

## Brazil's Olympian Tragedy: Searching for Citizenship in Vila Autodromo

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**Abstract :** Forty years ago, Vila Autodromo was a small fishing settlement in southwest Rio de Janeiro. By 2012, Vila Autodromo had established itself into a working class neighborhood – certainly not a slum, but nonetheless designated as a ‘favela’ as a consequence of its history as an illegal settlement that was thus never provided with public services. Vila Autodromo sits on a large lagoon, adjacent to the Olympic Park being constructed for the 2016 Olympic Games to be held in Rio, and looks out over the expensive high rise condominiums that have sprouted across the water. In 2009, when Rio submitted their bid for the Olympic games, there were approximately 900 families that called Vila Autodromo home, and the original plans for the games clearly show their homes remaining in place. Today, only a handful of these homes remain. This paper will utilize the case study of Vila Autodromo to examine the broader issue of Favelas in 21st century Rio de Janeiro. While race and poverty have become synonymous with Brazil’s inegalitarian social order – and personified by the thousands of favelas scattered in and around large cities like Rio and Sao Paulo – much less attention has been given to the political status of the nation’s invisible majority. In particular, this research will examine the question of citizenship and argue that the most fundamental problem of inequality in Brazil is not simply a product of history, race and social order, but more specifically a problem of ‘personhood’. The political marginalization of Brazil’s poor does not simply reinforce their social marginalization, it institutionalizes it in a way that makes it almost impossible to escape. The story of Vila Autodromo captures this problem in a way that not only illustrates the clear (though ambiguous) role of the state in the perpetuation of Brazil’s underclass, but also the human resilience that it has fostered.

**Keywords :** citizenship, poverty, displacement, favela

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