“I Never Thought This Could Be For Me”: Aspirational Capital, Identities, and Political Engagement among First-Generation College Students in São Paulo

Today, young adults from lower-income backgrounds are pursuing educational trajectories that would have been distant dreams for their parents. In many Global South countries, this expansion has followed a neoliberal logic in which private universities purport to provide students skills and increased earning capacity, and employers the necessary human capital to compete in global markets. This article examines these processes in Brazil, where federal policies have contributed to a dramatic growth in private, for-profit higher education in recent years. Building on ethnographic research in São Paulo’s expansive peripheries, our analysis examines three inter-related themes: higher education and life aspirations; intersectional identity construction; and political/community engagements. We argue that while neoliberal ideologies and policies are a key component of Brazilian higher education, many first-generation college students actively – and critically – challenge everyday oppressions and create new life possibilities in the context of enduring inequalities.

Keywords: First-generation, higher education, community cultural wealth, Brazil, gender, race

Introduction

And so it's like this, brother, I never dreamed this would come to be. I never even dreamed of it! When I started college, from my first step, every day for me was the chance to absorb something new – the person next to me, the chair, the desk, the painting, the way the professor talked, the classroom discussion, what I was going to say. I see today I'm still in transformation. Because it's a challenge when you enter a place where people have a different way of thinking, different ideas, different dreams. People who have struggled more, suffered more, or the same as you. You're dealing with many things, and many new demands. It's been a place where I'm adding to my wisdom and my knowledge. And I never dreamed I'd be there.

Marcelo[1] (Afro-Brazilian social work student in his late 30s, Universidade Anhanguera – Campo Limpo Campus, São Paulo)

In the recent years, higher education access has increased throughout the world (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Mohamedbhai, 2014; Robertson & Komljenovic, 2016; Shah, Bennett, & Southgate, 2018). In these transformations, students from working class and working poor backgrounds like Marcelo are pursuing educational trajectories that would have been distant dreams for their parents. In most Global South countries, this growth has followed a neoliberal logic in which private universities purport to provide students skills and increased salary potential, and employers the necessary human capital to compete in global markets (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As Robertson and Komljenovic (2016) argue, in this way, higher education is transformed from a public good into a market product that is increasingly delivered by Global North higher education conglomerates who see the Global South as a prime market in which to extend their operations.

Among Global South countries, Brazil has experienced an especially pronounced expansion in higher education (Amaral, 2016; Gomes, Robertson, & Dale,

[1] All names of interviewees quoted in this article are anonymized to protect confidentiality.

2012). While Brazilian policy makers have advocated for increased higher education opportunities as an economic development strategy since the 1960s (Amaral, 2016; Ramalho Pereira & Arseli Kern, 2017), it was only with the election of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1994 and his aggressive implementation of a neoliberal economic agenda, including tax breaks for-profit private universities and the creation of a federal student loan program, that higher education enrolment significantly expanded. During the two Cardoso administrations (1995-2002), enrolment grew 55% at public universities and 130% at private institutions (Chaves & Amaral, 2015). With the 2002 election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the country's first Worker Party president, support for the private university sector continued through an enlarged Student Loan Program (Programa de Financiamento Estudantil/Fies) and the creation of the University for All Program (Programa Universidade para Todos/Prouni), which provides exam-based scholarships for private universities (Carvalho, 2014). Concurrently, the Lula administration expanded the market-oriented, federal technical university system (Carvalho, 2014; Ramalho Pereira & Arseli Kern, 2017), while the public university sector began initiating racial/class-based quota admissions to promote lower-income students' access to these prestigious institutions (Segenreich & Castanheira, 2009). Largely as a result of these policies, the number of Brazilian students enrolled in 296 public higher education institutions increased from 492,232 in 1980 to 1,999,078 in 2016 (a 304% rise), and in the same period, the number of students enrolled in private institutions skyrocketed from 885,054 to 6,058,623 (a 623% rise) (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas, 2017).

In this article we explore some of the everyday experiences and life trajectories of first-generation university students in São Paulo's expansive Zona Sul (southern zone) peripheries. Our analysis is guided by a hybrid "anthropology of becoming" (Biehl &

Locke, 2017) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005)[2] framework that considers students' affective dispositions, symbolic and material worlds, and agency in the face of pronounced inequalities and structural barriers. In these processes of becoming, individuals, communities and institutions shift local discourses and articulations, influencing both their perceptions of the world and the possibility of reconfiguring the power relations and systems in which they are entangled. Our analysis centres on three inter-related themes: higher education, life trajectories, and aspiration capital; intersectional identity construction; and student activism, resistance capital and the assertion of local knowledge. We argue that while neoliberal policies and market-based discourses are important features of contemporary Brazilian higher education, the experiences of first-generation college students in São Paulo demonstrate that they do not simply (re)produce neoliberal ideologies, but also actively – and critically – challenge everyday oppressions and create new lifeways in the context of enduring inequalities. Our discussion seeks to add ethnographic richness to a growing quantitative and policy literature on expanded higher education access in diverse global contexts (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Odhiambo, 2016; Schendel & McCowan, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Yang & McCall, 2014).

Methodology

This article is based on data from the São Paulo site of a three-year (2016-2018) collaborative study on class mobility, political subjectivity, and lifeways among the

[2] According to Yosso's highly utilized framework (2005:76-81), community cultural wealth consists of at least six forms of capital – aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistance and navigational, compared to Bourdieu's influential tripartite focused on cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

previously poor in urban Brazil (Klein, Junge, & Mitchell, 2018).[3] The three-city study centres on districts where 2010 mean per-capita household income fell within the range generally associated with the Brazilian census categories "upper poor/working class" and the "lower middle class" – locations in which one would expect to find high numbers of previously poor adult Brazilians and first-generation university students. The Portland State University Institutional Review Board approved all São Paulo research procedures and instruments (Protocol # 153436), and the names of interviewees quoted in this article are anonymized to protect confidentiality.

In the first project year, a 15-person, São Paulo based team used a cluster sampling methodology (10 contiguous census tracts per district, 100 surveys per district, 400 total sample) to implement a structured quantitative household survey in four Zona Sul districts (Grajaú, Jardim Nakamura/Jardim Ângela, Jardim São Luis/Capão Redondo and Parque Regina/Campo Limpo) that met the overall study inclusion criteria.[4] Over the next two years, the co-authors of this article conducted ethnographic studies in these areas that combined formal and informal interviewing techniques, social

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[3] "Social Mobility, Poverty Reduction, and Democracy in an Emerging Middle Class," National Science Foundation, Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Cultural Anthropology Program; Award Number 1534621 for the São Paulo component under Principal Investigator Klein.

[4] The survey addressed respondents' household characteristics; work history, sources of income, and consumption patterns; household educational trajectories; leisure activities and travel; class subjectivities and experiences of socioeconomic mobility; opinions on contemporary political issues and the quality of life in their neighbourhoods; and political/community engagement (Klein, Junge, & Mitchell, 2018)

mapping, and participant observation at locations where class positions and subjectivities are experienced, re-enforced, and contested, including higher education institutions.[5] The core of our ethnographic data, and the focus of this article, are in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 41 individuals from project communities. After first obtaining informed consent, the co-authors and a research assistant conducted interviews in Portuguese at a private location of the respondent's choosing. We selected interviewees using a snowball sampling methodology that began with household survey respondents and reached out into often overlapping social networks, with the goal of capturing age, racial, income and educational diversity within these districts. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to two hours in length and were divided into five sections: household composition, everyday routine and life accomplishments; neighbourhood characteristics, class subjectivities and socioeconomic mobility; political opinions and political/community engagement; and aspirations for the future. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded in Dedoose using a grounded theory approach.

Project Setting

São Paulo's Zona Sul Peripheries

With a population of 11.9 million, and over 20.9 million in the 39 municipalities of its metropolitan area, São Paulo is one of the world's largest urban centres. This article centres on four districts in the sprawling Zona Sul peripheries that have among the highest levels of social vulnerability in the city (CEM, n.d.), including one-third of

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[5] During 2016 to 2018, co-author Klein made six, five to eight week-long trips to São Paulo, for a total of nine months of field work. Co-author Mateuzi lives in São Paulo and conducted interviews and ethnographic fieldwork on a regular basis throughout the three project years.

households living below the poverty line (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010). Like other São Paulo periphery regions, the Zona Sul also has higher concentrations of Afro-Brazilians than more central districts, with approximately 50% of residents self-declaring as Black (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010). Another defining element of life in the Zona Sul is high levels of violence. In the 1990s, the districts of Capão Redondo, Jardim Ângela, and Jardim São Luis received the moniker "the triangle of death," and as community residents still point out today, the United Nations once designated the region the most violent in the world. After a decrease in homicides in the 2000 and early 2010s, there has been a significant increase in murder rates in the last five years, which activists describe as the genocide of poor Blacks in the periphery, and one of our four project districts, Campo Limpo, has the highest rates of the murder of youth in the city at 10.44 per 10,000 residents (Rede Nossa São Paulo, 2016).

Despite these realities, it would be a mistake to view the Zona Sul as a homogenous region characterized only by poverty and violence. As the work of sociologist Eduardo Marques (2014) demonstrates, economic and political processes have generated diverse and unequal patterns of development in the Zona Sul, with neighbourhoods ranging from luxury condominium complexes (e.g. Vila Andrade, Morumbi) to favelas (e.g. Paraisópolis) to lower-middle class and working class communities. In response, periphery residents have mobilized a wide range of social and cultural movements that challenge these socio-spatial inequalities, including the "right to the city" (Holston, 2009; Kowarick, 2000), rap (Bertelli & Feltran, 2017; Pardue, 2008), and *sarau* (spoken-word) (Dandrea, 2013; Vaz, 2008) movements. All, in different ways, assert positive periphery-based, intersectional identities (Bertelli & Feltran, 2017; Carmo, 2017; Dandrea, 2013) and form part of the context in which first-

generation college students work to transform themselves and the social worlds in which they live.

Higher Education in São Paulo and the Zona Sul

The city of São Paulo has 138 higher education institutions, of which only five are public universities. In 2016, these schools enrolled a total of 662,597 students, with 90% (599,060 students) in the private institutions (SEADE, n.d.). As in Brazil more generally, the no-cost, public institutions primarily serve white, middle and upper-class students, and their extremely competitive admissions criteria make them out of reach for most lower-income students, notwithstanding the recent introduction of race- and class-based admission quotas. In contrast, the vast majority of lower-income students attend private, for-profit institutions that most analysts consider to be of inferior quality than the public system (Felicetti & Morosini, 2009; Machado, Sozo, & Morosini, 2016; Norões & McCowan, 2016; Sguissardi, 2008). Another important difference between the public and private, for-profit institutions is their engagement in knowledge production, with the public institutions having large and diverse research infrastructures, while most for-profit institutions focus on preparing students for the labour market and conduct few research activities.

Although most of São Paulo's higher education institutions are located in central regions, in the past three decades, many private, for-profit universities have opened in the city's peripheries, a growth supported by the revenue opportunities afforded through the Prouni scholarship and Fies student loan programs discussed above. This expanded access has facilitated the ability of periphery residents to attend college, as having universities near their homes and/or jobs enables them to avoid time-consuming commutes in São Paulo's notoriously onerous traffic. Within our four project districts, there are two universities, the Centro Universitário Adventista de São

Paulo (UNASP) and the Universidade Anhanguera – Unidade Campo Limpo. Both are private, and the latter exemplifies the current model of for-profit higher education in Brazil. With more than one million students in several hundred campuses throughout the country and a market value of US$8 billion, the Universidade Anhanguera is the second largest Brazilian higher education network, and in 2014 was purchased by Kroton, the largest for-profit higher education provider in Brazil (Robertson & Komljenovic, 2016). Paralleling the neoliberal turn in Brazilian higher education and the Global South (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Robertson & Komljenovic, 2016; Sguissardi, 2008), most of the Campo Limpo Campus' undergraduate and graduate programs explicitly present themselves as market-directed products, offering students the opportunity to obtain well-paying and meaningful professional jobs, and employers a skilled labour force to compete in the global economy (Grupo Kroton, n.d.). This combination of practically oriented curricula and physical accessibility has resulted in the Campo Limpo Campus enrolling approximately 10,000 full-and part-time students each year, most of whom reside in the Zona Sul and our project districts.

Findings

The Sample

Twenty-four women, 15 men and 2 transgender individuals participated in the in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 69 (mean = 42) and had an average monthly household income of $R 4,500, or 5 minimum salaries.[6] In terms of

[6] Socioeconomic class in Brazil is most commonly described using the A (the highest) to E (the lowest) categorization system of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE/Brazilian Geography and Statistics Institute). The 5 minimum salary

race/colour, 27 respondents self-defined as black or multiracial (10 and 17 respectively), 13 as white, and one as indigenous.[7] About one-third of respondents (15) reported some level of college education, and all were first-generation college students. Of these, only four have studied outside of the Zona Sul, and just two in public universities. The rest attended or are attending private, for-profit higher education institutions in the Zona Sul, some in the wealthier Santo Amaro district where many Zona Sul residents work (e.g., at the Centro Universitário Ítalo Brasileiro, Unip, and Uninove), and others at the Universidade Anhanguera and Unasp in Campo Limpo. Of the 13 private university students, five received scholarships through the Prouni scholarship program, and one a student loan through Fies. Nearly all students have selected pragmatic majors that offer a strong likelihood of employment, including social work, law, information technology, and psychology, which often lead to jobs in local governmental and non-governmental social service agencies in the Zona Sul (Carmo, 2017).

Making the Dream Come True: Aspiration Capital and Higher Education Trajectories

The Long and Winding Road to a College Degree

Although our in-depth interview schedule did not specifically address higher education other than a close-ended question on highest educational level achieved, nearly all interview respondents highlighted the importance of higher education in achieving

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mean household income of the interview sample falls solidly within the Class C/working class (4-9 minimum salaries) category.

[7] The Brazilian census has five, colour-based racial categories: *preta* (black), *parda* (brown/mixed race), *amerela* (yellow/Asian), *branca* (white), and *indígena* (indigenous).

personal fulfilment for themselves and/or their families. For adults in their 30s and 40s like Marcelo, whose words open this article, the path to a college degree required dreaming beyond the typical life trajectories of lower-income periphery residents in Brazil in the 1990s and the early 2000s, or, to use the terminology of the community cultural wealth framework, expanding their aspirational and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005: 77-79). Renato, who graduated in 2012 from the Universidade Anhanguera Campo Limpo Campus, explains:

> After I graduated from high school, I only worked. I had no intention of going to college. It was very expensive, and very far from our [lower-income periphery residents'] reality. Very distant, very distant. I really had no sense that this could happen. Renato (Afro-Brazilian man in his late 30s)

Similarly, Patricia, who graduated from Unasp and is currently enrolled in a master's program, initially did not think college was in her future.

> I always wanted to go to college, but it seemed so far off, and I couldn't imagine myself at college. [Interviewer: Why?] Because I thought it wasn't for me, that it wouldn't work out. You know, the thing that you want but you don't know how to get it. I would say "how I am going to do that?" And I didn't know. Patricia (Afro-Brazilian woman in her early 40s)

At the same time, for female respondents with children like Patricia and Daniela, parenting responsibilities added yet another obstacle that affected their higher education trajectories.

> So, for ten years of my life [mid-20s to mid-30s] I worked as a cleaning person – I had to raise my three children, didn't I? … But in 1992, after these ten years, I returned to school to finish high school, and I graduated in 1993. And then I went back to working in my 30s as a cleaning person again. … Then I got a job

> at [a human rights focused NGO in the Zona Sul]. I worked there for ten years, doing meetings all the time. Then I woke up and decided to become a social worker – that is what I really liked and wanted to do. So I started studying when I was 40, and I graduated when I was 48. Daniela (white woman in her 50s)

The Role of Economic and Educational Policy in Supporting Higher Education among First-Generation College Students.

The possibility of lower-income adults like Marcelo, Patricia and Daniela expanding and then translating their aspirational capital into college degrees has been greatly enhanced by the marked socioeconomic changes that occurred during the years of Worker's Party governance in Brazil (2003-2016). These developments included upward economic mobility for millions of poor and working class Brazilians through rising wages and expanded credit (Souza, 2010), redistributive social programs such as the much-lauded Family Grant Program (World Bank, 2013), and of particular importance for lower-income periphery residents, the Prouni scholarship and Fies student loan programs.[8] All of the three interviewees quoted above credit these federal educational programs as enabling their college education and facilitating higher education among individuals of their socioeconomic background.

> When I finished high school and was ready to go to college, there was no way I could do this. I was only able to go to college because of Prouni. These people who are going to college now, with everything all in place, don't have any idea of what it was like. Daniela (white woman in her 50s)

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[8] From its inceptions in 2004 until the second semester of 2014, 1.4 million Brazilians received Prouni scholarships to attend private universities, with 70% of awardees receiving full scholarships (Nascimento, Sozo, & Morosini, 2015).

Yet, all simultaneously maintain a critical perspective that situates private universities and neoliberal policies such as PROUNI and Fies within the broader context of Brazilian social policy and offer an assessment that in part echoes the critiques of scholars who have questioned whether these programs might be more about making money than democratizing higher education access (Nascimento, Sozo, & Morosini, 2015; Ramalho Pereira & Arseli Kern, 2017; Sguissardi, 2008). As Renato clarifies,

> [Prouni and Fies] are sensational! These social programs may not be the best way of doing things, and maybe it could have been better to have made these investments in public universities, instead of these half dozen education large business that have sprung up getting money from the government. But still, [these programs] changed the reality of the people. They changed them, brother, they changed them! There are so many universities– today I can go to three right here by my house! Renato (Afro-Brazilian man in his late 30s))

A New Norm, A New Struggle – Young Adults Navigate Higher Education.

For all of the adults over 30 years old in our sample, achieving a college degree required a pronounced reordering of what they considered "the possible" and building sufficient aspiration and navigational capital to embark on a long and difficult education journey. In sharp contrast, having come of age in an era of accessible local universities communities and expanded governmental resources to cover education costs, the ten young adults in our interview sample consider higher education an expected part of their life trajectories (on similar processes among young adults in sub-Saharan Africa, see

Msigwa, 2016; Oketch, 2016).[9] Yet, if obtaining a college degree is increasingly normalized for young adults in Zona Sul and other São Paulo periphery communities, achieving their educational ambitions nonetheless remains a *luta* (struggle) that requires hard work and the negotiation of shifting class landscapes. Some, like Paulo, who graduated with a degree in information technology, use a meritocratic discourse to emphasize the individual struggle behind his educational and career success.

> Since I was little, I always liked technology, so I always had a dream of getting a degree in this area and doing what I liked. … And there are still many things to study, an MBA to finish, certifications in your resume that are important too. So, in my perception, I worked hard for this salary. Many people judge me, saying, ah yuppie, daddies boy. But I studied my ass off. Paulo (white man in his mid 20s)

While Paulo's educational and professional accomplishments trigger tensions between himself and his neighbours, Váleria, one of several siblings from a community activist family, instead emphasizes her *luta* to succeed as a psychology major within an unequal playing field.

> I am in college, and I am always chasing things. I have worked my entire life. And it is not easy, it definitely is not easy! I think that we have to extend ourselves much more to achieve these things that those who are on top! Váleria (Afro-Brazilian woman in her early 30s)

[9] Seven of the ten interviewees under 30 years old in our sample currently attend college or are in the midst of the application process, and the other three hope to enrol in college in the near future.

Such experiences highlight how achieving a higher education degree may place first-generation college graduates in an uncertain – if not contradictory – class position on the margins of both the "traditional" middle class and the working poor/working class communities in which most remain after completing their degrees (Klein et al., 2018; Yaccoub, 2011).

Mobilizing Familiar and Navigational Capital.

In *Give a Man a Fis*h; *Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*, anthropologist James Ferguson argues that redistribution is an essential – and understudied – mechanism for economic survival and advancement in a global economic order increasingly characterized by informal labour markets and declining social welfare benefits (Ferguson, 2015). Similarly, for first-generation students in our sample, achieving a college degree typically requires mobilizing a combination of resources from their households and extended kinship networks, governmental scholarship and student loan programs, social welfare grants, and wealthier patrons (on similar processes among first-generation college students in Global North contexts see Mobley & Brawner, 2018; O'Shea, 2016a). For example, Marcelo and Patricia are a married couple with two children. Given parenting responsibilities and limited financial resources, they decided that Patricia would go to college first, and once she graduated, Marcelo would begin his studies. For Claúdia, a 24-year old transgender woman who lives alone, eating nearly all her meals at her married sister's home enables her to pay for private law school through her minimum wage job at MacDonald's. Extended family networks also support younger children who show educational promise, such as Gisele's son, an engineering student who was able to attend private grammar and high school (the preferred if not always obtainable education trajectory of Brazilians across all income levels) through the support of Gisele's brother, a taxi driver. For others,

churches play an important role in supporting higher education among their congregations, as in the case of Lúcia, whose private university tuition is covered half by a Prouni scholarship, and half by the Mormon Church. Another common source of support for lower-income individuals are the middle-class/elite employers of domestic and other service sector workers, who often give books, college prep course materials, emotional support, and cultural capital to their employees and their families.

Through such processes, lower-income families collectively develop their aspiration, navigational and social capital as family members pursue and achieve their higher education dreams (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Yosso, 2005). These experiences suggest that lower-income first-generation colleges students and their families are not so much "culturally poor" or lacking social capital in comparison to their wealthier classmates, but rather possess community cultural wealth that is not recognized and/or valorised in middle class/elite settings such as traditional higher education institutions (Mobley & Brawner, 2018; O'Shea, 2016b; Webb et al, 2017; Yosso, 2005). The utility of using narrow conceptualizations of cultural and social capital as explanatory factors in predicting higher educational success or failure is further called into question by Bertolin and Fioreze's (2016) finding that lower-income, Prouni scholarship recipients in at least one Brazil state actually outperformed their wealthier classmates. The authors hypothesize that this outcome may be linked to families' strong desires to achieve social ascension through higher education (on the centrality of family sacrifice and individual effort among the socially ascendant working class in Brazil, see Souza, 2010).

Higher Education and the Construction of Intersectional Subjectivities

If achieving a college degree is an aspiration shared by nearly all respondents in our interview sample, individuals' actual higher education trajectories are strongly shaped by their experiences of gender and race. For example, eight of the nine college

educated women in our sample (five Afro-Brazilian, four white) study or have studied pedagogy, psychology or social work, all historically female-dominated professions in Brazil (Artes & Ricoldi, 2016; Beltrão & Teixeira, 2004). Our female respondents present these career choices as logical extensions of their everyday lives as women in the peripheries, which include the responsibilities of caring for children, the household, and the community.

> My mother has all the qualities of a social worker – she is really good at this. I think that I am good at these things as well. … These stories that I hear [in the community] impact me. So I decided that psychology wasn't for me, but that social work fit. Bete (Afro-Brazilian women in her mid 30s)

In contrast, despite coming from similar lower-income backgrounds, the five college educated men in our sample display contrasting career trajectories depending on their race/colour, with the two white men studying information technology, and the three Afro-Brazilians men studying pedagogy, social work and history respectively. Moreover, while the two white men describe their education as a path to career success and have no history of community or political engagement, the Afro-Brazilian men explicitly situate their college education within activist trajectories.

> In terms of social movements, I am part of a college exam preparation course for lower-income students in the Zona Sul that has been around for 17 years. I studied there and was able to get into college. Today, I teach there, and I was also the office manager, caring for the space. I also am part of a theatre group, and this is extremely important for me. It's something that I identify with a lot, something that provides me access to other types of societal languages. Jaime (Afro-Brazilian man in in his early 20s studying history at a public university)

Marcelo similarly had a long history of community engagement before starting college, and he traces his professional and political trajectories to his mother's history of activism in the Zona Sul's housing movement.

> My mother was a warrior women, and my idea of continuing school came from her. She always had the dream of becoming a nursing aide, and she went to school [in her 40s], graduated, and works in this area … . Her example was a wake-up call for me to continue my education – if my mother, at her age, could go after this, why can't I? Marcelo (Afro-Brazilian man in his late 30s)

The centrality of higher education in supporting new intersectional, periphery-centric, resistant identities is equally marked for the five Afro-Brazilian women in our sample. For Vânia, a filmmaker who recently postponed her college studies due to financial issues, higher education functions as both a critical source of empowerment and a location of gender, race and class oppression.

> So these professors in the academy, talking there, are in their own world. They don't know what's going on. I got shaken up, because I spent Sunday living – and sharing – the life history of a mother, and on Monday I'd have to go to my economics class. I thought what I was doing didn't make sense, and I ended up being torn about by her story. But I know, that as a woman form the periphery, I have to get a degree. Vânia (Afro-Brazilian woman in her late 30s)

These processes of self-transformation and political engagement often continue after graduation, with additional coursework and graduate degrees re-enforcing Black women's identities and new found voices.

> If you stay in one place, you stay in one place. You are not able to think outside of the box. So I began to have a way out. First I took a course at the Universidade de Sâo Paulo [the most prestigious university in Brazil] about

> Black women in Sâo Paulo. I was able to understand who I am and what my path is. I always knew that I was Black, but so what? What was my personal story? I didn't know this. So from the moment I began to know my own story, my identity, from where I came, I became empowered. You gain knowledge, and you are able to talk about things. Before, I didn't have space, but now I have permission – I want to speak! Patricia (Afro-Brazilian woman in her early 40s)

Student Activism, Resistance Capital and the Affirmation of Local Knowledge

As our discussion demonstrates, higher education can play a central role in developing resistant, intersectional subjectivities among first-generation college students. In these transformations, private, for-profit universities emerge as a dynamic location of transformation and contestation. An example highlighting these processes is the annual "Psychology Week" at the Universidade Anhanguera – Campo Limpo Campus, a student-organized event featuring public discussions on the practice of psychology in the real world. For the past two years, Psychology Week has addressed issues central to the Zona Sul political activism (e.g., racism, gender and sexuality, social inequality, and police violence) and generated heated debate about which types of knowledge are being (re)produced at the university.

These tensions were vividly displayed at the 2017 Psychology Week, which combined politically-oriented panels featuring local activists with no formal connection to the university (e.g., "Psychology and Struggles: Activism against Mass Incarceration, Racism and Violence in the Peripheries" and "Psychology and Women's Rights Single Parents, Women's Empowerment, and Sexual and Reproductive Rights") and clinical-business oriented sessions (e.g., "Psychology in the Digital Age: Professional Marketing and Planning a Career"). According to students involved in organizing the event, there were many conflicts at the planning meetings between students with activist and

clinical-business perspectives respectively. These tensions exacerbated during Psychology Week when the politically-oriented panels directly challenged the ways in which the university trains psychologists. For Marcelo, who helped organize a similarly structured "Social Work Week" at the Campo Limpo Campus, working to transform both himself and the university through such engagements is a self-conscious act of resistance and community affirmation.

> So, it is clear they [the university] are making money off of us. But I am also benefiting and – I am absorbing all I can. This is a space I never I dreamed I would be in, and I am doing all I can to make a difference here. We try to occupy this space in the best way we can – within the classroom, through our life experience, through teaching methodologies that don't disregard life experience, which is also a college education of sorts. My life outside of the university was and is a college education. So, we try to occupy this space, doing what we can to bring together different forms of knowledge within the curriculum here. Marcelo (Afro-Brazilian man in his late 30s)

If the Campo Limpo Campus offers a fertile space for student activism and the expression of local knowledge, this is not to say that the university is supportive of such reappropriation of their market-oriented higher education experience. For example, in 2018, a group of social work students organized a *sarau* (a spoken word event) to raise awareness about the high rates of femicide in the Zona Sul.

> We were planning to draw body outlines in chalk on the floor to represent women who had been killed. The administration found out and told us we could only do this in certain places, but these weren't where we wanted to do the installation. But we did what we wanted anyway, using chalk to draw the body outlines and adding the date, the victim's name and the place where she was

> killed. The next day, the administration came with the security people, everybody [to remove the installation] – it felt like we were being arrested by the police. … And we had to remove the drawings from the floor. They could not stay. Marcelo (Afro-Brazilian man in his late 30s)

Yet, even though university administrations – and indeed, many of their classmates – were extremely uncomfortable with the stark tone of *sarau* against femicide and the accompanying installation, student activists believe that the university and the social work program may nonetheless financially and symbolically benefit from the exposure generated through such student-led protests.

> Our group organized this movement, and we began to knock on the door and speak louder. Our *saraus* and other activities here at the university have brought us a lot of attention, and social networks have helped a lot as well. Everyone shared what happened and started asking "what's going on at Anhanguera." And people at other campus held protests at other universities. It was that kind of thing – we were bothering them [the administration], but the university's name was also getting good press. Carmela (Afro-Brazilian woman in her mid 20s)

As this example highlights, university-based activism can simultaneously support the growth of individual resistance capital and nurture the growth of activist networks. At the same time, events such as Psychology and Social Work week affirm for-profit universities as a critical terrain in which diverse constituencies articulate competing visions of the role of higher education in supporting individual and community transformation. Such contestation suggests that even if most for-profit higher education institutions in Brazil and beyond operate according to a logic that may privilege economic gain over other considerations (Robertson & Komljenovic, 2016), they nonetheless represent an important space in which at least some students, professors,

and non-student activists assert local knowledge and challenge enduring social inequalities.

Conclusion

In recent years, unprecedented numbers of lower-income students in Brazil have obtained college degrees through private, for-profit institutions. As Roberston & Komlgenovic (2016) argue, this form of higher education expansion is intricately interconnected to the creation of new aspirations among the lower-income students on whom the new markets depend. Our ethnographic data suggest that rather than simply being the victims of clever marketing or market forces, many first-generation, lower-income college students are actively constructing their educational and life trajectories within neoliberal higher education modalities. In these processes, individuals mobilize their available resource networks (e.g., family, governmental, churches, employers) and community cultural wealth to support their education in the face of significant financial, time, and emotional challenges. At the same time, for a majority of college students in our study, the dream of a college degree is not only about investing in their future in order to support social ascension, although this no doubt plays a role, but also a self-conscious resistance to socioeconomic inequalities that builds on their personal experiences and local political engagements as lower-income, periphery residents.

We recognize that our relatively politically engaged sample may not be representative of first-generation college students in Brazil or the Global South more generally. The centrality of political activism in our study is likely a result of the Zona Sul's particular history of strong community organizing around issues related to racism, sexism, and police violence. Nonetheless, our findings echo the experiences of first-generation students in Global North settings, who, as many recent studies have demonstrated, develop resistance capital and affirm local knowledge in contradiction-

laden higher education settings (Mobley & Brawner, 2018; O'Shea 2016a, 2016b; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Although the literature on the development of resistance capital in Global South higher education settings is scant, we believe that such processes may be occurring in other locations and merit ethnographic investigation.

We would also like to problematize the idea that for-profit higher education institutions in Brazil are strictly "private." For example, although by legal definition a "for profit" [*com fins lucrativos*] institution, the Universidade Anhanguera and other for-profit Brazilian universities benefit greatly from tax breaks and the governmental scholarship and loan programs that make a college education possible for many lower-income students. As a result, the line between public and private is very blurred, a complexity further complicated by the fact that the elite public higher education institutions in Brazil continue to primarily serve middle-class and elite young adults, while the "private" sector reaches far more lower-income and older students.

Finally, mirroring a growing number of analyses of higher education in Global North settings (see, for example, Mobley & Brawner, 2018; O'Shea, 2016b; Webb et al, 2017; Yosso, 2005), we consider Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural and social capital inadequate to explain the nuanced experiences of first-generation college students in our study. The majority of lower-income college students in São Paulo study at recently created, private, for-profit universities whose student body, pedagogy and institutional culture are quite different from the prestigious public university system and well-established non-profit private universities. These traditional higher education institutions do, in a Bourdieuian fashion (re)produce the culture capital of middle-class and elite Brazilians, and the small numbers of lower-income and/or Black students at such institutions often recount experiences of invisibility, devalorisation and stigmatization (de Carvalho, 2004; Geledés, 2018; Martins, 2016). On the other hand, at

private, for-profit universities, the majority of students are lower-income, especially in campuses located in lower-income periphery regions, such as the Anhanguera University Campo Limpo Campus. Here, the students that we talk to consider themselves to be among equals, or to use the words of our interviewees, “people like us.” This sense of commensurability facilitates a smoother higher education experience than that of their lower-income counterparts at more elite institutions, even if many private university students nonetheless recognize that the quality of their education may be inferior to that of traditional universities. Our data further suggest that most, though by no means all, of the first-generation college students in our sample believe that their life experiences are valued in university settings. Through higher education, students apply and develop an impressive array of community cultural wealth, re-enforce periphery-centric intersectional subjectivities, provoke institutional tensions, and challenge enduring inequalities as well as the limitations of neoliberal higher education modalities. If and how these experiences translate into class mobility and professional success was beyond the scope of our initial study and is the focus on our current work with an expanded sample of Universidade Anhanguera Campo Limpo Campus recent graduates.

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