

*Cities under Water: A Comparative Environmental History of Floods in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires*

*Lise Sedrez*

Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro are two of the most important cities in Latin America. Buenos Aires is the capital of Argentina and Rio de Janeiro was Brazil's capital from 1783 to 1960. However, they share more than the experience of capital cities. From their foundation to the present day, both cities have been plagued by frequent and unforgiving floods.

My project proposes a comparative environmental history of the two cities, with a focus on the experience of urban floods. It studies how governments, residents, and landscapes coped with the overwhelming floods in both cities in the twentieth century. I argue that flooded Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires share common trajectories in the twentieth century and that comparative environmental history is an important tool to understand the challenges and transformations of both cities regarding their waterscape. Moreover, I argue that the comparison also provides new perspectives on how Latin American cities may adapt to a changing climate.

On the one hand, the two cities are quite different. Rio de Janeiro is a tropical port city, with hills and forests, and a large and welcoming bay. Heavy rainstorms in the summer ravage the city and cause frequent landslides in vulnerable poor communities that have occupied and deforested hills. For centuries, Rio has enlarged its territory through land reclamation, and, in the rainy season, the bay seems to wrestle back its space. Buenos Aires is at the mouth of the Rio de la Plata. In the city floods occur less often due to local rain precipitation. They rather depend on copious rains at the head of the Rio de La Plata and its tributaries, hundreds of kilometers far away from the city, when the Sudestada wind blows. Buenos Aires is closely connected to the hinterland not only by land but also by the water regime.

On the other hand, this project proposes a framework that brings the two cities together. Urban historians have often compared Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro regarding their large population, their relevance as the main urban center of their respective countries for a long time, and the urbanization processes both cities went through between 1880 and 1910. The same urban historians have just as often neglected to include urban nature in their narratives. Yet it is all there. As we focus on municipal and federal governments' attempts to address the flood's constant challenges by investing heavily on technocratic solution, or the resourcefulness of their residents to cope with (and even thrive through) disrupting floods, we understand better how urban nature is shaped.