this," stated Cilene, pointing at new text she had written in. "Sound ok?" Participants squinted at the screen in what appeared to be an attempt to understand what she meant, but before they could respond, the lawyer took their silence as approval. "Ok, onto the next line," she continued. I looked around the room hopeful that the other participants had understood more than I had.

The silence did not last long. Rafael jumped in to explain the logic behind what the lawyers saw as a legal inconsistency: "We are an association of institutions," he explained, describing the lengthy history of how the Residents' Board had been founded (entirely by CBO leaders) and why they had decided to keep that structure. The lawyer interrupted him before he could finish to explain why this was legally problematic. Jair, a middle-aged black man who had been active in City of God's social movements for decades and hired alongside Beatriz to assist with the restructuring process, jumped in to propose a possible compromise between Rafael's point and the lawyer's. Cilene interrupted him before he could finish to explain why his solution would not work. "We are a forum of discussion around political decisions," another participant chimed in loudly. Another attempted to explain to the lawyers with frustration that the goal of the Institute was to implement the decisions made by the Board. "I understand, but my job here is just to clarify" the lawyer remarked condescendingly, despite her obvious preference for replacing Board members with "physical" people.

All over the room hands were shooting up as people shifted uneasily in their chairs eager to lay claim to their history and their views. Somehow Clara managed to get her turn in the rowdy crowd, suggesting that ultimately “juridical” people were the only ones who had the capacity to execute whatever decisions the Board made, and that it would not be fair for residents with no commitment to social development to make decisions about the neighborhood if they were not in a position to actually carry them out. Simone, to this point silent, jumped in animatedly: “Outsiders can still help by being part of the Institute!” pointing vigorously at herself in order to ensure that her own role in the improvement of the City of God would not be overlooked. After multiple attempts to be heard, Geovana proclaimed that democracy was not always based simply on expansion, but on deepening, suggesting that the Board contributed to democratic engagement by increasing social development and demanding public policies for the City of God rather than by simply including a growing number of voices in the decision-making processes. I looked over at Simone, who was by now retreating from the confrontational debate by scrolling through her Facebook newsfeed.

The lawyer, tired of hearing the increasingly angry dissent among participants, shifted from the “open floor” model to a hurried explanation of the remaining comments and edits in the document. To my right, Carlina, who had been sitting with her hand raised for the last thirty minutes, rubbed her forehead in anguish and whispered in my direction, “I don’t work for them.” Giving up on getting a word in, Carlina got up and began serving us water, for which we were extremely grateful. Another participant behind me added loudly, “This is so rude.” By now, the other lawyer was engaged in a heated debate off to the side of the room with another participant. Finally the room erupted into total chaos as Cilene exclaimed: “You will need to explain this to

me because I'm *very* confused!" and Rafael began to shout "The politics for the fight for the City of God *is* the Board and the Institute!"

Finally Carmen, sitting off to the side, lunged forward with her hand in the air in a display of control. The room quieted as Carmen explained, loudly and authoritatively, the history of some of their struggles, what motivated the decisions outlined in the statute, and why some of the Cilene's suggestions had not worked in the past. "They worked for me," Cilene replied. "Well then you must be much prettier than me," Carmen retorted. I chuckled to myself as Cilene shifted uncomfortably. Tensions finally began to decrease as Carmen offered some suggestions for how they might reconcile some of their differing perspectives and why some parts of the statute could not be changed. In what appeared like an effort to wrap up the contentious meeting, Carmen added that they were all benefitting from the knowledge they had gained from the lawyers during this process. The meeting ended finally, though more out of everyone's exhaustion than because much progress was achieved. The lawyers agreed to take another look at their edits and incorporate more of the Board's demands into the statute. When I finally left the Institute—four hours later—I understood Solange's reluctance to attend the Board meetings and the dramatic differences between her approach to social change and theirs.

Though the meeting described above was the most contentious and stressful Board meeting in which I participated, it was not uncommon for Board members to speak up, speak loudly, and speak over each other. They certainly had little qualms with disagreeing with outside state and private actors. Many of the meetings I observed culminated in what seemed to me like little resolution to their disagreements after hours of arguing, and many spoke with frustration to me about the meetings afterwards. The boisterousness of the Board meetings had earned them a reputation for being difficult to work with and made them incur disfavor among many of the

activists in the neighborhood—like Solange—who opted to pursue social change through more peaceful and collaborative tactics. As I got to know the Residents’ Board members and Institute staff one-on-one, learned about their history, and observed them in more casual or everyday settings, however, I came to appreciate the logic behind this confrontational style of activism, the personal motivations of Board members, and the benefits of their approach for demanding improvements in their neighborhood.

## From Collective Grievances to Institutionalized Claims-Making

Though in 2016 the combative nature of the Residents’ Board had begun to threaten its very existence, it had also played a critical role in their formation and success over the years. In 2003, one year after the City of God gained international visibility for its extreme violence and poverty, then National Secretary for Public Security, Luiz Eduardo Soares, and Rio de Janeiro’s mayor, Cesar Maia announced that the City of God would receive a number of interventions in order to eliminate violence in the city (Pfeiffer 2014). The Business Forum of Rio, also established in 2003 by local business leaders to promote urban social development, embraced the initiative and joined forces with Soares and Maia. State officials and representatives of the Business Forum scheduled a planning meeting in one of the Residents’ Associations and invited several important actors. Few local residents were invited, and the leaders of City of God’s smaller CBOs who had been most directly engaged in local development efforts were especially appalled to have been excluded. “We found out [about the meeting], and that we weren’t participating” recounted Carmen, one of the founding members of the Board. “Hold on! How can it be that the institutions of the City of God are not being invited to discuss a social intervention in the City of God?” Carmen was born and raised in the City of God and founded

the Environment League in 1998, through which she had been running literacy classes geared especially at mothers, who had the highest rates of illiteracy in the City of God at the time. For Clara, another founding member who ran a small CBO offering free childcare to working mothers, the issue was also about reframing the debate:

We wanted to show the Public Power (the State) that the community doesn't need an intervention just because it is violent, because of the issues of security and the drug trade, no. We understand that the issue of violence is lack of education, you know? It's lack of proper sanitation, income, that's what we wanted to convey, understand?

Clara feared that the exclusion of their voices would allow the narrative that emphasized violence as the only problem of the City of God to go unchallenged. Even worse, she worried that violence would be viewed as a cultural issue, as a problem of the “criminal dispositions” of favela residents, rather than as a symptom of underdevelopment and lack of opportunity. Inserting their voices into the discussion of how to improve their neighborhood was critical on many fronts, not the least of which was to advocate for non-violent solutions to violence.

“We tried in every way possible to get into this network, to understand what was going on and how we could contribute,” Carmen recalled, “And what they told us was that we couldn't participate in their activities, in their meetings.” They sent letters to all left-leaning City Council members and went to City Hall and knocked on office doors demanding that they be included in the planning of the intervention. “We didn't sit around waiting for someone to let us in. They weren't going to!” According to Carmen, they were finally allowed into the meeting after threatening to leak the story to the media. Clara chuckled as she retold her recollection of the story. According to Clara, she, Carmen, and several other CBO leaders showed up to the Residents' Association on the first meeting and were denied entry by two young women guarding the door. According to Clara, they protested loudly and refused to leave until they were let in. “Imagine me, a favela resident, with pitch-black skin, a woman, arguing with these

important people to let me in. I wasn't going to sit around and let them make decisions about our community without us! And you know what? We got in!" As Clara's narrative suggests, entry into the meeting was as much about symbolic representation as it was about participation. Clara's protests to join the meeting were a symbolic reflection of favela residents'—and, in particular, black female residents'—exclusion from the decision-making and resource distribution mechanisms in the city. Over ten years later, Clara's giddy excitement over the retelling of their victory spoke of a broader, yet deeply personal, struggle for control over their own fates and effective inclusion in the city.

Once allowed in, Carmen and Clara were surprised to find the meeting room bursting with people, representatives from the United Nations; O Globo, Brazil's media giant; several federations of business conglomerates; Viva Rio, a mega NGO in Rio de Janeiro; and CAPOTE, a large NGO founded in the City of God but that ran most of its activities in other favelas. Carmen, Clara, and the other members were told to sit quietly. Carmen was indignant: "Hold on... You want to tell me that although I was born and raised here, and that I militate here, direct an institution here, we aren't going to participate or even get to say what we think?" Once the organizers finished presenting their proposed development plan, Carmen had interrupted the meeting, arguing that the city's intervention in the City of God was authoritarian. She accused the group of not taking into account the voices of local residents or the development activities that were already being offered by local CBOs, albeit with very few resources. Feeling embarrassed, the leaders of the meeting gave the CBO leaders that weekend to put together a better plan. "The meeting was on a Friday," Carmen remembered, "and we worked all weekend on the plan." Carmen and her colleagues divided up into teams and began surveying local residents about their needs and writing them up. "We spent hours putting together the plan and

trying to get it typed up.” As Carmen recalled, they could only find one working computer between all the CBOs, and they took turns drafting the document and making edits.

The final product was a fifty-page document that provided detailed demands for neighborhood improvement, including better trash collection, community gardens, a community bank, a high school, additional public housing, better infrastructure, and improved health care, among other issues. On Monday morning, they pulled together just enough funds to cover their bus fare and headed to the scheduled meeting with municipal officials and Forum representatives at City Hall, thirty kilometers outside the City of God. According to Carmen, “We were exhausted by Monday morning. But we did it. And they were shocked! They didn’t think that we could do it... We dressed up in our best business attire, you know, looking professional, and there was that whole thing of, poor people don’t dress this way, which really threw them off.” Their hard work paid off. The government agreed to adopt their proposal. CBO leaders named themselves the Residents’ Board and embraced the responsibility of advocating for the development needs of the neighborhood.

Over the following year, the Board partnered with the Business Forum of Rio, UNESCO, university researchers, and LAMSA (a private company that runs the Yellow Line, one of the city’s largest expressways) in order to more systematically research the needs of the neighborhood. They also organized a Community Forum, attended by over one hundred people to debate social development and needed public policies, opened up several new literacy classes, founded a community-based newspaper, and made over a dozen visits to municipal and state secretariats to form partnerships to support development projects (Pfeiffer 2014). In 2004, it published a Plan for the Development of the City of God which listed their development goals for the following five years. In 2006, they founded the Institute for Social Development, an

NGO that could legally apply for private and state funding and lead its own social development projects. As Board and Institute members described it to me, the Institute functioned somewhat as the “executive branch” to the “legislative” capacities of the Residents Board. When I arrived in 2014, the Institute had secured a two-story building on the City of God’s main avenue where Board members met regularly. It had two large meeting spaces, a kitchen, and several offices, some of which were occupied by CBOs whose leaders were also Board members. Board meetings were held on a bi-monthly basis in one of the Institute meeting rooms, and made their space available to other CBOs and “projetos” in the City of God.

## The Neighborhood as Subject and Object of Change

In many respects, the Residents’ Board functioned much like neighborhood associations, or “place-based collective organizations formed to address local interests that residents share” (Rabrenovic 1996:2). In both their Development Plan and my interviews with the main participants in the Board and the Institute, the articulated object of their mobilization efforts was the City of God and the shared needs, deficits, and interests of residents in the neighborhood. Though members of the Residents’ Board ran their own CBOs and often engaged in many similar activities as Youth Promise and other CBOs, they operated under distinct political imaginaries and logics of action. In contrast to the logic of Youth Promise and many other CBOs, which focused on individual transformation through social services, the Residents’ Board emphasized the territory: the physical, social, economic, and cultural interests of a geographically-bounded space. Their vision of social change had the neighborhood and its social and economic development as their primary object of transformation, as opposed to the more individual emphasis of Youth Promise. And while they also engaged in service provision, their

main focus as Board members was in fighting for public policies and public institutions in the City of God. At the same time, their emphasis on the neighborhood largely precluded collective action around urban social issues beyond the City of God. While participants certainly hoped for, and often talked about large-scale government and police reform and a decrease in racism and other forms of discrimination against favela residents, their efforts as an organized group focused on the interests of their neighborhood.

Geovana, profiled in Chapter 3, was among the founders of the Residents' Board, as were several other activists who had worked with Geovana on housing, education, and healthcare campaigns during the 1980s and 1990s. The Residents' Board was, in many respects, the latest rendition of a historically-embedded view of social change as operating for and through the City of God. It emphasized helping individual residents by improving the physical, social, and economic well-being of their shared space. The Development Plan developed by the Residents' Board was an especially useful tool for understanding the political imaginary and logics of action that undergirded this social movement. The "Plan for Social Development in the City of God" begins with the following statement:

The purpose of the document is to: disseminate an experience that has demonstrated that it is possible to live with differences, overcome divergences, and cooperate in the development of projects for the benefit of communities (i.e. favelas); establish partnerships to transform the City of God into a place where everyone has tranquility and satisfaction in living and raising their children.

As the statement suggests, the Board envisioned a reconciliation of differences between City of God residents in order to collaborate around their shared needs and rights. This 26-page document goes on to briefly describe the history of the City of God, drawing on both census data and their collective memories of major events to highlight the various types of violence and neglect faced by local residents. This included the arrival of its first residents after being victims

of floods and fires, which were described as “families that had no other option of housing that did not require settling near silted and polluted rivers or in areas of high concentration of garbage.” The document recounts major socio-economic changes over the following thirty-eight years, including the human and economic toll of the 1996 flood and the displacement of families thanks to rising real estate prices. At the same time, the Plan contends that population growth “was not accompanied by the investments in equipment and urban infrastructure services necessary so that the initial housing conditions were not degraded.” It backs this up by detailing specific deficits in housing, trash collection, educational services, and employment opportunities.

The document then recounts their historic and current efforts to “resist both the abandonment and neglect of the Public Power (i.e. the State) and the stigma of being violent and dangerous,” retold more briefly but in a similar spirit as my own Chapter 3. According to the document, this history led up to the establishment of the Residents’ Board in 2003, an event described as “a milestone in the life of the community and of the twenty institutions that make up the Residents’ Board and that, during these more than thirteen months, remain united because they believe that a new world is possible, but a better City of God is urgent.” Put bluntly, though they wished for larger structural and symbolic changes, the emphasis of their efforts was on their neighborhood.

The Plan concludes with a detailed list of “what we want by 2009.” For instance, in the area of Work, Employment, and Income, their five-year plan includes an increase in hiring of local manual laborers for neighborhood urbanization projects; cooperatives of trash collectors, civil construction workers, seamstresses, etc; and increased technical and financial assistance for local entrepreneurs. In the area of Education, the plan calls for the filling of teacher vacancies; a public school offering college prep courses; a reduction in drop-out rates; and the provision of

public early education services to all infants and toddlers; a 60% reduction in illiteracy rates through a “transformative methodology”; the construction of a secondary (high) school; and additional courses attending to the demands of the job market. A similarly detailed list is offered related to urbanization and the environment; healthcare; “social improvements” (including a reduction in unwanted pregnancies and drug use, among others); housing; sport; culture; and communication. Next to each objective is a list of the specific action steps that need to be taken to attain the objective, the organizations charged with those steps (i.e. the Residents’ Board, the Municipal Government, local CBOs, local schools, private partners, etc), and how each organization will contribute.

Altogether, it is an impressive document, offering an easily-accessible compilation of data and history, woven together by critical analysis of their collective histories, which culminates in a detailed list of action steps and responsible actors. Unlike the piecemeal, one-person-at-a-time strategy employed by Youth Promise and the other CBOs in CDD Collaborates, the vision of the Residents’ Board offered a multi-pronged approach that emphasized fighting against inequality and exclusion through neighborhood-based interventions. The Plan places, in no uncertain terms, the blame for their deficits on the State. Holding municipal and state government, as well private actors, accountable for specific action steps displaced the responsibility of social change off individuals and onto public and private institutions. In this approach to non-violent collective action, social change required holding the government accountable for investing in the neighborhood and treating favelas like any other urban space.

Carmen was especially articulate about this approach to collective action. I had first met Carmen at the contentious meeting described above, and had been immediately intimidated by her. She stood almost a foot taller than me and had interrupted the meeting to articulate her

views loudly several times. After many interactions with Carmen and observing her at several other meetings at the Institute, I came to view Carmen as a fierce and committed advocate for the City of God. Much of her efforts were informed by her own experiences of struggle, which led her view the government's negligence and dismissal of the favela as the primary culprit for sustained poverty, racism, and violence in the City of God. Carmen had become an orphan at the age of nine, and she and her four siblings were raised by what she described as "the community." Carmen had come to appreciate and value the strong culture of social support in the City of God, which she believed was still strong despite many social shifts in recent years. Throughout her life, Carmen had witnessed her neighbors' strong sense of responsibility to care for each other:

If someone got sneakers, if someone got clothes, they would come and divide it with everyone. "Oh, this doesn't fit my child, give it to someone else..." To this day it's like that. I think that this is something really important, like, in the favela which is this... We talk about an economy of solidarity, this thing of solidarity. If I don't have something, or even if I have just a little, everyone is going to eat, everyone is going to share. We don't have this thing of "Oh, I have something, and I'm seeing someone else who needs it, and I'm not going to give it to them..." My whole family was always, like, dedicated to this issue... I see you need something, we are going to fight for it. It's an illness, or someone passed away, we are there, always there, you know?

Through these experiences, Carmen came to view "the community" as the object and subject of change. Carmen believed she had an obligation to fight for the needs of the City of God and believed that change needed to come from within. Like Solange, Carmen also founded and ran a CBO, the Environment League, which offered literacy classes and various activities aimed at teaching children and adolescents about preserving and caring for their environment. Yet Carmen's approach was more explicitly political than Solange's:

The youth who come to the Environment League, he has to have some formal education. What does this mean? We say that it's a political education. The methodology and philosophy from Paulo Freire is political. Oh, people say, "But is this party politics?" People who say this don't know what 'politics' means... If they come here, they will study about housing, they will work, they will learn about health, they will learn about gender issues, he will study about social movements... He will understand the history of education, he will learn about the formation of the favelas, his own history in this place.

In contrast to Solange's near-total avoidance of politics, Carmen embraced the task of politicizing her participants. Notably, Carmen was careful to distinguish between party politics and the political methodology of Paulo Freire. By reframing politics as a critical examination of resources and gender discrimination, Carmen aimed to transform social work into a struggle for power and rights without directly challenging formal political actors. At the same time, the City of God was at once the spatial manifestation of inequality, the object of contention, and the site of struggle. This perspective directly informed how she worked with the youth in her organization:

The first thing we work on is identity. Who are you? Who are your parents? Where are they from? And why you need to value your parents' struggles... The City of God, it has a very rich history of construction by its residents. You ask me, 'Carmen, who are these militants?' They are all the people who fought to put electricity inside the houses, the people who fought to pave the roads in the City of God... So, the life of those who live in the favela is made by militants. So, the people who contributed with some of their time, ... they need to be part of the discussion. If the young people, the people born in this place, do not have an identity with this place, they will not want to, later, fight for this place. They will want to study, to graduate, and then leave here, because they can't see any opportunities here. Understand? And we are constantly working to break up this narrative.

In her use of the term "militant," Carmen employed an important discursive tool that re-wrote favela residents as fighters, rather than victims (or criminals). In fact, the term "militant" permeated the narratives of most other members of the Board and the Institute. In the above excerpt, Carmen described "militants" as the residents who helped build the City of God. In other words, militants were those who resisted their marginalization and impoverishment by contributing to the collective needs of the neighborhood. The term also proffered them with a kind of "insider" status, an identity that emphasized favela residents' unrelenting commitment to the struggle, in contrast to "volunteers" (most of whom were from outside the City of God) who came and went as other interests took priority:

We are not volunteers, we are militants. Volunteers come from time to time and do an activity. We are militants. Militants commit themselves to making a change, commit themselves to studying about that. Every day he is there. Every day there, having money or not he'll be there. So we militate. We fight for the community no matter what, even when there is no money, no time, we fight for the community. We are going to fight for public policies to benefit the neighborhood...So we militate.

The term “community militancy” was derived from the term “militantes,” or “militants,” individuals who fought against the dictatorship during the 1960s and 70s. Brazil’s Labor Party, which came to power with the election of Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva in 2002 and had remained in power since President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016, had led much of the militancy movement. Many members of the Residents’ Board participated in clandestine political associations during the dictatorship. The members I interviewed did not carry guns or lend support to guerrilla fighters. Instead, they fought against the dictatorship by leading consciousness-raising groups that utilized Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy as a guide for running politically-motivated literacy classes among favela residents. Geovana’s story in Chapter 3 provided one example of this approach. During my time in the field, I met several of these “militants” who joined formal political activities after the fall of the dictatorship, such as labor unions or political campaigns for the now-institutionalized Labor Party. Esther and Maria Rita’s sister, for instance, had also participated in the Workers’ Party efforts to overthrow the dictatorship in the 1970s and 80s, though she eventually moved out of the City of God and joined the leadership of a major university union. While these individuals no longer advocated directly for the City of God, their upbringing in City of God’s leftist politics had motivated their continued engagement in institutionalized politics. I did not meet any such “militants” engaged in City of God’s local political structures, however; formal politics at that level was not a site in which a just distribution of resources and power could be negotiated.

Geovana, Carmen, and many other Board members had opted to remain in the City of God and focus their political efforts on advocating for the neighborhood. They were “community militants.” They adopted the same fervor, unwavering commitment to the rights of their territory, and the view of the state as inherently antagonistic to the poor in their fight for the needs and rights of the favela. Just as militancy during the dictatorship entailed an acceptance of the risks entailed in the struggle against unjust state power, community militancy also carried risks. In the excerpt below, Isis, a 64-year-old woman who had joined the Board in 2009, reacted to my explanation of the consent form for my research project, in which I noted that her identity would remain anonymous:

I have nothing to hide because we militate here, we can't be censoring ourselves, if I have something to say I will say it here, and I will say it in other places, because I can't censor myself... We live always in the in-between, you know? Between the “parallel power,” by which we mean the drug trade, and the power, the power of the police.

For Isis, “militating” for the community meant speaking her mind and advocating for the needs of her neighborhood even in the midst of violent state and non-state actors. The term implied not just a commitment to the struggle, but a certain boldness and willingness to incur personal risk for direct and public engagement in the struggle. While the dictatorship was replaced by drug traffickers and the police as the forces against which they fought, the principles and tactics of action remained the same. Community militancy was ultimately a struggle against racism and poverty that relied on non-violent politics in a fight for rights and equality. This was best articulated in a Facebook post by Carmen in 2017: “The doors have never been open to blacks or favela residents, we've always had to break it down. We need to gather up the guns and promote political formation so that our youth can become stronger and fight for the guarantee of our rights as well as equality.”

## Change through Confrontation

City of God's community militants viewed the State as the primary culprit for the lack of resources, the violence, and the disparagement of the work of favela residents. In their perspective, the state was antithetical to their interests. When left unchecked, it would exclude favelas from the social, economic, political, and cultural benefits of the city and from decision-making about their needs. This perspective undergirded the confrontational nature of the Residents' Board, which believed that substantive and permanent improvements in the neighborhood could only be achieved through direct struggle with state actors. Carmen and the other Board members' approach was both rational and emotional. On the one hand, they had learned from experience that standing up to government administrators directly and forcefully was necessary to make their voices and demands heard. But their confrontational style was also a reaction to decades of personal and collective experiences of suffering as a result of violence, discrimination, and the lack of access to basic resources. By remaining conscious and critical of the long history of structural and symbolic violence perpetrated by the state and society against the City of God, Board members felt a deep indignation at the marginalization, exclusion, and unfair treatment they had received simply by virtue of having been born into poor families and living in a "favela."

In addition to viewing their experiences of violence and inequality as a problem of the State, the Board advocated for permanent change through public policies, rather than through "projetos" or other small grants. This was another major difference between the Board members and those of CDD Collaborates. This is how Carmen explained it to me:

Every partnership that the Environment League has, we don't accept this thing when they (i.e. outside partners) already come with their own plan. We are going to sit down [with them] and discuss how [their plan] transforms. How does it transform the City of God,

and for what purpose? We don't want to be used. We are militants. Militants work with money or with no money. So we are not here with open arms ready to accept whatever protect from whatever grant. Who is [this project] important to? Oh, it's important for the City of God. But it's going to transform what? And how long does it last? It's just a 15-day course? And who is making money from this? Where is the money coming from? So we don't support any activity that isn't permanent and that is only...for the guys (i.e. politicians) to have numbers...It doesn't matter if the [partnering] institution has a bunch of activities and a bunch of partnerships if they are just coming here to take advantage of our territory.

Geovana and several other Board members reiterated this perspective. In fact, the view that politicians supported small, temporary activities in the City of God for the sake of getting their name and photograph in the newspaper around election time, only to abandon the project and the neighborhood after being elected, was quite prevalent among local residents, activists and non-activists alike. Carmen's suspicions of offers by private NGOs or politicians to partner with her organization were quite warranted. I had witnessed or heard of several short courses, activities, or social services that were funded by the mayor or a state deputy which lost funding almost immediately after the media had reported the story. Even more "honest" partnerships—those in which the partnering NGO had good intentions and had no political affiliations or interests—often offered short-term projects that lasted a few weeks or months but brought no permanent improvements to the neighborhood.

The Residents' Board was not interested in "projects," but in structural changes: new schools, improved hospital care, a neighborhood-wide urbanization plan, and more public housing units, things that could not be easily taken away after political interest in the City of God had waned. As Carmen expressed, they viewed this as a fight for "políticas públicas," or public policies, legal changes that would guarantee not just their right to social services but also a permanent funding stream built into the municipal budget to ensure that these rights were fulfilled. Without the institutionalization of social development in the City of God, promises for

improved services would disappear quickly due to the constant changes in political parties, interests, and alliances in municipal and state government. While Solange and the members of CDD Collaborates were willing to accept whatever funding came their way, often finding ways to make those resources extend far beyond their original purpose, the Residents' Board rejected any funds or partnerships that would not bring permanent change in the City of God. As a result, they frequently said no to proposals from outsiders and had become accustomed to standing their ground in order to “protect” their neighborhood from being taken advantage of by self-interested political and private actors.

Ultimately, this strategy had helped the Board to achieve several important successes. Since the founding of the Board and the city's adoption of their development plan as a guide for public investments in the City of God, several of the demands listed in the Plan were addressed or fulfilled. The Board created an online portal in which government and private actors could learn about the Board and local CBOs in order to promote new partnership and funding opportunities. Some of the partnerships were with various Secretariats at the municipal and state levels, as well as with public research institutes, federal and state universities, the “social-service” branch of private conglomerates, and international organizations, such as UNESCO and Action Aid, all of which provided funds and/or other resources in order to offer the types of trainings or services that addressed the demands in the development plan.

The Board also worked with municipal officials to increase the number of trash collection days, to clean up debris sites, and to add “community cleaners” who swept many of the main streets. The Board successfully mobilized the municipal government to construct new housing units for families who had lost their homes in the 1996 flood and were living in temporary homes. Geovana, Carmen, and the other Board members spoke fondly of this project, in which

they worked with the architecture department at Rio's state university to meet with displaced residents to collectively design models for the houses in which they wished to live. At the same time, they refused to allow outside contractors take on the project, insisting that City of God residents be trained and organized into a cooperative and hired to build the homes. Rafael had been among the workers. Though their original request was for four thousand units, they succeeded in securing the construction of 618 homes. The Board also secured partners to fund the establishment of a community radio station which shared public interest stories and information about courses and upcoming events. Notably, Youth Promise—with a great deal of support from Solange and Maria Rita—had embraced the task of overseeing the radio station, demonstrating that while Solange and the other Board members had different approaches to social change, they often collaborated on these efforts.

In 2005, members of the Board traveled to Venezuela to participate in the International Congress for Economic Solidarity, in which they established contacts with multiple supports of strategies for economic cooperatives in informal settlements. They organized ten planning meetings and trainings open to the public. Finally, in 2011 the Residents' Board worked with the Institute to secure a grant from the Municipal Secretariat for the Development of Economic Solidarity, which allowed them to open the first Community Bank in Brazil. The Bank produced a neighborhood-based currency to promote investment and commerce within the City of God, and the project was hailed as a model for community-based economic development across Latin America. Sadly, the Bank was robbed in 2014 and all the money was taken.<sup>23</sup> Though the local currency stopped circulating after that and, as of 2017, the Bank was still closed, Institute staff

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<sup>23</sup> It was located only a few doors down from the UPP headquarters and the robbery became yet another symbol of the UPP's weakening power in the territory.

remained funded and continued to offer courses in fiscal responsibility and economic cooperatives.

Board members also organized a coalition for demanding secondary education services in the City of God. This multi-year effort entailed multiple steps, which included multiple meetings with local residents and potential partners, meetings with state deputies and secretaries,<sup>24</sup> submitted multiple letters, petitions, and other written requests, collected evidence of the “demand” for a secondary school in the City of God through surveys, filed multiple documents, and when this all proved insufficient, they accosted the governor in the middle of a live televised interview and demanded that he sign the mandate for a secondary school in the City of God. Embarrassed and caught off guard, he signed the mandate, and the state finally invested a supposed \$6 million reais into the construction of a secondary school. The project halted after two years when, according to the state, the funds ran out. In 2017, Carmen re-initiated the coalition in an effort to reignite the fight for secondary education in the neighborhood. I attended several meetings, which included both Board and Institute members as well as interested partners from Farmanguinhos (the federal association for health research<sup>25</sup>), as well as researchers from Pontifícia Universidade Católica (the most prestigious private university in Rio), and staff from SESI (the social service branch of Brazil’s industrial conglomerate). We contributed by adding questions in our survey to measure demand for secondary education in the City of God.

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<sup>24</sup> In Rio, the municipal government oversees the implementation and administration of preschools and elementary schools, while the state government oversees secondary education.

<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the main branch of Farmanguinhos was, ironically, situated on the outskirts of the City of God and directly in front of one of the area’s most precarious informal settlements. Their location, however, also prompted its staff to take special interest in the development of the City of God.

These are only a few examples of the many efforts waged on multiple fronts by members of the Residents' Board and their allies. Each of these improvements required a unique combination of tactics that were not always aggressive but always hinged on holding elected officials and other actors directly accountable for their legal obligations and their promises. Like Youth Promise, the Board relied heavily on partnerships with outside organizations, including several international groups. Capitalizing on the fame of the City of God, the Board welcomed these partnerships as long as their offers to help would support long-term improvements. Furthermore, as the opening anecdote demonstrated, these partnerships were closely monitored by Board members and their staff were held accountable for listening to their interests and adjusting their proposals based on the demands of local residents.<sup>26</sup> While in many cases the final project was a compromise between the interests of outside partners and those of the Residents' Board, community militants were steadfast in their commitment to ensure that their voices were included in the construction of local development initiatives.

## Place-Based Politics and the Dynamics of Conflict

Although the Board and the Institute had helped to spearhead many important development projects in the City of God, by 2014, the general consensus among City of God's CBO members and many other activists (like those profiled in the following chapter) was that the Residents' Board was failing, or had already failed. Like Solange, many people viewed the meetings as stressful and not especially productive. Isabella, the founder of CDD Connects, a

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<sup>26</sup> This was an ongoing issue. Many activists across the City of God complained that potential partners came in with "projeto pronto," or conclusive proposals designed based on the interests and perspectives of the partner/donor rather than the actual needs of the residents, which infuriated most activists who felt like these partnerships were yet another site in which their voices were excluded and their demands ignored.

popular Facebook page aimed at sharing interest stories about the City of God, had attended one of their meetings out of curiosity. She later told me that she would never return, feeling like it was not a place to make social change but where people competed over who had contributed more to the struggle in a quest for self-aggrandizement. Leonardo referred to the Board as “rubbish,” and Maria Rita, one of the most diplomatic people I met in the City of God, simply refused to attend many of their meetings despite the fact that she maintained good relationships with most members individually.

In addition to the conflictual nature of the meetings, there were suspicions among outsiders that some of the grant money provided to the Institute had been misallocated (i.e. stolen), though there was no way to prove this since their internal financial and administrative structures were also informal and inconsistent. Since most grants did not support payment of staff salaries, CBO workers often had to choose between doing all of the work (which required dozens of hours a week) for no pay or find creative ways to reallocate funds to support themselves. I had little interest in investigating the possible misappropriation of funds, though if money was in fact taken to cover the personal costs for the staff (rent, electricity, food), it would surely have been significantly less than what they might have made if they had opted to forego these efforts and secure formal employment (or if they worked for a large NGO outside the City of God). The rumors are less instructive of reality than of the ways in which access to resources resulted almost immediately in suspicion of corruption and illegality.

The lack of funds that could go directly to staff salaries placed an enormous burden on Board members. In one of my interviews with Geovana, already in her 60s, she cried as she told me that after decades of hard work she had been unable to save up any money for retirement. “All these years of work, and what do I have to show for it?” she asked me as she took off her

glasses to wipe her eyes. She feared she would have to keep working even as her body gave out. In 2017, this became an even scarier possibility as she began to have memory problems and wondered how she would afford the growing costs of needed medical exams. At the beginning of a presentation I was giving about my research in September, 2017, I whipped out my tape recorder as Geovana began informally recounting pieces of City of God's history, noting that I wanted to get it all on tape so I wouldn't forget it. She chuckled; she had become used to my wanting to record everything she said. "It's actually good to record this," she nodded at me in approval, "I don't know how much longer I'll be around to tell my story." It was little wonder that Board members argued about how to fairly divide limited resources: their very lives depended on it.

I had also received complaints from Board members that decision-making was not always done fairly or democratically amongst them. Vasconcelo, for instance, often felt excluded from decisions about which CBOs should benefit from new funding opportunities or which Board leaders would speak publically on behalf of the City of God. On one occasion, Board members received a small grant to support travel to Santa Catarina, a state in southern Brazil, to give a presentation about the Institute. According to Vasconcelo:

In the first administration [of the Residents' Board], after the first election, there were a whole bunch of travel opportunities. We had to go to Santa Catarina do advocate for the Institute... There were fist fights and everything! We almost had a fist fight to decide which one of us from the Board would go. Today? Oh... Now when the President tells us: "I... I went to Bahia." She says it quickly, you know? "I went to Bahia." And I'm like, "You went to Bahia to do what??"... And you know why they do this? They are afraid, because I'm going to say: "Come here! You went to Santa Catarina? But which Commission was that under? Show me the statute written by the Commission [about that], where we voted on it...? You understand? No, it's like a little club.

Vasconcelo's sense of exclusion from the group had not kept him from attending meetings, though his bitterness was often tangible as he scowled in his seat or argued with the

other members about how decisions were made. At the same time, other members complained to me that Vasconcelo's CBO had not run any actual activities in years and that he was not a viable representative for the Board. Ultimately, the group's dysfunction seemed to me like a self-fulfilling prophecy: by denying Vasconcelo access to new funds, his CBO was unable to run activities, thereby taking away his capital as a legitimate representative and reinforcing his status as an angry outsider. A more important take-away, however, was that limited funding and an extremely insular and confrontation model of collective action severely strained possibilities for inter-group cooperation. The same tactics that allowed them to militate for their community against unresponsive political actors was also fraying the social fabric of their collectivity.

In 2015, the Residents' Board and the Institute appeared to have received a chance at a re-birth. One year earlier, Simone, the Director of Operations from a city-wide NGO called the Institute for a Better Tomorrow (IBT) had taken special interest in the Residents' Board. IBT had been founded in 1959 by a Catholic Bishop and provided a range of educational services to favela residents and had recently begun to train favela-based CBOs to apply for federal government in order to encourage the direct transfer of funds from the government to favelas. According to Simone, there was an immense gap between the legal, financial, and administrative requirements of funding institutions and the organizational capacity of favela-based CBOs. Simone had heard of the Residents' Board, admired its leaders' active engagement with the government, and believed that she could assist this well-established Institute to attain the administrative knowledge and organizational structure needed to compete for large grants. With Simone's assistance, the Board applied and received a one-year grant from the Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Social, or the National Bank of Social Development (BNDES) to pay for the restructuring process. Simone was in charge of overseeing the process.

While the grant was, in some ways, an opportunity to salvage and revamp the Board, it came fraught with complications. For one, the grant was intended to fund the salaries of two administrative staff, but provided no money to support the current leaders of the Residents' Board. Though many of the leaders of the Board applied for the two administrative positions, none of them had the qualifications to carry out the work, as they had little training in administration, management, or finance and had been running the Board through an informal, trial and error approach. Though they eventually welcomed the two CDD residents who were selected for the positions, they remained resentful that their hard work was not being financially rewarded. Additionally, the formalization process was emotionally painful for the Board members, who felt like their eleven years of work were constantly under attack as Simone and other advisors brought onto the project explained the legal and organizational problems with their informal practices. Clara and others felt like their way of doing and seeing things, the knowledge they had gained through decades of fighting for their rights, was deemed deficient. This created incredible tensions with Simone, the administrative staff, and the broader community of activists also working to advocate for the City of God.

When I interviewed Simone in 2016, she had already been working with the leadership team at the Residents' Board for two years after helping them secure a second year of funding for the restructuring process. She was tired, frazzled, and unsure of how much change she would be able to accomplish, though she had not been entirely surprised by the challenges she had encountered. The tensions between the formality, bureaucracy, and systematization required to gain funding and the informal, people-driven processes the Board had utilized to effect change during their first decade of existence had become increasingly apparent. While Simone sympathized with the reticence of the founders of the Residents' Board, she worried that the

combative practices that had been critical to the foundation of the Board would prevent it from advocating effectively for the community. By 2017, the BNDES withdrew the funding for the restructuring process, leaving the Institute with only a smattering of other funding streams and Board members with a feeling of frustration, resentment, and loss. Whatever divides already existed between them grew even further.

## Democracy Inverted

According to Benjamin Barber, neighborhood associations and other locally-based institutions in which shared and divergent needs are negotiated make up a core segment of democratic engagement. For Barber, active engagement in the debate and making of claims at the local level are a distinct and important type of politics, one that is less concerned with tangential engagement in the formal election process and more concerned with the administration of power and resources within neighborhoods (Barber 2003). Through engagement in local-level politics, citizens construct what Barber terms “strong democracy,” which “tries to revitalize citizenship without neglecting the problems of efficient government by defining democracy as a form of government in which all the people govern themselves in at least some public matters at least some of the time” (Barber 2003:xxii). Arjun Appadurai, looking at grassroots organizations in India, similarly argues that “deep democracy” is constructed by efforts among grassroots organization to draw upon the strengths and knowledge of local communities in order to mobilize for their rights by making claims on the state and making allies with international partners (Appadurai 2001). For Appadurai, deep democracy is characterized in large part by “inclusion, participation, transparency and accountability, as articulated within an activist formation,” as well as by expanding the struggle for rights beyond local borders, thereby

promoting “globalization from below” (Appadurai 2001:42). In other words, local organizations play a significant role in promoting democracy by expanding access to engagement in claims-making, particularly among traditionally disenfranchised populations, and by forging partnership across local and national borders.

In the last twenty years, several Brazilian cities have received attention for innovative projects in participatory budgeting and other types of municipal-civil coalitions aimed at collective decision-making. A plethora of articles and books exalt these efforts for creating “spaces of democracy” (Barnett and Low 2004), “inventing local democracy” (Abers 2000), and “making spaces for civil society” (Baiocchi et al. 2008) as government officials opted to include local residents in fiscal decisions and the distribution and management of resources. This was not the case in the City of God. While the municipal government officially adopted the Board’s Development Plan, this was only done after their protests and threats. Even after the Plan’s adoption, Board members had to fight to obtain the resources and to re-secure commitments by changing political leaders at each step of the way. While some of their partnerships with state and private actors were collaborative and productive, many were not. Board members had grown accustomed to waging protests, sit ins, boycotts, writing angry letters, and accosting politicians at public events when their efforts at more peaceful claims-making through formal challenges were ignored or denied.

Furthermore, unlike the well-known collaborative state-society coalitions in Brazil, the Residents’ Board explicitly avoided engagement in party politics and refused to support, take money from, or advocate on behalf of projects sponsored by politicians. Isis explained this logic to me:

You have to include in your research project that the Board doesn’t represent the entire City of God. We are a piece of the City of God...and by virtue of this the Institute also

only represents a piece...Because here [in the City of God] we have associations and organizations that don't share our methodology, the proposition of the Board, because we are non-partisan. We don't talk about party politics, we don't represent a political party. We are an open forum that goes after public policies. Here we don't speak in the name of Secretary this-and-such. He [the Secretary] can even be our friend, our partner at different moment, but we aren't going to say, "Oh, [we are with] so-and-so." We leave that really clear, it's in our statute. We are non-partisan and some of the Residents' Associations wear the shirt of a political party, and then it gets difficult, you know? And that's why we say that we aren't the City of God, we only represent a piece of the City of God.

As Isis's description suggests, the Board's eagerness to reject the status as representative for the entire neighborhood was strategic: they did not want to be confused with local political groups or party politics. In fact, they sought to keep members of the Residents' Associations and any other groups engaged in local politics as far away from their activities as possible. While Board members made many direct claims on the mayor, city council members, state deputies, and Secretaries at the state and federal levels, they refused to engage in local politics or to campaign for specific political parties. Engagement with government actors at the local level would not only have brought Board members into close contact with violent actors and would likely have required they engage in dangerous partnership with them, it would also have eroded their legitimacy. Despite their best efforts to steer clear of these networks, the Board was not entirely immune from these issues. Geovana explained it this way:

The Board doesn't have the ability to prevent anyone from attending [the meetings]. But a meeting is completely different when you have someone like that [i.e. widely known to have ties to the drug trade]...If there is something more serious, you aren't going to talk about it, understand? And a resident goes to a meeting like that, and there's a guy that has ties to the drug trade, the resident enters mute and leaves in silence, he doesn't speak, he doesn't say anything. And besides that, he looks at us all of us and says "How?" You know how it is? "What do these people (i.e. the Board) want? They are talking about rights and healthcare and they are sitting down with people who represent the interests of the drug trade." That hurts us...He looks at us and says, "It's all flour from the same bag, they must not want any real change if they are sitting with the drug trade."

I did not ask Geovana for specific examples, and she did not offer any, but her point was clear: The Board's legitimacy in the eyes of the City of God relied heavily on their ability to

steer clear of the drug trade and their allies. Participation in local coalitions around distribution of resources, had these existed, would have necessarily involved local violent actors, thereby immediately compromising the very objective of traditional participatory projects.

Although the Board's confrontational, non-partisan politics operated under a different logic than the participatory budgeting projects that have been of interest to scholars of urban governance in Brazil, it was just as important for the making of strong and deep democracy. In a neighborhood whose local governance structures were dominated by violent and corrupt actors, the Residents' Board was one of the few non-violent sites of democratic engagement. The Resident's Board and the Institute offered local residents opportunities to debate the development needs of the neighborhood, negotiate resources distribution, and make claims on the state for their rights. Their adversarial tactics were critical to ensuring that outside actors did not take advantage of the neighborhood. As social movement scholars are quick to remind us, democracy is strengthened by contentious politics in which non-state actors hold the government accountable for fulfilling its constitutional obligations (Mcadam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2003). In the City of God, the Residents' Board was one of the clearest examples of an organized effort to ensure their collective rights were upheld. In many respects, the Board's unwillingness to support projects initiated by local politicians preserved their status as outsiders to corrupt governance structures. It allowed them to "perform" moral politics by publically reaffirming their tensions with political actors who, by virtue of being politicians, were by default presumed to be corrupt and violent. By being visibly antagonistic to politicians, they could both make demands without appearing to be allied with immoral actors.

At the same time, confrontational politics took its toll on internal cohesion and their ability to effectively "speak for" the City of God. As many scholars have noted, neighborhood

associations operate on a logic of not only shared place-based interests, but a collective identity based on the sense of solidarity produced through these shared needs (Castells 1983; Rabrenovic 1996). Neighborhood associations like the Residents' Board could, in theory, be sites for the consolidation and strengthening of relationships based on residence in the same physical space. In the case of the Residents' Board, however, their fight for the needs of the City of God also fractured many of the relationships—both internally and with potential allies—necessary to effectively wage this fight in the long-run. Although the Board yearned to be a site for open democratic debate of neighborhood concerns, the possibility of drug traffickers co-opting their space limited this possibility. As a result, they kept their activities and meetings somewhat insular and focused on issues related to social development. Their insularity also limited their ability to effectively include a wider group of residents in their decision-making, thereby weakening their legitimacy for the lack of representativeness of the group. Several activists from other groups had told me in some form or another: “The Residents' Board doesn't represent me. They just do what's in their own best interests.”

While the Board and the Institute had too few participants to make larger claims about race and gender inequality, my limited observations suggested that, much like at Youth Promise, this site offered opportunities for women to take leadership, but sometimes at the cost of darker-skinned members. I suspect this had less to do with racism among members and more with the relative opportunities for education and visible leadership among lighter-skinned people. Black people, and black men in particular, are feared in Brazil and are much more likely to be arrested or experience police brutality. Vasconcelo himself had been aggressively searched by police multiple times simply while driving or walking. Had he been at the forefront of aggressive face-to-face meetings with political actors, he would likely have been arrested or shot. Lighter-

skinned women, such as Carmen and Geovana, could advocate on behalf of the City of God without appearing as threatening as a black man and were therefore less likely to be arrested. At the same time, lighter-skinned women in the City of God likely had greater access to education and to be seen teachers or social workers. Carmen, for instance, once posted on Facebook that her taxi driver told her she looked like a teacher. When she replied that she was a “community educator” in the City of God, he then proceeded to question why she was wasting her time “educating” favela residents when she could be making more money in other areas. Clara, who had much darker skin, was less likely to be seen as a teacher or social worker, and likely less likely to be taken seriously by politicians or funders. While Clara played an important role in the leadership of the Residents’ Board and in many of their efforts, she was much less likely to interrupt meetings or speak loudly. I observed the same among the other dark-skinned female staff in the Institute. Though inequalities between these community militants was not always structured in these raced and gendered patterns, they were not impervious to the outside implications of differentiated perceptions.

The Board’s limits in their representation of the neighborhood was further perpetuated by their insistence that only “juridical” people—those who represented formal CBOs—could be members. There was a technocratic logic to this approach: those with “expertise” in managing the social development of the neighborhood were deemed most adept at representing the neighborhood’s interests with municipal and state organs and private investors. The Board’s decision to only allow “juridical” people to participate both prevented ordinary residents from having a voice in their decisions but also helped to protect them from the possible infiltration of the drug trade. In the City of God, the opening up of advocacy groups to all residents—what might be viewed as democratic—would have jeopardized their safety and their ability to channel

incoming resources to the development of the neighborhood. In a context of corrupt and violent governance, the landscape of moral politics could best be maintained through restrictive gatekeeping and exclusionary decision-making. Ultimately, the Board sacrificed resources and representativeness for security and legitimacy. Actually existing democracies are never without internal contradictions, however, and the politics of non-violent politics in the City of God was no exception.

# **Chapter 7**

## **Cultural Resistance and the Politics of Art**

## Introduction: Protest through Poetry

I stepped into the bar shyly, searching unsuccessfully for a familiar face. In the back, the bartender wiped down the counter while chatting with a small group of men on the other side of the bar as they glanced with mild interest at the soccer game on the television behind them. In the front area of the bar, a man sat shirtless nursing a glass of beer, his large belly forcing him to sit sideways next to the plastic table where his half-empty bottle rested. Two women sat sharing a beer at another plastic table. Wondering over to the bartender, I inquired if this was the place where Art Talk was gathering. The bartender pointed at a bouquet of plastic flowers on another table just as Cibebe walked in, her hands full of bags. Relieved, I went over to Cibebe and asked how I could help. She handed me a stack of flowers and asked me to help her wrap the stems around the iron bars that extended from the cement half-wall to the ceiling, separating the bar from the street while still giving passersby a view from outside. I had not formally met Cibebe yet, though we had both attended the Art Talk meeting a week earlier. At age 25, Cibebe was a young white woman with dark curly hair wearing thick black eye liner and large gauge earrings. She was extremely friendly and enthusiastic about her role as bar decorator for the event. We got to task decorating the masculine space with plastic flowers, sparkling Christmas-tree lights and sheets of red fabric. A van arrived filled with large brightly colored paintings from a local artist and Cibebe asked me to hang them on the iron bars. Behind the lights-covered microphone stand, Cibebe placed a small painting of Frida Kahlo in place of the Art Talk banner, which she had been unable to locate. “Here! This works!” she exclaimed, satisfied with the substitution. We pushed tables off to the side and lined the chairs to face the microphone and Frida. The shirtless man remained seated in the middle of this now-feminized space, staring off into space barely noticing the changes.

Earlier that afternoon I had interviewed another young woman, Natalia, the founder of Art Talk. Unlike many of interviewees, who often engaged in friendly banter throughout our interviews, Natalia was direct, serious, and to the point. At the end of each response, Natalia paused abruptly. “Next question,” she proclaimed, smiling awkwardly as if on cue. She seemed hurried and a bit bored, as if she had answered these same questions many times, and her demeanor had thrown me. I had a sense that Natalia remained distrustful and a bit annoyed by my presence in her neighborhood, likely having interacted with many researchers already. At the end of our interview, I had offered to help set up the open mic poetry event that night in an effort to endear myself to her and to express my solidarity to her cause. I was also eager to see what a poetry open mic in the City of God looked like.

As Cibeles and I finished decorating the bar, other Art Talk members began arriving. Two dark-skinned young men walked in—one with dread locks down to his waist—carrying a giant sound speaker, and a third arrived shortly after to help connect all the wires. Little by little more people arrived, greeting each other warmly, looking for ways to help set things up, and purchasing beer. Within an hour, around twenty-five people of various ages, genders, and skin tones were congregated. Some sat on chairs, others on the floor, and many others stood outside the bar chatting amiably and smoking cigarettes. As I later discovered, though Art Talk was run by City of God residents and most events took place within the neighborhood, a number of those in attendance that night were from neighboring middle-class areas or from favelas in other parts of the city. As I sat waiting for the event to begin, quietly observing the crowd, someone hugged me from behind. “Sonia!” I exclaimed, turning around to find one of my participants, a tall black woman with a large afro and friendly smile who I had not seen in several months. We began updating on each other on life changes since our last encounter. Sonia had worked for social

justice in many different forms since adolescence. I had met her through Rosangela in 2014 during a meeting for SpeakCDD!, the community newspaper they had founded two years earlier, and had enjoyed getting to know her and hearing about some of the projects in which she had been involved. As I discovered that night, she was also a poet.

Our animated exchange was interrupted when Natalia called the Open Mic night to order. While most Art Talk Open Mics did not have a theme, they had made an exception for this one, titling it “Women against the Coup,” in reference to the recent vote by the House of Representatives to impeach Workers’ Party President Dilma the week before. Natalia had invited the most prominent female poets from the City of God, including Dona Mia, a spunky woman in her 70s who had become one of the cultural icons of the neighborhood, as well as several other, mostly black female poets. Over the course of the next four hours, dozens of people got up to the microphone. This is an excerpt of my field notes after the event:

The microphone was open to anyone, and several people read poems that weren’t necessarily political, and some that were written by other poets. A couple of people read poems written by their friends. Some people sang their poems. Zeca, an older man, was especially entertaining as he had brought outfits for each of the characters that he performed. He did a couple of poems about the police that were especially provocative and interesting and I wish I could have filmed them. There were poets from all walks of life, some seasoned, some great, some timid, some novices....Although I don’t recall all the moments, there were some that were especially memorable. Carina Tufe was a 30-something-old tall Black woman with long braids wearing a long dress, and she was a formidable poet. She cried passionately several times as she was reciting her poems, and it was hard not to feel the pain of the poem with her. One was about the pain of giving birth to a stillborn child.... Natalia had also invited a young mulatto woman whose nickname was LilyQ. At the beginning of the Open Mic she had hung several pages with provocative quotes about women’s sexuality and equality in sexuality. Some read: “You want a shaved vagina but you give me a hairy asshole” and “If you don’t like kissing after oral sex, then you are repulsed by your own body.” LilyQ had a very sexually empowering speech, that included the importance of being open about sex so that women’s rights could be respected. Natalia asked her several provocative questions about her own sexuality, and Natalia herself even made a few comments about preferring large penises and having bought a few sex toys from her shop.

While some poems focused on personal issues, the majority had political undertones as poets criticized the corruption in Brazil's government, renounced police brutality and the violation of the rights of favela residents, especially its black population, and decried violence against women. Others celebrated women's sexuality and called for the protection of lesbian, gay, and transgender people. Many had opened their poems by exclaiming: "Long live democracy!!" as they lifted their fists to the air. These were greeted with cheers of solidarity from the crowd. Through songs, poems, and rap, Art Talk had transformed the bar into a site for making demands for democracy, safety, a more equitable distribution of resources, and an end to racial discrimination. The occasional interruption by cheers from the men watching the soccer game in the back offered an invaluable reminder that, in the City of God, the coexistence between the ordinary and the political is what enables the politics of non-violent to survive.

This was true in paintings as well. During a break, I sought out the woman responsible for the Frida painting as well as the other, much larger colorful paintings I had strapped to the iron bars earlier that night. I introduced myself to Luz, the artist, and asked her about some of her paintings. One was of a young boy holding half of a plastic coke bottle beneath a spigot in the middle of a clay-ground park, surrounded by a row of one-story houses. According to Luz, this little boy used to wait in line for water many years ago when she had just moved to the City of God. "He would bring his coke bottle and his bucket to the spigot every morning because back then it was the children's job to get water. And I always thought it was funny that instead of just putting his bucket under the spigot, he would fill the bottle and dump it into the spigot a bunch of times till the bucket was full." As she narrated the painting, it became clear that this was a story of childhood, but also of scarcity.

Another painting was of a small white house with two windows and a triangular red roof sitting alone on a green pasture. It did not resemble any house in the City of God, or Rio de Janeiro. According to Luz, the house represented a place of quiet, because her own house was so noisy from the blasting music of the *baile funk* parties hosted by drug traffickers, as well as the loud sermons coming from nearby evangelical churches and the screams of children playing in her street. How wonderful it would be to escape it all, she reflected aloud. A third painting was of Batman, his face half in the light, half in the dark, which, Luz told me, was meant to reflect the good and the bad sides of humanity. A passerby looking at these paintings would be unlikely to see the symbolism in them, but, lining the iron walls of the bar that night, they contributed to the collective airing of grievances and the rejection of structural, symbolic, and physical violence faced by favela residents.

At the end of the Open Mic, Natalia took the microphone and declared she had an announcement to make: she would be running for City Council in the upcoming 2016 municipal elections. She explained that it was critical for women from the favela to have a place within the political system. The crowd went silent as they digested the news. I wondered if the lack of enthusiasm was out of shock, disinterest, or, perhaps most likely, the belief that government was unfixable and Natalia was wasting her time—and risking her safety—by attempting to work through the system. The lack of faith in Brazil's democratic institutions had become a common thread among City of God's residents, gaining strength after the vote for Dilma's impeachment and constant news stories of politicians accused of corruption or domestic violence. Natalia smiled at the crowd with the same awkward smile I had received during our interview earlier that day, reassuring them that this was an important step towards strengthening democracy in Brazil. Natalia's announcement suddenly transformed the bar from a site of symbolic claims-making to

one of direct politicization of their grievances. Participants' discomfort was palpable as they grappled with Natalia's concrete attempt to make the changes that Art Talk members had demanded so emphatically only minutes earlier. Art was a safe place for politics; elections, however, were not, especially in the City of God.

As the initial shock subsided, Natalia's friends began to clap in an effort to show her their support. She wrapped up her speech and asked everyone to take a photo in front of the 550 bus, and we shuffled out of the bar. I soon discovered this was a tradition of Art Talk: after each Open Mic, they pulled over the first 550 bus to pass by and congregated in front of it to take a photo. It was intended as a symbolic gesture: the 550 bus began in the City of God, passed through another favela, then down Rio's wealthy commercial district, past several beaches, and ended in Leblon, Rio's most expensive neighborhood. Stopping the bus on its journey signaled their efforts to interrupt the systems of inequality that exacerbated the social and economic distance between the poor and the rich. And, like the opening anecdote of the Open Mic in the park after the House vote for Dilma's impeachment, stopping traffic on a public street was an effort to politicize physical space. The bus driver looked petrified when two young black men from our group signaled for it to stop and knocked on the door to explain the purpose of stopping him. The group was accustomed to the tradition and participants organized themselves in front of the bus quickly, some standing, others squatting in front. When, one year later, Art Talk decided to make T-shirts they could sell for profit to support their activities, one of their artists painted a caricature of this photo for the shirt cover, their smiling faces and peace signs displayed prominently in front of the bus as it made its way to Leblon.

After the picture, I ran into Jordana, Maria Rita's neighbor, who was returning from university two hours away with two of her white middle-class friends. They had arrived at the

Open Mic only a few minutes before it ended, but had been enthusiastic to have seen at least part of it. “You don’t find this kind of thing in Zona Sul,” Jordana noted, referring to the wealthy district of the city. “Only here in the City of God are you going to see a poetry Open Mic in the middle of the sidewalk, at a bar.” Jordana was referring at once to the informality with which artistic events took place in the City of God, as well as to the unique logic and form of politics in the *favela*. Poetry, rap, paintings, and a host of other artistic practices allowed favela residents to develop political subjectivities that were at once public and hidden and to demand change in a manner as direct as it was avoidant. In a neighborhood where formal politics were viewed by most as ineffective and dangerous, art served as a core vehicle for resistance to violence. At the same time, everyday public/private spaces, like parks, open bars, and streets were transformed into sites of protest and claims-making for the rights of citizenship.

## Culture as Resistance

The cultural practices of poor racial or ethnic minorities or otherwise marginalized populations have been of fascination to social scientists for over a century. Among the first scholarly analyses of the cultural practices of excluded groups emerged from the Chicago School. They viewed the music, art, dance, theater, and other artistic forms of minority groups as a type of social deviance that promoted subcultures that were socially distinct from, and antagonistic to, mainstream society (Duncombe 2007; Park et al. 1984). Within this perspective, cultural expression among minority groups contributed to cultural heterogeneity, divisiveness and conflict and should be repressed.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, an alternative view of cultural resistance emerged among a group of radical academics at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in

Birmingham, UK who viewed the expression of alternative cultures as a critical means for challenging dominant groups. Youth subcultures, including Rastafarians, Hippies, punk music, and others had the capacity to produce symbolic communities of resistance that could, in theory, engender more concrete forms of political resistance. In the United States, the lifestyles, literature, and artistic expression of groups organized around civil rights, women's rights, anti-war protest, and a host of other issues came to be understood not as subcultures, but as *countercultures*, or “full-fledged oppositional movement[s] with a distinctively separate set of norms and values that are produced dialectically out of a sharply delineated conflict with the dominant society” (Braunstein and Doyle 2002:7). While “subcultures” were understood as existing on the fringes of, but not necessarily in opposition to, society, countercultures were constructed to challenge the cultural, social, and political foundations of society.

Scholarly analysis of the social and political interventions of countercultures were inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci, who suggested that the “hegemonic apparatus” of the dominant groups was constituted by not only economic and political power, but also through cultural power. Through cultural hegemony, dominant groups legitimized their claims to power and splintered civil society (Burawoy 2012; Gramsci 2009). Resistance through art promoted counter-cultures that could both challenge dominant (oppressive) cultural beliefs and also unite oppressed groups. Jas Elsner, for instance, suggests that during the period of Roman hegemony, “such self-definition [through art] offered the scope for a culture within a culture, a space of initiatives (in the context of religion), which need not resist the dominating power but which—if circumstances arose—might do so (Elsner 2001:270). In other words, art created the *possibility* for political resistance by constructing an “anticultural system” composed of subjectivities that

stood in opposition to the dominant class (Elsner 2001:270). For these scholars, cultural resistance was critical for laying the foundation for a new society (Duncombe 2007).

In both perspectives, however, it is clear that artistic expression among oppressed communities plays a critical role in the construction of alternative ideologies, values and identities that reject the practices and views of the dominant culture. Examples abound of artistic creations as a device for resisting inequality and injustice, particularly when formal avenues for change were dangerous or inaccessible. In South Africa, resistance art played a critical role in generating a collective identity among Black communities before apartheid and inciting protest and struggle among them. “It was a clear demonstration of the non-racial solidarity taking shape behind the crumbling edifice of apartheid,” writes Sue Williamson of the posters, banners, plays, and music populating South Africa’s murals, celebrations, funerals, and homes in the 1980s (Williamson 2010:9). In India, MK Gandhi advocated for a return to traditional Indian religious and cultural practices as a tool in the anti-colonial struggle for independence.

In her analysis of cultural resistance in Latin American art, Ariane Dalla Déa suggests that “artistic articulations are among the first manifestations of collective resistance, and art becomes a crucial and fundamental way of conveying demands, struggles, and the collective identities constructed by the act of resisting oppression” (Déa 2012:5). Art can be used as a coping mechanism for suffering and oppression, as representations of discontent, and as metaphors for different types of oppression (Déa 2012). Across Latin American history, various forms of artistic expression have inspired nationalist identities (Hayes 2000; McCaughan 2012), the “transculturation” of indigenous and colonial religious iconography (Zamora and Kaup 2009), and peasant and indigenous revolutions (Conklin 1997; Yashar 2005).

In Brazil, multiple cultural forms have emerged among communities of African descent in order to both preserve and honor their heritage and to resist the oppressive tendencies of racial discrimination. National concerns over state-building and the construction of cultural and political notions of citizenship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered both the opportunity and the need for the building of Afro-based identities that contributed to, but remained from, national identity. Some of the artistic forms that emerged from communities of African descent included the popular samba music and carnival parades, as well as *jongo*, a dance form imported from Africa and Umbanda, a religious practice that combined beliefs and deities from African religions with elements from Kardecism, Catholicism, and Black magic. While the latter two are mostly practiced by Rio's urban poor, samba and carnival have "ascended from the ghettos to the cornerstone status of the (spectacular) representation of the Brazilian" (Sansone 2000:89). These cultural forms combined elements of Brazilian nationalism with African culture, allowing for a complex interaction between multiple racial and intellectual groups while also contributing to the "mercantilization" of Black culture. Similarly, the practice of *capoeira*, which draws on dance, martial arts, and musical instruments and sounds from Africa, has attained a status as the nation's most popular form of martial arts, thereby preserving and diluting Afro-Brazilian culture at once.

The transformation of some fringe forms of African-inspired cultural forms into national markers of Brazilian identity and consumption suggests that alternative art, once popular, may serve to reinscribe the very institutions it is meant to subvert. Furthermore, the work of Christopher Dunn on the ideological divide between the "hippies" and the "revolutionaries" during Brazil's dictatorship suggests that cultural resistance may not always inspire its followers to engage in direct political action (Dunn 2014). This is consistent with a broader critique of cultural resistance. For instance, John Stuart Hall contends that while subcultural art forms may

have the capacity to challenge dominant ideology, they struggle to offer material alternatives to structural inequality, thereby offering little more than imaginary solutions to concrete problems (Hall and Jefferson 2006). Unless cultural movements have the capacity to organize around political action or specific types of community development, they risk becoming arbitrary. In other words, the cultural forms of minority subcultures have the capacity to promote, reject, or neutralize broader social and political transformation.

While cultural resistance in Brazil has at times struggled to maintain its original, subversive intentions or to produce concrete political change, it has offered Brazilians a space in which to challenge dominant ideologies and to construct alternative identities and values. Artistic expression allows marginalized groups to capitalize on political openings in order to produce a counter-narrative. For instance, many artists have taken advantage of the global interest in samba and carnival to challenge inequality, such as through song lyrics that decry racial discrimination and reaffirm the values of African roots (Guimarães 1998) or carnival parades that depict slavery, environmental degradation, poverty, and violence (Velloso 1990). Additionally, cultural resistance coalesced in reaction to Brazil's dictatorship in the 60s and 70s under a movement called *tropicália*, which was constituted by art forms including the visual arts, theater, film, and popular music. Restrictions around freedom of speech and the possibility of arrest and torture created significant constraints on what could be said, however. According to Christopher Dunn, "the tropicalists generally avoided obvious expressions of political protest, preferring instead satiric or allegorical representations of everyday life in an unevenly developed country under authoritarian rule" (Dunn 2014:435). Ultimately, in Brazil and across the globe, cultural resistance is a tool for constructing alternative identities in opposition to dominant beliefs and ideologies, though, like any other tool, it must be used strategically in order to avoid

co-optation or risk direct violence from those it challenges. In the City of God, culture became a core tool of expression of grievances, identity construction, and political claims-making that both resisted violence while also maintaining sufficient discursive distance from it to survive.

## Cultural politics in the City of God

If you ask most people in the City of God what they think is good about their neighborhood, they will tell you it's a place filled with culture. "Culture" to most residents includes everything from athletics and dance to music, poetry, painting, and sculpting. In fact, the City of God has gained a reputation as one of hubs of cultural vitality among favelas. It was the birthplace of funk, a type of heavy rap music in which rappers spoke of marginality, violence, and pride in their resilience and unity, as well as drug use and women's sexuality. In 1994, Cidinho & Doca, two rapper-DJs from the City of God, wrote a funk song that became nationally famous and acclaimed as the "hymn of the favela." The City of God also boasts an impressive roster of world-renowned UFC, MMA, Tae Kwon Do, and Jiu Jitsu fighters, professional soccer players, ballet and contemporary dancers, and hip hop artists. In the 2016 Summer Olympics, City of God native Rafaela Silva took home the first gold medal from Brazil in Judo. For a neighborhood of 60,000 inhabitants facing so many challenges, it is little surprise that local residents have so much pride about the breadth and quantity of famous athletes and artists from the City of God. Culture was City of God's second claim to fame, after extreme violence. While in recent years Rio's favelas have come to be recognized as sites of artistic creation in favelas, the City of God maintains its status as one of the hubs of favela culture.

Engagement in artistic endeavors in the City of God was not only extremely common, but regarded as morally normative: it was part of the status quo. In fact, some forms of artistic

expression were used to glorify the drug trade, such as the “proibidão, of the “big prohibition.” The “proibidão” was a type of funk music that exalted the drug trade and substance abuse, and it was one of the few types of “speech” that had been legally prohibited under the UPP. While most residents did not actively listen to this type of music because it represented violent politics in the neighborhood, engagement in cultural activities was widespread and was among the topics that could be openly discussed in public. At least two thirds of the eighty-two Facebook pages created with the words “City of God” or its abbreviated “CDD” in the title were dedicated to various cultural forms or to publishing news about upcoming cultural events or stories about local artists. In a setting in which many activities or discourses were strictly prohibited, cultural expression was widely embraced and encouraged.

Activists in the City of God took full advantage of this political opening. While they almost entirely avoided direct confrontation with the drug trade and local corrupt politicians, participants used writing, singing, rapping, painting, and host of other cultural forms to express their frustrations over structural, symbolic, political, and physical violence. Through these art forms, residents helped to construct a shared narrative of grievance against state abandonment, police brutality, racism, and gender-based violence. While these grievances often related to issues that were specific to the City of God, cultural activists were part of a larger movement that extended far beyond the neighborhood and into urban, national, and transnational social movements. By advocating for equality *outside* the favela—in government posts, international NGOs, universities, and in larger movements against racism, sexism, and violence—they could effect the kind of change needed to improve local conditions *within* favelas. While City of God’s cultural activists were not the only ones to leave the neighborhood or leverage allies in the city, this model of social change was distinctively broad and deep: it aimed to transform society

as a whole. At the same time, the City of God remained their point of reference. Their status as favela residents offered them legitimacy in urban and transnational movements for justice and equality, gave them a physical space in which to ground many of their activities and claims, and offered them a sense of direct purpose in the midst of a broad and somewhat abstract set of demands. Ultimately, cultural activists nurtured an ideology and practice that bridged the favela with the larger city and the world that interwove place-based identities with mobilization efforts to change social norms and improve public policies and government structures.

Locally, they also followed a logic of distinction from other social justice efforts. Natalia, the founder of Art Talk and one of the main cultural organizers in the City of God, claimed that they were “a social movement, not a collective or NGO,” explaining that, in contrast to the permanence of City of God’s activists in CBOs and the Residents’ Board, the actual participants of Art Talk came and went as their lives shifted but that they all contributed to a mission that was much larger than any one individual. While CBOs were dedicated to individual transformation and City of God’s community militants fought to transform their neighborhood, for cultural activists, only large-scale change would create the conditions for equality, justice, and peace needed to improve life chances and experiences within the City of God. By democratizing and de-institutionalizing their mobilization practices, cultural activists were also able to subvert the tendency for movement leaders to become corrupted, co-opted, or threatened—or, at the very least, to be perceived in that way.

True to Natalia’s observation, each cultural activist I interviewed or observed offered a unique and deeply personalized contribution to these social change efforts. Some wrote poetry or made art at home for themselves, but at times opted to share some pieces at Open Mic nights or other cultural events. Others took their artistic production further, exhibiting or performing at

cultural events in other favelas or other city spaces, competing in Poetry Slam contests, producing records, or publishing books or disks. Many also contributed to these efforts by helping to share stories about artists in the City of God and other favelas through community-based newspapers, blogs and vlogs (video blogs), audio visual productions like mini-documentaries, and graphic design and website construction. I also met many people who did not consider themselves artists but offered critical support to these efforts by helping to organize events, fill out grant applications, secure other resources like vans, food, or equipment, or drive people around. One woman, who became one of Natalia's most committed volunteers, joined Art Talk because her adolescent daughter was a poet and wanted to support her and the other poets. Cultural activism offered residents with few resources or training the opportunity to join a community united by a shared belief that art could change the world. In the following section, I offer a few examples of cultural activism in the City of God.

### *SpeakCDD!: Claiming the Local Narrative*

In 2012, Sonia, Rosangela, and a handful of other local residents partnered with a group of graduate students and faculty at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro to found a community-based newspaper. While newspapers in themselves may not fit squarely in the category of “art” as we usually think of the term, the newspaper was filled with drawings and poems by local residents and stories of the cultural endeavors of local residents. Like the Open Mic for Art Talk, it was a site for the making and sharing of cultural activism. Its introductory message by the editorial board in its first issue offers a valuable summary:

**“A lot of work and one more newspaper is on the street of the City of God”**

One more time we come to the streets with the SpeakCDD! newspaper. This newspaper is the result of much hard work and dedication by each of its members, all of whom are residents of the City of God. [It is for] all residents interested in exchanging

ideas with their neighbors and showing people outside our neighborhood what happens in our favela beyond the gaze of the large commercial media (the most common newspapers accessed in newsstands and on television).

In this edition, the reader will learn about the situation of abandonment of CIEP Luiz Carlos Prestes, one of the Spaces for Child Development of the Municipal Government, in the article by Solange. You will also see the real situation in which residents in areas with construction by the Bairro Maravilha project, based on the perspective of Sonia, reporter for the newspaper. You will also see how the Community Bank is running after it was inaugurated in 2011 in the City of God, by Joana.

The City of God participated in June in the event by the United Nations that united diverse countries do discuss issues related to the environment in Rio+20. Here, the reader can accompany the event in the pictures by Angelica. And you will also learn about the House of Culture of the City of God, Art Talk, and the participation of our community in FLUPP (The Literary Congress for Favelas) and FLIP (The International Literary Congress of Paraty). There are so many things happening in the City of God to tell you about!

Follow the newspaper *SpeakCDD!*. Read it. Distribute it. Collaborate as a reporter, get to know our group and our independent project. The newspaper is also on the internet. Just visit us and send us a message. The City of God always had a voice, now we have from where to shout.

I include this lengthy introduction as a way of demonstrating the explicit connections that residents made between culture and protest. The newspaper itself was arguably a work of political art: the first edition was sixteen pages long, filled with colorful images and stories about the many events organized and/or attended by City of God residents and reports of how government interventions were and were not fulfilling residents' needs. In 2014, Rosangela published a story about the inauguration of the House of Rights in the City of God, the first of its kind in Brazil, which offered one space in which residents could apply for birth certificates, employment cards, drivers' licenses and a host of other documents. In the article, Rosangela bemoans the thoughtlessness behind the inauguration proceedings: the ceremony only allowed government officials, but had no space for local residents; the local press (i.e. her and other City of God journalists) were not allowed to take pictures, there was too much policing, and, at the last minute, they decided there was not enough time for the children to perform their song, despite weeks of practicing for the event. "At the same time and at a park very close to the

location of the inauguration,” wrote Rosangela, “the plastic artist Carminho was conducting a workshop with children and their families. On one side of the park, children making art and expressing themselves, and on the other, children leaving an event without having performed. Since the stage was organized only for the governor, the authorities closed their eyes to a future president of the nation who was there playing his drum without being able to get their attention.” Throughout all editions, local reporters offered stories about government interventions with poignant critiques of their shortcomings and the many ways in which they missed an opportunity to offer the City of God what it needed and to value its residents.

The newspaper also had many political cartoons. In the image below, titled “The soap opera continues...Internet CDD,” the cartoonist depicts a child yelling “A little more to the left, mom. There you go!!” as his mother climbs on the roof to find a spot in which her laptop could access the internet. Months earlier, the municipal government had installed a free internet service for local residents, though to residents’ dismay and amusement (though not to their surprise), few people had ever actually been able to access it. Solange, the director of Youth Promise, had refused to even try, as she was convinced either the government or local drug traffickers might break through her firewall and spy on her. The hypersexualization of the mother with her large buttocks sticking out from under her short dress, as well as the woman’s (and child’s) clear appearance as Caucasian with blonde hair offer a valuable example of the contradictions of grievance-making among cultural activists. I return to this topic at the end of the chapter.



Over the following five years, the paper remained dedicated to sharing special interest stories about art and culture in the City of God, about the many activities organized by local CBOs and the Residents' Board, and about the neglect of the state. Articles included stories of famous athletes and artists from the City of God, information about how to adopt a child, the winners of a municipal grant for "Local Actions" (i.e. social projects in favelas), the Gay Rights Parade in the City of God, the founding of a community-based radio station, and another about the challenges of securing employment in the formal market (written by Camilla after she had been pushed out of Youth Promise). Many stories praised the virtues of literacy and the importance of encouraging education and reading among young children.

In every issue was at least one, if not several stories decrying urban violence and the consequences of this to local residents. For instance, a 2014 issue included a story by Sonia titled "Where is public security?" which prominently displayed a picture of Natalia on an easy chair sitting next to a man, both invited speakers at the International Literary Festival. The event was located just across the street from the Regional Tribunal for the State in the center of Bangú

in a busy commercial area. “The presentations were wonderful,” wrote Sonia, “we felt like the participants were ingesting culture, leisure, and citizenship.” After describing some of the presentations, Sonia describes the unfolding of a shootout due to criminals trying to rescue a friend on trial, which resulted in the death of eight-year-old boy walking down the busy street with his grandmother. The article concludes: “We spent part of a wonderful day with the beauty of poetry and concluded our programming with much pain and indignation about this tragedy. Governors, where is public security?” On the next page, four residents and three priests from City of God’s Anglican church smile into the camera holding yellow brochures. “The City of God has entered into a fight against domestic violence against women” reads the headline. The juxtaposition of these stories of violence and non-violence reflected the tangled web of politics and claims-making in the City of God. The final page of the issue offers another cartoon critiquing the government, this time about its failing public health care system. The doctor yells “Next,” but his patient has already died and decayed, only his skeleton remains. While talk of the drug trade remained absent from the many issues of *SpeakCDD!*, the newspaper was almost entirely dedicated to a discourse of violence and residents’ continued struggles against it.



## The Black Movement from the Favela Out

While there were many themes that inspired City of God's artists, racial discrimination was perhaps the most popular. In fact, only 19% of the residents we interviewed in our community survey identified as white; a full 49% identified as Black, and the rest as *pardo* or mixed-race.<sup>27</sup> As I briefly discussed in Chapter 3, Brazil has a long history of miscegenation, which has led to a colorful spectrum of skin tones, and few Brazilians have no African blood. The legacy of inter-racial mixing has led many Brazilians to view their nation as a “racial democracy,” a space in which people of all skin tones are given equal political representation. However, as many of City of God's activists were quick to point out, very few dark-skinned Brazilians occupied the upper echelons of society or the most prestigious positions. From politics and business to the media and universities, Brazil's leading institutions are run and occupied overwhelmingly by whites. At the same time, favelas account for higher Black and brown populations than the rest of the city. In the last fifty years, Brazilian sociologists and anthropologists have set out to challenge the myth of racial equality, suggesting that not only is Brazil deeply racist (Heringer 2002), the very notion of a racial democracy allows inequality to go unnoticed and unchallenged (Guimarães 2006).

If from a sociological perspective it is difficult to dispute the claim that Brazil is deeply divided along racial lines, my observations in the City of God suggest that race—and blackness in particular—is best understood as a political tool activated for the purposes of retrenching or protesting inequality. In other words, empirical views of what does and does not constitute blackness have taken on secondary importance relative to how this construct can be leveraged.

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<sup>27</sup> Eight people identified as “indigenous,” and no one identified as “yellow or Asian ancestry,” though the option was available.

Among City of God's cultural activists, their claims of blackness and protest against racism offered them a gateway to an urban and global set of discourses and movements and legitimized their claims for issues beyond racial discrimination. By inserting themselves into the global Black movement, City of God's activists were able to make their demands travel beyond the favela and to become citizens within a broader, if still subversive and oppressed, urban community. In Rio and across Brazil, the Black movement extends beyond disadvantaged neighborhoods and into all classes, institutions, and networks. Within this larger field of claims-making, favela activists found a space, a discourse, and a set of allies.

When I first began studying the City of God, I had been surprised by its racial diversity. In fact, despite the widespread claims that the “asphalt is white and the hill is black,”<sup>28</sup> the City of God had many white and lighter-skinned people, and many people with tan skin but Caucasian features. The hot sun has also helped to darken skin that in colder climates might be considered “white.” While many City of God residents, like Esther and Maria Rita, fit the stereotype of phenotypically “Black” people, most fell somewhere between Caucasian and African, and a few presented characteristics of Indigenous heritage. While a full analysis of the implications of this racial diversity fall outside the objectives of this chapter, I came to two conclusions about City of God's racial spectrum that are significant here. The first was that the residents who fit somewhere in between “white” and “black” could, to some extent, auto-select their race. In many contexts, race was a negotiated identity, rather than an ascribed one. The second was a product of the first: that favela residents were extremely strategic in how, when, and where they self-identified and, for many, identification as *black* had come to be seen as a tool for political

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<sup>28</sup> The “asphalt,” meaning areas with paved roads, is a euphemism for the city's middle and upper-class neighborhoods; the “hill” is a popular term to describe favelas, since most of them were built on hills. The juxtaposition of the “asphalt” and the “hill” has become a common way of contrasting wealth and poverty in Rio de Janeiro.

action. In other words, among City of God's activists, blackness was not only a social construct imposed on them, but also a political construct mobilized for the sake of claims-making.

I had many opportunities to explore and learn about the complexities of racial negotiations in the City of God. For instance, one of the questions that most generated discussion in our participatory survey questionnaire was on race. Leonardo and our team of research assistants had debated this for hours. The first issue was how to ask the question. The common approach was to ask "What is your race?" but Leonardo suggested that people might take this to mean: "What racial designation is on your birth certificate?" which, he noted, might not match how they identified themselves. The second issue was about using the term "race" over "color;" as the former implied a social category, the latter a biological one. Ultimately we decided the social construct was more meaningful to our study and to our understandings of social development and insecurity than the biological one and would allow for better comparisons across studies. We also did not want to go down the rabbit-hole of listing colors (black, brown, tan, yellow, white), which seemed, to our group, even more distasteful than social categories of race.

Once we settled on our question ("What do you consider your race?"), we struggled with which categories to use. Leonardo was staunchly against the use of the term "Moreno," which translates loosely to "Tan," and was, according to him, used by people who were ashamed of their African ancestry. In fact, white people often referred to dark-skinned as "Moreno" in order to avoid the negative connotations of the term "Black." "Pardo," which translates roughly to "brown" or "mixed-race" felt, to the group, to reflect a combination of African and Caucasian descent but got away from the historical tendency to try to "whiten" dark skin in discourse. Our final debate was around how to term Blackness itself. The term "Negro" is most commonly used

by whites describing blacks, and by blacks themselves. Lately, however, black activists have embraced the term “preto,” which emphasizes the color black over this history of slavery. Notably, the category of whiteness never came under debate. When I administered a trial version of the 110-question survey with a young man in the City of God, one of the few questions that had stood out to him was our use of the term “preto” instead of “negro,” for which he was extremely grateful. “Negro” has so many negative connotations in our society,” he had reflected. “I was happy to be able to identify as ‘preto’ instead.”

I offer this level of detail about our discussions in order to demonstrate the complexities of racial self-identification in such a socially and politically charged environment. It suggests that the negotiation of racial categorization was not only dynamic and contentious, but also an opportunity for reflection on the historical roots of inequality and their present-day manifestations. At the same time, the debate itself was lengthy and exhausting. As a white woman whose racial classification has been largely stable across time and space, I noted that the opportunity to self-categorize also presented people of ambiguous groups with an internal and external struggle about belonging. To embrace the racial category and socio-cultural markers of the category “preto,” though it seemed an improvement from the more common term “Negro,” still came at a cost. Mauricio, one of our research assistants who identified decidedly as black, offered me a valuable anecdote. These are my field notes from our conversation:

One of Mauricio’s black female friends, for instance, was told that if she stopped straightening her hair and opted instead for braids she would lose her job at a hair salon, presumably because her braided hair might discourage the store’s (black) customers from straightening their hair. Though I quickly drew a connection to capitalism, Mauricio shot this idea down immediately: “This isn’t just about capitalism. Because if a white woman with curly hair decided to leave her hair curly, no one would care, even in the same salon. But for a black woman to braid it, she’d be fired. So racism and capitalism get all mixed up and feed off each other.” He had a point.

Donna Golstein's ethnographic study of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Rio's favelas offered many similarly instructive reflections on the costs of embracing blackness among poor black women (Goldstein 2003). As Mauricio's analysis suggests, City of God's black activists were keenly aware of these negotiations of racial identity and the many costs associated with "choosing" blackness. What I discovered among City of God's activists was a conscious embrace of discourses and performances of blackness—despite their recognition of its social and economic costs—as a tool for political mobilization and connection to movements beyond the favela. While each activist did this in their own way, it included wearing braids, corn rolls, dreadlocks, afros, and other hairstyles associated with African culture, and many women wore large jewelry and colorful prints intended to resemble African fashion. It also involved artistic production and performances that praised their African ancestry and decried the mistreatment of blacks.

Esther's son Leonardo was among the most vocal advocates for racial justice I met in the City of God. Though he was only 26 when I met him, he had already been engaged in dozens of projects in theater, research, and audio-visual production related to racial justice and other social issues. Leonardo had studied theater and audio-visual production at an NGO in the City of God as an adolescent, and from there became active in cultural activism in the City of God. He was a talented actor and had been featured in several performances across the city. In 2011, Leonardo and Natalia were chosen to be "community reporters" for a program on favela culture for *O Globo*, Brazil's largest media conglomerate. Every month, Natalia and Leonardo decided on an interesting story about the City of God, interviewed relevant people, and collected footage of the scene or event. These special interest stories were then broadcast across Rio de Janeiro. It was widely popular among City of God residents who were proud to have their talents, events, and

organizations gain visibility across the state. It also provided Leonardo a celebrity status in the neighborhood. Whenever we talked down the streets together, people constantly came up to shake his hand or wave at him and Leonardo smiled broadly, returning their affection.

After his two-year stint as a community reporter, Leonardo co-founded a theater company with two colleagues in the City of God. He used it as a space to give young favela residents with skills to become professionally-paid actors, to cultivate critical reflection about violence and inequality, and to discuss their personal challenges. In 2017, they had also begun offering college preparatory courses. His own performances were also targeted a social justice issues. I attended one of them, which ran for several months in the theater of a large arts-focused NGO in downtown Rio. The play was about the unlikely relationship between a wealthy white woman and a group of street children who, over the course of the play, overcame their own biases against each other and learned to trust and support each other. At the end, the villains of the play were the woman's husband's two friends—all three were white police officers—who poisoned some soup in order to murder the street children, but had inadvertently killed an innocent old woman instead. The moral of the play was evident: social inequality could be overcome with kind human interaction, despite the best efforts of the police to harm the poor. Leonardo had given his best street-kid performance dressed in ragged clothes and overplaying the “carioca” slang. Much to Esther, André and Maria Rita's amusement, he had bleached his dark corn rolls and let his tufts of beard grow out. But for Leonardo, this was an important opportunity to use his talent to send a valuable critique about Rio's social and security problems.

While the theater was Leonardo's platform for protesting against racism, police violence, and the mistreatment of the favela, even more popular among City of God's activists were spoken word, hip hop, and rap. MC Claudinho was among City of God's most popular

musicians, who founded a slam hip hop competition in 2014. “It was based on the idea of a cultural circle, but our idea was a more political intent than for entertainment, because the idea was to make young people reflect on matters that have to do with their reality, with their daily lives.” According to Claudinho, the early hip hop battles were initiated to give young men in gangs a place to battle without killing each other. It was a place in which they could earn respect and expression aggression through words, rather than physical violence. Hip hop battles helped to decrease homicides, but, for Jonathan had little cultural value. Instead, the hip hop battles he organized had a theme, and participants were required to rap about that specific topic:

We presented themes about politics, like UPP, the Lava Jato,<sup>29</sup> fraud by [former Governor Sergio] Cabral, discovery of the purchase of votes during the World Cup in the Rio... These are issues that affect us directly but we do not read about it often. The young men competing in the battle already knew that he had to learn about the subject in order to win, so he would go and read, and get informed about the issue. And the audience that is going there is sitting there wondering what the fuck is the *mensalão*?<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the hip hop battles, he invited many guest speakers, mostly Black people from the favela, who had become writers, poets, professional athletes, and other professionals. It was an effort to give youth an alternative set of role models, “because the only role models they have are drug traffickers.” He also hoped that by helping young people network with established artists outside the neighborhood, they could find a way to gain financial rewards for their work. In 2017 he launched an album about race and injustice in Rio de Janeiro; one of the songs was titled “Manifesto CDD,” or “City of God Manifesto.” The song was written after the fall of a police helicopter in the City of God during on operation, which was immediately presumed by the media and the police to have been shot down by drug traffickers. The following day, seven

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<sup>29</sup> Lava Jato, or Car Wash, was the largest money laundering scheme in Brazilian history ever to be prosecuted, and resulted in the arrest of former President Lula and dozens of other politicians and businessmen, many from the leftist Worker’s Party.

<sup>30</sup> The *mensalão* was another term used for the Lava Jato scandal.

young men were found shot in the head assassination style in the City of God’s swamp. It was widely believed the police had been behind the attack, with widespread support from Rio citizens on social media who claimed that “A good criminal is a dead criminal.” Only a few hours later, the preliminary investigation into the copter crash revealed no bullet holes: it had crashed due to maintenance issues. The lyrics to MC Claudinho’s song, translated roughly, read as follows:

City of God only wants peace  
 Police only kill poor  
 society does not like black [people]  
 for us always death penalty

Swallow your cries, kid  
 pistol in our face on account of a joint  
 They take bribes, but don’t accept checks  
 Without an escape, the king of knocks  
 knocks us down

Checkmate, MATE,  
 cry of the Mate society,  
 good citizen wants to kill  
 The victims of misery and inequality

Who invades the TV carrying a rifle  
 It cost millions to enter Brazil  
 Money in the pocket, of whom, no one knows  
 Super focused on the meme of Inês Brasil

State that kills and knocks down planes  
 Sentencing the favela to the shack or the  
 coffin  
 Takes shots, beatings, and bombs  
 City of God in a state of coma

If we shut up, we do not enter the equation  
 Shooting mark and no bruise  
 Poor suspect is the premise  
 To break your house with the judge's  
 endorsement

Invades the house of the state deputy  
 Caused a crisis, broke the state  
 Uniformed Thief  
 Send the *caveirão* to congress and the senate

Better days for CDD  
*Quilombo* of war, rest and leisure  
 The dream persists only if happy  
 Police who arrest lawyer is a judge

As the rap song above demonstrates, the City of God is taken as the victim—both real and symbolic—of social exclusion, racial discrimination, police brutality, and state corruption. While MC Claudinho performed many of his songs at Open Mic events for Art Talk, he had also performed in multiple Brazilian states and on stages across the city. His audiences included many black, brown, and white youth and young adults from both favelas and wealthier neighborhoods. Rap, he explained to me, was a medium imported from the United States that

had been critical in the global Black movement and helped to connect the fight of the favela to larger issues around racial inequality. For MC Claudinho, hip hop allowed him to carry stories about the favela to people and places beyond it:

It is a way of describing, of carrying the feelings of people who live in the favela. Because the outsider only has that image of violence, of shootouts, and they do not see that there are people of the good, who want to live, to take care of their families. With my music, I want to tell people from the outside that there are good people here... With my art, I want to be a spokesman, a communicator to many people outside, that the inside that the favela is a place filled with culture, and that their problems are by the abandonment of the state.

MC Claudinho viewed his music as part of the Black Movement, which he understood as a musical a larger musical movement spearheaded by artists like James Brown and Nina Simone. For him, this contrasted with the “Movimento Negro,” literally translated as the “Negro Movement,” which he viewed as a “movement of militancy, of research, discussion, dialogue, protest, social movements.” For Claudinho, all expressions of Black identity were political, even if they were not expressly academic or directly confrontational:

Every Black person, he is already a militant from the moment that he is born ... Sometimes we emphasize this thing of militancy in the speech, in the field of knowledge. But if you are born black, you will have to militate to survive. If you are a single mother, exhausting yourself to put food on the table, man, you are militating! If you listen to the lyrics in Nina Simone's music, she will not tell you to pick up a gun or participate in a protest, but she will talk about the difficulties of being a black woman. And this is already a militancy. The hair that black people use is political; if I have sexual relations with a black woman, this is political, everything, everything is political, because it is going against the Eurocentric flow.

Through slam poetry, spoken word, rap, and hip hop, young dark-skinned youth from favelas had created a platform to air their grievances, to connect their experiences of racism with state violence and poverty, and to join a global movement for racial equality. What Claudinho and other musicians had experienced in the City of God came to be understood as a symbol of violence and injustice more broadly; their art, in turn, was intended to address these at the

symbolic level. It was also an opportunity to construct alliances with urban and transnational movements, a topic to which I turn below.

Jordana, Maria Rita's 20-year-old neighbor, had used to her skills in journalism to highlight cultural projects in favelas and to connect these to issues of race, gender, and violence. Jordana wore colorful, stylish outfits, often wove strands of red or blue into her braided hair, and wore bright green lipstick that contrasted vividly with her dark skin. Jordana had moved to the City of God one year earlier to be closer to her university, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, one of the most prestigious public universities in the country. She was one of the busiest people I knew in the City of God, constantly shuffling between classes, internships, and volunteer work. I often saw Jordana at midnight as she arrived home tired from her two-hour bus ride from her university. Her constant engagements in Rio's downtown area and other favelas in the city meant that she was rarely in the City of God.

She had won a full scholarship to her university and had opted to major in "Social Communication." In addition to her studies, Jordana was an intern in a laboratory that studied culture in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and had joined the section on "cultural manifestations from the periphery." Her training as an undergraduate student involved attending cultural events and interviewing artists in favelas and producing texts or videos on these and offering critical analyses of how these shaped and were shaped by literature and other cultural movements. I asked Jordana how she understood the term "cultural manifestation:"

Cultural manifestation is a protest, right, when you create...your reality, you know. It is a manifestation. A song, for example rap, is a manifestation, right, you put in letters what you live daily and give rhythm to it and disseminate it. So it is a manifestation, a protest made here [in the favela], and it is seen [by people outside]. It is a production...it is a form of authorship, you know, of those who live that daily, so that is why it is a manifestation, a protest. It's cultural because it's art, right? It is not a mobilization [political] protest. It's also mobilizing, but it's through another means, right? A more artistic means.

Though Jordana was commissioned to cover events in many Rio de Janeiro's favelas, she had recently done a story on a self-defense group organized by young women in the City of God. The group had termed itself Girl Power. Jordana explained why she viewed Girl Power as a form of political resistance:

I also consider it a political act. Girl Power would not necessarily be considered a political act, right, but when you think about all the violence that women suffer, especially women from the periphery [i.e. the favela], and ultimately most of these women are black, and, you know, when we recognize the violence they suffer daily, I think you need to make a form of, defense, resistance. Because this is a form of resistance for women.

As Jordana noted, self-defense classes were not typically considered to be political. But for her, offering these in the favela for black women was not only a way of arming women with tools to protect their physical and sexual integrity but also of raising awareness of their constant risk of being assaulted. In the two years that followed this first interview, Jordana used her skills in community journalism and contacts in the university and with artists and other "cultural producers" across the city to cover dozens of stories about similar events.

In January, 2018, Jordana started her own YouTube channel dedicated to telling stories about the favela. In her introductory video, Jordana smiles into the camera and exclaims "First of all..." pointing to her extremely large earrings that read: "Out with" on the right side and "Temer" on the left. "Out with Temer" had become a popular slogan among leftist political activists across Brazil since Michel Temer's takeover of the presidency after Dilma's impeachment in 2016. Jordana continues: "Secondly, I am here to talk a little bit about what Favela is. Favela is love, it is art, it is freedom, it is theater, it is dance. Favela is life," she proclaims, images of a colorful favela housing project behind her. "This project," she explains, "proposes to debate themes that are not necessarily discussed in traditional big media. Here we

are going to talk about you, your experiences, your lives, your values, what you do, what you like, what you do not like, for you to see yourself here on this little screen.” True to her word, the videos on her channel showcase favela residents describing their everyday lives and explaining how they express resistance and identity through their artistic expression. In one video, in which Jordana reflects on a Samba School that put together a set for the 2018 Carnival parades on slavery in contemporary Brazil, she notes that the parade “shows the favelas as a current *quilombo* [i.e. former communities of runaway slaves], as a place of resistance, and as a shelter, since our demands are not being met by the state.” The parade had itself been produced by a black choreographer from a Rio favela. In both his rendition of modern-day racism and Jordana’s journalistic reflections of it, art and cultural productions have enabled Rio’s poor to decry their continued racial and political subjugation.

## Poetry and Politics

While Natalia’s campaign announcement at the Open Mic event had caught many participants by surprise, she had explained her decision in detail to me earlier that day and helped me understand the logic behind her unpopular decision. Natalia had been involved in politics from an early age, first as the leader of a Youth Caucus for the Communist Party in the City of God and then as a major leader in the student labor movements as a student at the prestigious private university, Pontifícia Universidade Católica, or PUC-Rio. Natalia was highly critical of what she considered an unequal and ineffective bureaucratic governmental system. She had joined the Communist Party less out of a commitment to communism and more out of a sense that Brazil’s current government was broken and needed someone from the outside to fight for radical change. She was also a practical thinker, however, and believed that she could gain more

clout in the Communist Party than some of the other, top-heavy parties. In addition to her political organizing work, Natalia had gained visibility in the City of God at age 21 working with Leonardo as a community reporter. She had earned a reputation as “Leonardo’s partner, the girl with the glasses.” Natalia was also a poet, and in 2011, she applied for and won a grant by the Secretary of Culture for R\$25,000 to start Art Talk, which had covered the costs of equipment and supplies and paid for some staff stipends.

Natalia’s candidacy for City Council in 2016 taught me as much about her as it did about the relationship between culture and politics in the City of God. I had offered to volunteer for her campaign in part to observe the behind-the-scenes organization of party politics in the City of God and in part to lend support to the activist movement in the neighborhood. Though over a dozen City of God residents had opted to run for City Council, Natalia had been the only activist I knew who was running for office; most activists would have never even considered the idea.

Natalia’s party flyer described her as “Partner of the City,” describing her as follows:

Natalia has a lengthy history of student struggles. She participated in the Municipal Association of Higher Education Students. As a resident of the City of God, she founded Art Talk, making her a cultural reference in the city. She is leader of the movement #PeaceCDD against violence. This candidate for city council intends to create grants for poetry readings and cultural circles, to bolster sports projects in favelas, to territorialize the budget for Culture, and stimulate Economic solidarity. She wants to support public college preparatory courses and fight for wifi in the parks.

Natalia and her volunteers handed out these flyers across the neighborhood. Natalia also publicized her campaign over a megaphone as she rode on the back of a motorcycle. Though many candidates for city council extended their campaigns to multiple neighborhoods across the city, she had focused her efforts on the City of God, where she believed that she had greatest leverage as “a young female cultural leader from the favela.”

Natalia's status as a "cultural leader" was both enabling and limiting in the formal political arena. On the one hand, her role as a community reporter and the founder of Art Talk gave her visibility, legitimacy, and evidence of her commitment to the well-being of her neighborhood. Many other local candidates had been accused of only doing things to help the neighborhood during election time, and Natalia's ongoing activism "proved" that she in fact cared about the City of God. At the same time, I also suspect that Natalia's physical embodiment—she was thin, wore large glasses and baggy shorts, was light-skinned (and identified as "indigenous"), smiled at awkward times, and otherwise gave off a sense of being a bit odd—did not fit with the stereotype of the sly, charismatic (and male) politician. In the City of God, where party politics remain dominated by clientelistic practices, those with extensive groups of "friends" (including "friendships" with violent actors) are often the most likely to win. I believe Natalia was largely able to engage in politics without being accused of co-optation by the drug trade because few people actually took her seriously as a viable political candidate. While Natalia's colleagues in Art Talk were deeply committed to helping her succeed and engaged in extensive outreach on her behalf, by and large there was little enthusiasm around her campaign and few people held out hope of a victory.

Needless to say, Natalia was not elected to the 51-seat city council. In fact, only one favela resident was elected to city council in 2016—Marielle Franco, a black female sociologist from the Maré complex who had succeeded due in part to extensive campaigning in wealthier neighborhoods. The reasons for this are complex and varied, but two deserve mention. For one, city council elections are not based on districts, but on the number of votes that went to each party and the top-voted members of the winning parties. This means that favelas are not automatically guaranteed a representative number of spots on the council. Secondly, in the City

of God and many other favelas which deeply distrusted politicians and strongly resisted representation by any one person, votes were distributed across multiple candidates—including many from outside the favela—preventing any one person or party from garnering enough votes to be competitive in favelas. Fear of violent authorities both democratized the candidacy process but stymied actual representation in government.

Though Natalia did not win, her candidacy reflected and strengthened the ties between cultural activism and the formal government structures of the city. Natalia's growing visibility as an outspoken activist also increased her contacts with activists across the city, which she continued to leverage to promote cultural activism. In 2017, I went to visit Natalia at her new home in the City of God, which she had turned into what she called a "Laboratory for Free Thinking." It was an open space with an outdoor patio, a living room with two desks and desktop computers, and benches scattered for meetings. The kitchen refrigerator had been stocked with beer and *cachaça*, a Brazilian rum. Only the bedroom had been reserved for Natalia's living space. The goal of the space was to offer both favela and non-favela activists a space to exchange ideas, to organize cultural events, to read and write, and to produce knowledge about and from within the favela. "We are here to unlearn," Natalia had tacitly corrected me on one occasion after I asked for her help in learning more about her project. According to Natalia,

The laboratory is a space of collective construction, of creativity among artists, communicators, people interested in poetry, cinema, art in general, music, and we invent the pathways of the laboratory. And this is also a perspective of culture, art creation and the production of events, cultural production, but there is also a perspective...to think about human rights issues, right, to articulate an agenda of communication on this issue, a training agenda, a stimulus, a campaign, a committee of ordinary residents, what are the basic rights? What are things that we can do soon?

For Natalia and the other people who came and went from the laboratory, the space was as symbolic as it was practical: it was a site for the cultural production of knowledge and

discourse around human rights. There was also a secondary logic behind the lab. Natalia wanted to draw on the energy and enthusiasm of young people and use the space to harness this into the next generation of cultural activists. As MC Claudinho also noted, hip hop and other art forms were popular among young, black youth in favelas and offered a portal through which to connect to them in a way that other activist groups had not. Natalia explained:

These young ones here, they have gas, a lot of disposition to do things, to engage in partnerships, but they have difficulty relating to people who are already in the favela, like the NGOs, other cultural movements, or the older folks engaged in Culture...or the Residents' Board...I think we need a strategy to attract [them], when you spend too much time in the bureaucratic, you leave the streets, but, you know, the streets are important...I want to think about how to form these young people of like 20, 25...how do we empower [them], how do we form new leadership, because I think that NGOs rarely do this.

In fact, many of the most active members of Art Talk and the Laboratory were in their 20s and early 30s. While some had attended university and others had not, hip hop, slam poetry, graphic design, and audio-visual communications provided a channel for uniting diverse groups of people with experiences of exclusion and marginality and an interest in discussing and mobilizing against these. Though many activists in their 40s, 50s, and 60s participated in Art Talk events, and many of them were light-skinned, cultural activism in the City of God maintained a strong emphasis on young black favela youth. Even more importantly, however, was the recognition that the City of God was situated within a larger, global landscape of symbolic and structural violence that required networks and mobilization efforts beyond the local neighborhood. While art allowed cultural activists to express their politics safely in the City of God, their contacts outside the favela were critical to their efficacy. I offer some examples of this below.

## Connecting the Favela to External Movements

One of the core resources that City of God's cultural activists leveraged were ties to social mobilization efforts across and beyond the city. As Valentine Moghadam has argued in her research on Islamism, feminism, and the global justice movement, transnational networks "connect people across borders around a common agenda and collective identity; mobilize large numbers of supporters and activists...[and] engages in sustained oppositional politics with states or other power-holders" (Moghadam 2012:5). In the City of God, activists benefited from a kind of "boomerang effect," wherein their contacts with urban and transnational activist networks outside their neighborhood helped to strengthen local efforts (Keck and Sikkink 1998). It did so by giving them access to information, global discourses of human rights, economic resources, and allies beyond the neighborhood.

SpeakCDD!, for instance, was founded by a joint effort between local residents and a community-based research nucleus at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Several interns for the university and faculty member at the nucleus had provided some funding, training, and ongoing assistance in organizing and running the newspaper. From my conversations with Rosangela and Sonia, the partnership was bittersweet. On the one hand, they were grateful to the support of the research nucleus and seemed to have a good relationship with the young man overseeing the nucleus and several students. On the other hand, they often felt like the young interns, mostly young white women from Rio's middle-class neighborhoods, offered advice that was not relevant or helpful in the context of the City of God and that at times they came across as condescending or controlling. "They keep offering to host workshops to teach us how to do community journalism, but they never ask us to teach *them* how to do community journalism," Rosangela had complained to me on several occasions. She had come to resent the idea that the

relationship between universities and favelas was one-directional. By 2016, Rosangela wished that the students would leave the project and allow local residents to fully take over administration of the paper. “It is our paper after all.”

In addition to her relationship with the nucleus, Rosangela was also engaged in a global network of female activists. She was a reporter for World Pulse, a global social media platform that aimed to “unite and empower women everywhere” through storytelling and facilitating connections between female change-makers across countries. Many of her stories were about community journalism and cultural events in the City of God, which I had helped to translate to English. Her articles were often liked or commented on by women in Africa, Europe, and Latin America, and Rosangela had embraced these virtual relationships. In 2016, World Pulse asked Rosangela to attend and write a story about the 13<sup>th</sup> International Forum of AWID, a four-day conference of over 2000 women from across Latin America. The theme for the conference was “Feminist Futures: Constructing Collective Power in Promotion of Rights and Justice.” The Forum took place in Bahia, in northeastern Brazil. Rosangela established several relationships with feminists at the conference, including the president of AWID, the founder of World Pulse, a Capoeira Master who had implanted Capoeira in six other countries, a labor rights organizer from São Paulo, and many women from Africa and other Latin American countries. When I asked Rosangela what she had taken away from the event, she replied:

I realized that I was born to be a reporter, that I like communication and that there is nothing in the world better than listening to people and that World Pulse values me and supports me in actions, everything I learn with my friends and sisters from World Pulse make me realize how much we can contribute to the development of people. I feel embraced by the women of the world in the World Pulse network.

MC Claudinho was also extremely active outside the City of God, performing in dozens of states and in front of diverse audiences of various racial and class groups. Jordana was deeply

embedded in networks of university students, and in 2017 had begun working with students in São Paulo on some of her audio-visual projects. Mauricio had been hired by a German literary organization to perform a play by a famous German author in Brazil and had recently been invited to travel to Germany to meet the rest of the team. Natalia, in addition to her work in party politics, had spent six months as an undergraduate exchange student in North Carolina after being selected for a prestigious foreign exchange program run by Brazil's Ministry of Education. In 2017, she was accepted into a Master's Program in International Relations at the University of Portugal and was planning to start the following year. In her application to the university, Natalia had proposed a project on tourism in the Amazon jungle after spending ten days there during a "process of spiritualization."

In 2017, Leonardo helped to launch a new initiative that aimed to include favela youth in urban and national debates around drug policy. The initiative was a partnership between a research center in Rio de Janeiro State University and a group of young people from several favelas in Rio de Janeiro. Leonardo had played a key role in organizing the group, identifying its objectives, bringing in new members, and speaking about the initiative at events across the city. I attended the official launch of the project in August, 2017, which had taken place at an arts center in the Maré complex, one of the city's largest favelas. There had been at least three hundred people at the event, mostly young black people. Leonardo had been appointed the MC for the event, ushering the audience through hip hop and poetry performances, a discussion about drugs, security, and favelas in Rio among black academics and activists, and a reception. One of their slam poets, a young woman of no more than 23 years of age, wore large earrings with the slogan "Black Lives Matter." The event was recorded and streamed to an additional 1,000 viewers across Brazil.

As people mingled after the event, Leonardo beamed as he handed me their shiny new booklet, which contained information about the history of drug use and drug control across the globe, the types of drug use and those most common in Brazil—highlighting that 50% of Brazilians reported using alcohol in the last 12 months—and explaining the transformation of drug use into a social problem with criminal penalties. “In Brazil, between 2006 and 2008,” it read, “8 thousand people died per year due to drug use. But 96% of these deaths were caused by legal drugs, like alcohol and tobacco.” Skipping ahead two pages, the brochure notes that “The majority of individuals incarcerated and killed in the war on drugs are you, black, and residents of favelas and the periphery, demonstrating that this policy is selective.” The brochure concludes by suggesting that this situation can only change with the decriminalization and regulation of drugs. Favela residents, it claims, “suffer from daily violence, our rights are restricted, and we lose opportunities. It is time for us to be included in the debate about drug policy in order to make our perspective heard.” Though the project was still in its early stages, they had begun to work with a similar group in Bahia and were hoping to take drug and security policy debates to more national platforms.

The relationship between favela cultural activists and these broader movements was both critical to their mobilization efforts but also served as a constant reminder of their secondary status within these. Mauricio, for instance, suggested that that exposure to the world outside the favela was critical for developing a political consciousness:

I once worked in a music school. And there was a student there who was doing music class, then doing sports, then doing theater, and he was in that Kumon [private tutoring program], you know? ...And he'd do all these things every week. I mean, he did something in each of the areas [of development]. And here in CDD, every once in a while you have a little school here or there and we say it's opportunity. But people do not see what it's like to really have the opportunity to do all these things.

Mauricio's exposure to artistic movements outside the City of God had given him the

opportunity to witness the resources—financial and cultural—that could be accessed by other classes and by people of other countries. This allowed him to locate CDD within a larger context of poverty of rights and resources that more isolated favela residents were unable to appreciate. Furthermore, his exposure to these artistic circles had provided him a racialized discourse that provoked an analysis of race in Brazil in relation to other countries, but that could also be situated within the specific context of the favela.

At the same time, favela activists were keenly aware of their location within these urban and transnational movements. Both Leonardo and Jordana had become disenchanted with their partnerships with urban political and racial movements, recognizing the tensions between these broader mobilization efforts and the needs of the favela. According to Leonardo:

I was tired of the young black movement, because I was a little disenchanted, because I did not recognize myself there ... I think the fact that I heard a lot of these racial issues talked about in and about the favela, I got tired of hearing these questions spoken by the [older Black] academics. They do not talk about favela issues, they talk about racial issues, but not about the favela. Sometimes they talk about racial issues that people in the favela have already solved. We've already learned how to get along with white people...sometimes my own brother is white, my mother is white, the woman on whose breast I nursed was white, so we realize that we need to work together in the favela; I can't be excluding people just because they are lighter skinned. So the favela has solved some of the issues that academics talk about.

Just as Leonardo was frustrated with the more academic and exclusionary politics of the national racial movements, leftist political groups were seen as even less interested in addressing the concerns of marginalized populations. Jordana posted this two weeks before the 2016 municipal elections after having participated in several rallies and protests in downtown Rio:

One of the great problems of the left is that it is not at all representative.  
It's a middle-class bunch talking about favela to the middle-class itself.  
A bunch of white people talking about racism.  
A bunch of heterosexuals talking about homophobia.  
Now let's go together to transform the city into a great meeting in Lapa.  
Thanks!

Leonardo also complained regularly about white university students who protested loudly for justice and equality on television and in the streets but refused to step foot in a favela and opposed affirmative action policies in universities. Isabella, who had won a full scholarship to a private university to study community journalism, noted to me that she was the only Black woman in the favela. “I always feel like the odd one out there. I don’t get money from my parents to pay my bills while I’m studying. They have no idea what my life is like. So I just keep to myself.” While cultural activists in the City of God relied on their connections with racial justice movements and leftist political parties in order to bring visibility to the issues of the favela, they could not overlook the fact that their middle-class allies had many more resources and a much more limited understanding of how race, poverty and violence operated in Rio’s poor neighborhoods.

## The Limits of Local Activism

On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, an 11-year-old boy was shot and killed during a drive-by shooting in front of the local supermarket where he helped his father sell fish. While the identities of the shooters were never discovered, many suspected that they had been plain-clothes police officers or members of vigilante groups shooting at the drug sales point on the street corner behind the fish booth. In response, Natalia, Isabella, Leonardo, and several other cultural activists organized a march and a rally to demand peace in the City of God. It was attended by approximately three hundred residents. Most residents I knew categorically avoided group marches in the City of God because they were usually organized by the drug trade in response to a police killing of one of their own, and many of these marches ended in confrontations with the police. This march was different, many residents told me. It was organized by a non-violent

social change group, it did not call out any particular violent actor in the community, and it was peaceful. The protesters shut down the main thoroughfare as they waved posters and chanted about their right to peace and safety. After the rally, the organizers decided to make their group official. They titled it #PeaceCDD and decided that their main objective would be to fight for residents' most basic human right: to live in peace.

Over the following two years, they organized several peace protests in response to police shootings of innocent civilians. Every time a resident with no direct ties to the drug trade was killed, they marched for peace and demanded a meeting with the UPP Commander in the City of God to inquire as to the details of the homicide, to request that a full investigation take place, and to ask for a decrease in police operations. When a judge ordered the “collective search” of the City of God after the helicopter crash in 2016, Natalia and her colleagues leveraged their allies in the municipal and state governments and with lawyers from the Public Defense Commission to get the search authorization suspended. Tina, another organizer, told me they had also pressured the Commander to locate the bodies of two adolescents who had gone missing. The members of #PeaceCDD met regularly to discuss the current security situation and to discuss possible strategies to make claim around security.

By 2017, however, most group members had come to accept that the group's main contribution was to protest innocent killings *after* they happened, but that it did not have the capacity to stop them. After some group members received threats to stop these explicit condemnations of violence in the neighborhood, the members refocused their efforts to cultural and social development efforts. While they remained committed to protesting police brutality in the wake of especially violent policing operations, participants recognized the risks involved in these efforts. In the most recent protest, an activist was caught between a police officer and an

especially rowdy protester, and though the activist had managed to calm the situation, the possibility that the police might begin shooting into the crowd of disarmed protesters—including many children and older people—had dissuaded future protests. Though I suspect that Natalia, Tina, Leonardo, and the other members of #PeaceCDD would continue these mobilization efforts despite the risks, the project was not readily embraced by City of God’s activists. Though the members of the group had survived their incursions into the security landscape of the neighborhood, most people I spoke with feared for the lives of these protesters. #PeaceCDD rubbed against the limits of activism in a neighborhood where local politics and insecurity could not be challenged, even by its most regarded cultural producers.

## Conclusion

For all the problems with cultural resistance, there is still potential. For in cultural resistance lies the possibility of imagining and creating something different. People who have little access to political power or material wealth can express through culture their criticisms of their current situation and conjure up a vision of something different. These people can create sets of symbols which reorder the co-ordinates of the present, and fashion new forms of social interaction that challenge old ways of organization. That is, counter-hegemonic cultures...Once people learn to do-it-themselves as a cultural practice, the step to doing the same thing when building a community or acting as a citizen in a democracy may be that much smaller (Duncombe 2007:498).

The above quote highlights both the possibilities and limitations of cultural activism. Artistic expression in the City of God allowed residents to challenge state neglect, exclusionary policies, racial injustice, and police brutality by employing normative cultural forms. The production of art was accessible to even the poorest City of God residents, and in particular, to young people, many with little schooling or access to institutions. Drawing, writing, rapping, and writing poetry allowed residents to construct counter-hegemonic narratives that both united favela residents around similar issues while also situating them within larger urban and transnational movements. It had a distinctly democratic effect. At the same time, cultural

activists in the City of God were often bound to allies in political and race-based movements with more resources and less knowledge about favela issues. The shift to identity-based social movements in Brazil both offered favelas an opportunity to connect to global networks while also maintaining them in a subservient position within them. Cultural activism had local limits as well: they could protest violence in song and dance, but street protests and direct engagement with the police were a much riskier terrain. The politics of culture in the City of God remained, like other movements, a complicated affair. It both pushed forward possibilities for democratic engagement and claims-making while also struggling to transform many of the larger structures of violence and inequality that had engendered their efforts.

## **Conclusion:**

Making Space for Non-Violence

## Introduction

On February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018, President Michel Temer signed a decree commanding Brazil's armed forces to take control over the state of Rio de Janeiro's police. The City of God was slated to be the first favela to be occupied by the national army after being declared in January as the most violent neighborhood in the city. Forty-one shootouts had been reported that month in the City of God—higher than any other neighborhood. In defense of the decree, institutional security minister Sergio Etchegoyen claimed that “It's important to understand that Rio de Janeiro is a laboratory.” Secretary-General Wellington Moreira Franco added that what was happening in Rio would hopefully spread throughout Brazil: “I believe that this is one more step along the road of being able to restore security, order and, above all, confidence to residents of Rio de Janeiro state. This spirit is being mobilized so that ... this conversation, this methodology can spread throughout Brazil” (The National 2018).

The immediate trigger for the decree was an inordinately high rate of muggings, armed robberies, and gun fights between police and drug traffickers during Carnival week, which became an international embarrassment as stories about victimized tourists and Rio's surge in violence were plastered on front covers of major news outlets. The rise and fall of the UPP program—and the fall and rise of urban violence across Rio—in recent years likely also contributed to this decision. Many left-leaning activists and scholars have suggested that the mandate is an effort to militarize the nation in a context of eroding state legitimacy and democratic openings. While the motivations behind the policy and its effects are the subject for another dissertation, what matters here is the central position of Rio de Janeiro, and the City of God, in Brazil's experimentation with policy-making, particularly around security and governance. Although Rio de Janeiro occupies 11<sup>th</sup> place for homicide rates in Brazil, its

international visibility as a site of tourism, commerce, industry, and culture and its ongoing challenges with the drug trade have made it the nation's main site for experimenting with governance through security, and insecurity. And once more, City of God's residents have become the guinea pigs for this experimentation. What happens in the City of God will inform municipal, national, and, in the long run, international policies around policing and governance. The goal of this dissertation is to ensure that the lessons learned about the tense relationship between democracy and violence in the City of God extend beyond simplistic accounts of bullet wounds and corrupt politicians. To this end, I conclude with an overview of what we might glean from our understanding of non-violence in the City of God.

## Weapons of the Weak

Latin America has witnessed enormous political and social changes in the last forty years as dictatorial regimes were replaced by democratic governments and liberal constitutions and civil society groups set out to lay claim to their rights. Literature on social movements across Latin America exploded along with the proliferation of organized action for the rights of indigenous communities, laborers, landless peasants, women, and blacks. While inequality has persisted despite the democratic shift, political openings have enabled marginalized groups to make collective demands for political rights, social services, civil protections, and access to cultural resources. After centuries of economic, social, and political repression, Latin America's "subaltern" finally have a chance to remake society to fit their needs, interests, and rights.

However, for all the documented social mobilization efforts multiplying across Latin America, its extremely poor communities have yet to make the news for non-violent collective action. In the preface to his popular book "Weapons of the Weak," James Scott claimed that

“most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Or, better stated, such activity was dangerous, if not suicidal” (Scott 1987:xv). Despite the desire among many scholars to romanticize peasant rebellions and national revolutions, most major movements for social change are spearheaded by the working or middle-classes who have both an interest in transforming social and political structures and the means to do so. In fact, a vast literature has demonstrated the amount of resources needed for major social or political transformations, including political openings (and access to these), shared counter-hegemonic narratives, and elite allies, resources to which peasants, slaves, and other very poor and disenfranchised groups are extremely unlikely to have substantive access. The few organized rebellions or movements among peasants, slaves, or other extremely oppressed populations are so violently crushed that they not only produce no meaningful improvements but discourage others from trying. In response to this bleak perspective, Scott set out to document “everyday forms of peasant resistance,” which included “foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on” (Scott 1987:xvi). These individual, subtle, and hidden acts of resistance constitute, for Scott, the forms of everyday struggle that are possible among the lowest strata of society.

In 2000, Asef Bayat introduced another perspective that largely confirms this worldview, suggesting that across the Middle East, the poor have engaged in “social non-movements,” or collective behaviors that have no direct intent to transform society but inadvertently do so anyways by their sheer persistence and size (Bayat 2013). In other words, when enough people engage in certain actions, such as those witnessed in informal employment or housing, wealthy elites and politicians have little choice but to adapt to these practices. Social change happens, but not by any particular intention by the poor. In the last thirty years, Scott’s and Bayat’s views

have gained quite a bit of purchase as scholars set out to document the apolitical practices of extremely marginalized populations. In an effort to de-romanticize our analyses of social movements among the poor, we have settled for accounts of individualized acts of resistance or normative collective action that have no intention of transforming unequal structures of power.

What I found in the City of God was a phenomenon that neither of these perspectives would have predicted. While social movement scholars have reveled in the multiplication of organized action, the urban poor have not yet—and probably will not—coalesce around a unified social movement. Whatever efforts might once have been possible in the context of informality and poverty, such as those documented by Brodwyn Fischer and Bryann McCann in 20<sup>th</sup> century Rio and by James Holston in São Paulo, were almost entirely shattered by the rise of the drug trade and the violent co-optation of local governance structures. Unification among activists in a context of daily shootouts and gruesome killings of those perceived to be a threat to violent actors or their allies threatens not only the lives of movement leaders, but also their reputation and the legitimacy of their movements. Even for the most daring leaders, the more they succeed in growing their movement, the more favela residents come to see their power as corrupt and dangerous. Growing urban violence has rendered large-scale social mobilization quite near impossible. Unless major shifts take place in the political and security landscapes of favelas, it is unlikely that a unified favela movement can be sustained.

However, its opposite is no more true: Rio's urban poor are doing significantly more than individual acts of everyday resistance or passive forms of collective behavior. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, City of God's favela activists were engaged in multiple organized efforts to make demands for improved services, for the protection and enforcement of their citizenship rights, and for large-scale political and social change. These efforts were

intentional, collective, and organized and they had as their main objective a transformation of unequal structures of power. While activists were required to disguise their political objectives in order to survive in a context of violent politics, their “hidden transcripts”—the narratives they employed in private spaces—were deeply political. This was not a case of activism destroyed, but of activism reconfigured.

## Social Movements in Micro-Spaces

In many respects, City of God’s social movements fit with our general understandings of social movements. Within each movement, participants shared similar political imaginaries, adopted shared narratives and logics of action, and drew on political openings and allies outside the neighborhood. Activists were largely motivated by personal and collective experiences of suffering, injustice, pain, anger, and hope. Their personal relationships and commitments to change sustained their efforts, even as scarce resources, shootouts, fear, and cancelled events threatened their mobilization efforts. And as many social movement scholars have found elsewhere, City of God’s movements operated both within and against formal political opportunity structures as possibilities for danger and efficacy waxed and waned.

Despite these overarching similarities, the City of God offered many lessons for how to think about social movements in micro-spaces of extreme violence. For one, social action in the City of God was, in many respects, turned invisible to formal political actors (and students of formal politics). There was an underground dimension to their efforts. While the individual activists were constantly sharing stories, occupying streets and parks, talking to municipal officials, and making public claims in the news and on the internet, there was a strategic de-politicization of these discourses in order to ensure that they would be misrecognized by violent

actors. What has allowed them to fly under the radar of local drug traffickers and corrupt political leaders has also made them difficult for political scientists and scholars of urban violence to locate. This does not mean that they do not exist or that they are in fact apolitical, but simply that another set of lenses is required to find them.

This has two implications for how we think about social movements in Latin America moving forward. For one, if the current trends of increased physical violence and decreased institutional legitimacy continue—and every indication suggests they will—it will be critical for scholars of social movements and urban politics to look past traditional forms and spaces of claims-making to find collective action. Rather than assume that social movements have collapsed, we should instead ask how they have been reconfigured and rescaled. If we start from the assumption that, even under conditions of extreme violence social mobilization is possible, we are much more likely to find it, to document it, to understand it, and ultimately, to strengthen it. The second is a more predictive contribution: social movements will likely *be* rescaled, fragmented, and rendered unrecognizable to authoritarian and violent regimes. While this may come across as foreboding to some, the reconfiguration of social movements is not inherently good or bad. In fact, while the fragmentation of movements does limit the pressure that civil society can exert on the making (or unmaking) of specific policies or practices, it also opens up some important democratic channels. Again, the case of the City of God is instructive here.

The City of God provided a valuable reflection on the paradox of democracy and violence. While the co-optation of governance structures had severely constrained residents' engagement in collective political claims at the neighborhood level, the limits of power that these dynamics imposed also prompted a democratization of political imaginaries. In other words, because movements were not able to grow upwards, they grew sideways. The presence of so

many different forms of collective action in such a small space was a direct consequence of the impossibility of hierarchy: had it been possible for these movements to consolidate into one organized, institutionalized structure with a coherent identity, political imaginary, and set of narratives and practices, the others views and practices would have been sidelined. As movement literature has demonstrated, organized change comes at the cost of diversity. Movements often rely on one message and one set of clear demands if they are to achieve political or social change. While favela activists' inability to consolidate into one movement amongst each other and across favelas has surely stymied the strength of their efforts and their ability to pressure municipal or state policy changes, it has enabled a proliferation of practices and perspectives. In the City of God, the long-standing debate between scholars of old and new movements is rendered meaningless: multiple approaches to organized action blossomed in this space. In the absence of a hierarchy of change-making, there was a place for everyone.

Paulo, a 32-year-old man from the south of Brazil who had moved to the City of God in 2014 to contribute to social mobilization efforts, described this well:

There is this very simple idea that I believe most people don't understand or don't accept: the struggle and militancy are not products, and therefore they should not be categorized. Subjects act and think in different ways, including within organized collectives. Each one gives what they have...I'm very interested in returning to philosophy and questioning each of these practices, each of these optics, each of these actions.

Paulo, who had created a Facebook page dedicated to such academic reflections of favela activism, had, like me, come to occupy the complex interstices between City of God's micro-movements. He was an active contributor to each of these movements, a mediator between them, and a student of them, and I often found his online and in-person reflections to be extremely useful in my own grappling with my observations. While I suspect Paulo's post was an effort to remedy some of the internal divisiveness between activists in different groups, there

was a large contribution for how we think about democracy and collective action. Every individual has a unique perspective and understanding of what matters and how to attain it. Efforts to impose coherence and unity on this diversity is both critical for effective social mobilization but stymies strong democracy. Benjamin Barber's original conceptualization of strong democracy had in mind the breadth of community-based political groups in America's small municipal enclaves, where the political machine worked much more democratically than national politics. The fascinating contradictions of democracy and violence in the City of God, however, demonstrated that political constraints in fact engendered their opposite: a proliferation of political imaginaries and practices. As Paulo would agree, the possibility of multiple voices offers a valuable opportunity to rethink how "the struggle" might unfold.

At the same time, the politicization of favela residents did not occur as a simple response to violence and exclusion, but in relation to historical social mobilization, urban and transnational activism, and political openings at the municipal, state, and national levels of government. City of God's activists took advantage of national democratic rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and protest, and draw on urban and global discourses around rights and action. Their connections with middle- and upper-class urban residents and their ability to physically and virtually navigate across the city were critical resources. And while favela activists never accessed much money, they had become reliant on the little pockets of grants and donations they could muster. To presume that extreme scarcity automatically produces political action would be to overlook the many political, social, and financial resources upon which City of God's activists relied. Rather than suggest that extreme violence begets collective action, a more accurate claim would be that extreme violence can engender an extreme commitment to non-violence; and extremely determined activists find ways to capitalize on few resources to

mobilize for their rights. As I discuss below, identifying the channels that activists have constructed to make demands will be critical for strengthening these efforts.

The impossibility of institutionalized action in the context of violent governance has had another meaningful outcome: the opening of spaces for gendered politics. While as a scholar I have been trained to resist dichotomies, there was an undeniable feminization of City of God's social movements in response to the hyper-masculine sphere of violence and formal politics. This is not in itself a new finding, as many scholars have documented the important interventions spearheaded by women in areas of armed conflict. The work of Cynthia Cockburn has been especially influential in my understanding of how the masculine world of violence co-exists with—and often helps to engender—the feminine spaces of non-violence. However, both Cockburn and the many other scholars of women's work in peace-making and community leadership in times of war have arrived at the conclusion that in both war and peace, women remain subservient. In this "continuum of violence," the patriarchy is maintained through either physical violence or through the political and economic oppression of women (Cockburn 2004). While at a macro-level of analysis it is difficult to argue with this claim, the movements for peace and justice in the City of God offered a site for female leadership and for the promotion of women's rights. In fact, the feminization of politics was critical to their survival. As Latin America's political and security landscapes shift, we will have little choice but to examine the micro-sites of claims-making. But I suspect that when we do, we will find new spaces of feminized politics and power.

## The Costs of Non-Violence

If the main argument of this dissertation is that non-violent collective action is possible in the context of extreme physical and structural violence, the corollary to this is that these efforts come at a cost. More accurately stated, the motivations and challenges of social action in the City of God were mutually constitutive: what allowed these movements to survive also prevented them from being more united, efficacious, and powerful. In September of 2016 I presented a rough outline of my dissertation to a group of around twenty-five City of God residents that included representatives from each of the social movements I've described in this dissertation, as well as many other individuals not directly engaged in these projects. While presenting my findings to the very group I had been studying for so long was nerve-wracking, what I had most feared was the very real possibility for a heated and angry debate afterwards among people who had become deeply distrustful of and antagonistic towards each other. Though many of my participants, like Maria Rita, Jefferson, and Rosangela, had become adept at traversing the various CBOs, the Residents' Board, Art Talk, and other spaces of organized action, there was much antagonism between these movements. Core leaders of these movements disagreed on ideology and practice. Many of them had attempted to work with leaders of other movements, only to find that the other group was so committed to a different approach that collaboration was nearly impossible. In a landscape of constant danger and scarce resources, personal and political differences became amplified and blamed for many of their struggles, and I feared that bringing these to light might further fray the tattered fabric holding them together.

The two-hour discussion that followed my presentation, however, was among my most instructive moments in the City of God as my participants reckoned with the political and structural forces that both engendered and constrained their mobilization efforts and their

relationships with each other. For one, few people seemed surprised by my main “finding.” Of course, many exclaimed, non-violent collective action remained a core feature of the neighborhood. What choice did they have? In a context of extreme violence, mobilizing against violence—in all its forms—gained a special sense of urgency. “If we don’t do it, no one else is going to,” suggested one of the group members. In the face of so much suffering and injustice, multiple feelings emerged: anger about their mistreatment, compassion for the victims of these, and fear about what how much worse it would get if the government were left unchecked. The shared sentiments and vulnerabilities combusted in this geographically-bounded space to produce multiple consequences, one of which was social mobilization for peace and justice.

Participants widely agreed that cohesion between these groups was extremely difficult and laid out many of the reasons for this. There were few resources, which meant that they often had to compete with each other. When they had tried to partner with each other, many groups did not fulfill their part of the agreement or had been too stubborn about how to make change, and this had created antagonism and distrust between them. Older activists felt that young people did not respect their experience, while younger activists accused the earlier generation of being too tied to the “old” ways of mobilization and did not embrace the creative approach of young people. As participants shared their views, many quite passionately (and, in some cases, angrily), I held my breath, waiting for the group to explode into arguments between them. There had been a few close calls as people defended the bravery and importance of their efforts, the logic behind them, and the reasons they had had difficulties in fulfilling their promises. Most of them had given up the possibility for economic stability and personal safety to dedicate themselves to the fight for their neighborhood and larger forms of injustice, and it was little wonder that they had such an emotional connection to their ongoing struggle.

Group cohesion was salvaged when we turned to a discussion of the drug trade and politicians: everyone agreed that these were the main problems facing them. Drug traffickers kept a close eye on public discourses and mobilization activities, which forced them to keep their efforts small. Furthermore, leaders of the Residents' Associations, the regional government branches, and many of the local candidates could not be trusted, thereby preventing them access to local governance structures. I suggested that they might also have refrained from merging their efforts in order to avoid being viewed as either complicit with or a threat to the drug trade, an observation that seemed to have resonance. Finally, the discussion transitioned to a series of suggestions about what might be done to improve relations among activists and to promote the needs of the City of God, which included more collaborations across movements through forums, workshops, and community dialogues and events.

The discussion was going even better than I had expected until participants began checking their phones and glancing at each other. Luz cleared her throat and, with a low voice, informed us that Sonia, one of the founders of the newspaper SpeakCDD!, had just died after suffering a heart attack. Apparently, Sonia had suffered a panic attack two days earlier when she had gotten stuck outside during a shootout on her way to their weekly newspaper meeting at Youth Promise. As I later learned, Rosangela had found Sonia sitting on the sidewalk leaning against the door of Youth Promise in shock as the bullets raged around her, her key stuck in the door. Rosangela had dragged Sonia into Youth Promise, and then, once the shootout had subsided, to the emergency room. Sonia had spent Saturday in the hospital getting tests, then was released, only to die of a heart attack on Monday morning.

After Luz's announcement, our group sat in silence digesting the news. In an instant, the divisiveness between participants faded as they were suddenly united in their shared grief over

the death of a fellow activist with whom many of us had been very close. I suspect that news of death in their small neighborhood—an event that occurred with regularity—also brought to the surface the very real possibility of harm that their activities produced. We wrapped up the meeting to partake in the snacks that Esther had laid out for us in the kitchen. As my participants came up to me to offer their congratulations on my presentation, I attempted to hold back tears. Despite their best efforts to fight for improvements in the City of God, the possibility of death was constantly looming over them, threatening both their organizing efforts and their very survival.

## Towards Change

In such a complex landscape of politics and violence, how do we go about rethinking current public and social policies and practices? There is no simple answer to this question, and offering simple solutions would not do these issues justice. Brazil's political system is mired in corruption that makes government money leak through its pores, internal rivalries that get played out through its antagonistic multi-party system, and bureaucratic red tape that makes even the best-written public policies difficult to implement effectively. In Rio de Janeiro, the strength of criminal gangs and vigilante groups and their ability to pressure officials to make or unmake public policies further erodes the state's ability to execute its legislative obligations. Time and again favela residents have witnessed the passing of what progressive scholars and activists would consider "good" policies, only to have them be drained of money or to have the party leadership change before the projects were fulfilled. I would not be the first to suggest that the true challenge in Brazil or Rio de Janeiro is not the passing of legislation guaranteeing the civil, political, and social rights of all citizens, for this legislation already exists by and large. Rather,

its challenge is finding ways to implement these policies. To do this, much work must be done to increase budgetary oversight, hold politicians accountable for fiscal crimes and mismanagement of funds, and ensure the continuity of long-term projects during party transitions.

A brief discussion of democracy in Latin America is warranted as well. The recent collapse of democratic institutions in Venezuela and Honduras, the regional shift towards populist politics, and the extremely low support for national presidents in Colombia, Argentina, and many other South and Central American countries suggests that even the most basic political rights must not be taken for granted. Brazil's democracy is surely "disjunctive" and becoming increasingly so under the rule of Michel Temer, and it is difficult to predict what will happen next. However, as scholars it is critical that we situate political openings and closures within a larger historical and regional context, wherein we might arrive at the disappointing conclusion that, for all its problems, City of God's residents have in fact benefited from many opportunities afforded by the current system. These are far from sufficient, but we should not overlook the possibilities that are constructed by extremely determined individuals when afforded basic rights. While focusing on the gaps might lead to a more prescriptive analysis of what is needed, it is just as important that we consider what is going well and build on that. In fact, whatever bits of funding, development, visibility, and cultural interventions City of God's activists have achieved have been a result of their ability to identify and capitalize on these political openings. The rights of free speech, assembly, and protest, the availability of municipal and state grants, the limited resources from larger NGOs and allies in urban and transnational social movements, and the extensive repertoires of action from which activists have been able to draw afforded critical

resources for mobilization. While the Brazilian government has much to fix, let us not lose sight of what it has done well, and what it is allowing civil society to do.

Sociologists and other social scientists also face an ideological challenge in putting forth policy recommendations. Interventions like the UPP, that in theory promote the militarization of the urban poor and are unlikely to receive the support of even moderate-leaning sociologists, were effective in decreasing public insecurity for a time. As I argued in a separate article, most City of God residents welcomed the militarization of their neighborhood in 2009 because the UPP offered a dramatic shift from the spontaneous, aggressive, and ineffective interventions of the military police in years past (Fahlberg 2018). It also rid the neighborhood of the public sale of drugs and displays of weapons and brought more social services to the neighborhood. After the signing of the presidential decree in February of this year giving the national army control over Rio's police, I asked Maria Rita what if she was anxious for the entrance of the army into the City of God. "We aren't, Anjuli," she told me. "I just think it will be more of the same. It will maintain society more docile during election year, but I know that after a while, everything goes back to the way it was, just like with the UPP." For most of the residents I met, the full might of the national army was the only force that could ensure peace, because only then would drug traffickers flee instead of shoot back. The issue for most of them was not that the police were invading, but that ultimately they withdrew and the violent competition for territorial control between drug factions returned, sometimes even more aggressively than before.

The immediate and very real threat posed by the drug trade has led residents to embrace the militarization of their community. After spending so much time there and watching the differences in public security during and after the UPP, it was difficult to disagree with their assessment. At the same time, as an activist scholar, recommending militarization or supporting

the takeover of Rio's security by the national army seems dangerous and irresponsible. Surely Brazil can do better than to address their challenges with violent crime through more violence. In response to the decree, a well-known activist from the Complexo da Maré, one of Rio's largest favela complexes, noted: "We had one soldier for every 75 residents. I, as a resident here since I was born, never had a doctor or a teacher for every 75 residents in the Maré" (Brasil de Fato 2018). Among Rio's public security scholars and activists, the demand for more social services and less policing has become the resounding demand. There is little question that, in the long-run, many of City of God's challenges would be addressed through an increased effort by the state and its private sector to offer favela residents greater access to well-paid and secure employment, education, health care, transportation, infrastructure, housing, and the myriad other needs of individuals and neighborhoods.

For now, however, even if the government did commit to putting more doctors and teachers in the City of God, they would have a difficult time getting to their posts on a daily basis because of shootouts and the control of drug traffickers over its streets. In an interview I conducted with a social worker stationed at the local welfare office on the outskirts of the neighborhood, I discovered that even her staff, many of whom had been entering the City of God for years to help the area's extremely poor families, had been denied access and threatened at gun point on multiple occasions. Despite the many practical and theoretical problems with implementing a program like the UPP in favelas, this intervention has come closer than any other in the City of God's fifty-year history to containing public insecurity and allowing state and private services to function. Realistically, as much as progressive-minded scholars (like myself) maintain a deep-seated and well-reasoned fear of the state ruling through its security apparatus, the police should play an important role in maintaining social order, enforcing laws, protecting

vulnerable populations, and ensuring that residents are able to leave their homes and participate as full citizens in the social, economic, and political life of the city. The overwhelming tendency for sociologists and other activist scholars to call for less policing and more social services is, in the big picture, helping to move Brazil in what I see as a positive direction. But in the immediate, short-term reality of extreme criminal violence that permeates the City of God and Rio's other favelas, a more moderate approach may be more effective.

There is one space, however, in which I believe the call for change is less complicated: in the construction of our collective imaginaries about favelas. The City of God's recent jump to the top spot for highest shootouts in January, 2018 across Rio brought a renewed interest among reporters. Dozens of newspaper articles came out about violence in the City of God, including two that highlighted my research and my main findings. However, both articles focused on the consequences of violence to local residents, saying little or nothing about the non-violent activities by local residents despite my strong emphasis on these during our interviews. In a follow-up conversation with one reporter, in which I suggested that he conduct a follow-up article on non-violent action in the City of God, he replied: "I'd love to, Anjuli. But since our magazine works with a dynamic of covering hot topics, it's difficult to go in that direction. On the flip side, if you know of any interesting news there or in other communities, let me know and I'll do my best to take advantage of that. I'd love to talk about the good things too." Violence is hot; non-violence is not. While this is all but surprising in the case of the media, the same might be said for urban ethnographies, which have lately been accused of sensationalizing violence at the expense of a more tempered (if perhaps less exciting) perspective on the urban poor.

However, what and how we choose to talk about people in conditions of extreme violence has a direct and powerful effect on their opportunities to secure employment, to walk

through shopping malls without being followed, to be treated with civility by police officers, to make friends or romantic ties outside the favela, and, ultimately, to be treated as urban citizens rather than “favelados.” While the forms and consequences of violence do need to be understood and discussed, we ultimately do the urban poor a disservice by perpetuating the limited view of them as victims or criminals. Urban sociologists have contributed a vast body of scholarship on violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and many have uncovered the tactics of survival and resilience among non-violent residents. But very little speaks to their work as political subjects and agents of transformation or to their intentional efforts to make both their neighborhoods and their cities more just, safe, and equitable spaces. While we may have little control over Brazil’s broken political and security apparatuses, there is much that can be done to balance our collective imaginaries about the urban poor: we need to publish less about violence and more about non-violence.

## Saying Goodbye

When I attended Sonia’s funeral, Maria Rita and I climbed to the top of the hill of the cemetery, sweat dripping down our backs as the sun beamed down on us and the hundreds of friends, family members, and fellow activists from across the city who came to say goodbye to Sonia. What Sonia had lacked for in wealth she had made up for in community. As we dragged our way up the steep hill that, from the bottom seemed like a small mountain, we passed by the large marble crypts designated for wealthier families buried down below. Closer to the top, farther from the entrance, the ground was covered by small white stones for the people whose families could not afford marble crypts or stones. What struck me most was the juxtaposition between the individuality of each crypt—with a unique design, color, name plates, and spreads

of flowers—and the homogeneity of the white stones, which all looked identical in their long rows. Finally arriving at Sonia’s gravesite, I looked sadly at the small white stone that had been assigned to her. “Even in death, the poor stay poor and the rich stay rich,” Maria Rita reflected. Even more than the size or material of the headstone, what bothered me was its lack of individuality. Sonia’s effervescence, her bright smile, and her tireless commitment to social justice in the City of God seemed to be entirely erased in her burial site. I had flown back to the United States later that day amidst tears of sadness at Sonia’s passing and the image of that plain stone sitting unmemorably between so many others.

One year later, back in Brazil, I attended another Art Talk Open Mic event and sparked up a conversation with Sonia’s two sisters, whom I had only briefly met at Sonia’s wake. Neither of them had been especially engaged in social mobilization before then. “That was always Sonia’s thing,” they told me. I mentioned how much I missed Sonia’s bright, welcoming smile. “You know,” one of her sisters said, “we never saw that side of Sonia. But after she died, everyone from all these movements she was part of started telling us about this bright smile of hers. We had no idea how happy it made her to be part of all of this, and how much she mattered to these groups.” For the next hour, the three of us huddled in a corner sipping on *caipirinhas* as we exchanged stories of Sonia. They told me they had started a small CBO a few months earlier in honor of their sister in order to “transform our sadness into culture.” Since then, they had turned their street into a “cultural hallway,” bringing artists and poets, showing movies, and welcoming discussion about culture to local residents and neighborhood children on Sunday afternoons. They had also organized field trips to take children and their parents to museums in Rio’s downtown area. “Many people feel like they aren’t good enough to go to these places,” they had explained. “They worry that they don’t have the right clothes, that they will be

discriminated against, that they'll say or do the wrong thing. We wanted to show them that they have just as much right to be in these spaces as anyone else, and that they could do it!" The two sisters beamed at me, proud that they had found a way to make their sister's death meaningful.

The fight for equality and justice rages on in the City of God. While the possibility of death and the certainty of suffering constantly challenge mobilization efforts and the individual well-being of local activists, these are also the very elements that inspire their struggle. Though much work at multiple scales and in many fields remains to be done to address the violences that harm, marginalize, exclude, and kill Latin America's urban poor, I hope this will offer an intervention into how we talk about, study, and remember them. As I see it, my fight is one against that white, generic tombstone under which Sonia is buried. In death, the urban poor are easily forgotten as faceless victims of a cruel war between the state and the criminal gangs it has borne. I hope my dissertation offers outsiders a view of the urban poor in life, in their persistent efforts to transform their conditions of suffering and exclusion into a struggle for justice, change, and belonging. And I hope their stories teach us something about the possibilities for non-violent collective action that emerge in the fissures between democracy and violence.

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