

**“THE PERIPHERY IS THE PERIPHERY EVERYWHERE”:
CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN URBAN PERIPHERIES**

Life beyond work: leisure, political participation, and historical transformations in a peripheral neighborhood of São Paulo

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Abstract:

The article examines various forms of political mobilization, social participation, and community engagement present in a peripheral neighborhood of São Paulo’s East Zone. By comparing half a century of transformations, it seeks to understand the demands of local youth for spaces of sociability and leisure, and how artistic and cultural movements respond to them, producing new forms of territorial belonging and political participation. By analyzing how different forms of engagement coexist within a territory, the article examines how recent changes in urban dynamics have influenced local self-help networks, processes of political identification, and ways of appropriating and theorizing the city.

Keywords: Urban Anthropology; Peripheries; Social Movements; Social Participation; Youth.

A vida além do trabalho: lazer, participação política e transformações históricas de uma periferia paulistana

Resumo:

O artigo examina as diferentes formas de mobilização política, participação social e engajamento comunitário presentes em um bairro na periferia da zona leste de São Paulo. Ao comparar as transformações ocorridas ao longo de meio século, procura-se entender quais são as demandas da juventude local em torno de espaços de sociabilidade e lazer, e como movimentos artísticos e culturais respondem a elas, produzindo novas formas de pertencimento territorial e participação política. Ao analisar como diferentes formas de engajamento convivem dentro de um mesmo território, o artigo busca compreender como mudanças recentes nas dinâmicas urbanas influenciaram redes de autoajuda locais, processos de identificação política e o modo de se apropriar da cidade e teorizar sobre ela.

Palavras-chave: antropologia urbana; periferias; movimentos sociais; participação social; juventude.

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On our first visit to the peripheral neighborhood in the eastern zone of São Paulo, we spoke with Andreia,¹ the coordinator of a neighborhood center for citizenship, culture, and entrepreneurship. Having worked there for almost twenty years, Andreia knew the region like no one else and, as a resident, had witnessed the countless transformations on the outskirts of the city. We entered the field as part of a group of researchers working at the intersection of social sciences and the civil society sector. At the time, the local NGO was looking for new ways and methodologies to hear the voices of the territory to have them contribute to the construction of a participatory and integrated action plan. Thus, throughout the entire process, we had the support of professionals working at the forefront of different social actions taking place there. This interlocution was essential for defining the direction of the research and selecting the topics and issues to be investigated. During the fieldwork period (2023–2025), in conversations with the organization’s technical team, school principals, directors of municipal health care clinics, as well as residents and community leaders, we defined interviewee profiles and selected participants for the study.

The NGO, which has supported numerous initiatives in the region since 2005, had achieved considerable success in bringing together leaders to develop a participatory Neighborhood Plan in a process open to all residents of the region.

“At first it was difficult,” Andrea reported at our initial encounter.

The Neighborhood Plan is a territorial management tool created under the Strategic Master Plan of São Paulo (Law 13.050/14). Regulated during the administration of Mayor Fernando Haddad, the law promotes resident participation in the development of actions and proposals for improving their neighborhood, involving both interventions conceived by the community, and actions planned or being implemented by the government. In structuring the plan, the NGO produced various diagnoses of the neighborhood, organized regular

1 The names mentioned are all fictitious.

meetings among residents, promoted participatory workshops, and created collegiate bodies and spaces for discussion to raise and discuss proposals with the community. With ups and downs, the entire process took about two years, at the end of which a Plan was approved by the participants and then endorsed by government authorities.

On that afternoon in August 2023, while talking to Andreia in the NGO's kitchen, the works proposed by the community were about to begin. Tractors and trucks circulated through the neighborhood, and there was much anticipation about the population's reaction to the first planned actions. Although it included a variety of interventions covering different issues and themes, the NGO coordinators feared that the plan's objectives, outlined after exhausting meetings and workshops, would not have the unconditional support of the population, especially among younger people.

"When we began to develop the Plan, the average age of the residents who attended the meetings was very high. We had difficulty raising awareness among younger people," Andreia said.

During the listening process for the production of the plan, the NGO developed technical diagnoses of the territory, produced qualitative data using participatory tools, spoke with community health workers and employees at the public health clinic, and interviewed local leaders and representatives of institutions operating in the territory. The open meetings were publicized with posters in places with heavy resident traffic, door-to-door flyers, digital messages, sound trucks, and by word of mouth. However, none of these efforts were able to mobilize younger people in the territory.

"After a lot of effort, we managed to lower the average age from 60 to 40. But we still need to talk to the younger people," Andreia concluded pensively.

A similar diagnosis was frequent in conversations with leaders, residents, and employees of public and private institutions: young people had lost their sense of territorial belonging.

"Most of them go from home to school. Others work downtown or take technical courses. They only leave home to go to the train station and are not involved with local issues," reflected Andreia.

The neighborhood has a long history of community participation and engagement. From the creation of the Sociedade de Amigos do Bairro (Neighborhood Friends Society) in the 1970s to the arrival of NGOs and social workers in the 2000s, local residents — together with authorities, business people, city council representatives, political parties, labor unions, churches, and social movements — have constantly pressured public authorities for improvements. This historic mobilization not only took advantage of local networks of aid and solidarity, but also produced new forms of sociability, establishing a strong connection with the territory among two or three generations of older residents. The sense of territorial belonging was expressed and enacted weekly at games of the local football team or in songs about the neighborhood and its residents. In these contexts, during samba circles that swayed the festivities, after football matches, or in narratives about mobilization and struggle for urban

infrastructure, the notion of a peripheral neighborhood, inhabited by workers and humble people, was constantly invoked and performed. At these events, wrapped in a narrative of overcoming adversity, struggle, and equality among its residents, the neighborhood emerges not only as the main locus for the construction of a peripheral political subjectivity, but also as the object of the transformative action of its residents.

It would be difficult to affirm that the adult population was fully represented at the meetings and gatherings about the Neighborhood Plan. In fact, the vast majority of participants, most of whom were women, had familiarity with participatory processes due to their experiences in mobilization and engagement in struggles for improvements. Thus, although the militant narrative in the neighborhood and the formal spaces of political representation did not portray the adult population as a whole, the most noticeable absence during the meetings and actions undertaken by the project was that of residents younger than 30. Aware of the problem, the NGO's technical team created different strategies to reach this age group, promoting local entrepreneurship and professional training courses, offering study grants, supporting hiring exchanges for large franchises in the service and food sectors, and even promoting monthly cultural festivals. However, the diagnosis remained the same: young people did not seem to engage with the territory in the same way as their elders.

"Young people no longer want to stay in the neighborhood," was a phrase repeated by almost all NGO employees. "Most want to move away from here. They want to live in more central locations such as Penha, Tatuapé, or Brás," concluded Camilo, another coordinator of the local team.

For part of the team, the problem was the poor political education offered by the neighborhood's precarious state school. For supporters of this view, more investment in training courses was needed. For others, the political engagement of young people was hampered by family pressure for them to look for jobs as soon as they graduated, and the long hours spent at work, in technical courses, or even commuting. To mitigate this problem, more scholarships and financial aid would be needed for those who wanted to get involved in the proposed activities and actions.

However, although the school in the region was extremely precarious, with a lack of essential infrastructure and an absence of teachers and staff, and even though young people faced long hours on public transport to access an increasingly hostile and deregulated job market, these conclusions contrasted with the extreme vivacity of local youth sociability. Even on weekdays, the neighborhood streets were always full of children playing, riding bikes, kicking a ball, or standing around in small groups, chatting on street corners and in squares. On weekends, the scene was even busier. As the neighborhood is located near one of the largest open-air funk dances in São Paulo, after 6 pm on Fridays, a crowd of young people begins to arrive at the train station that provides access to the neighborhood. This *flow*, as it is called, attracts young people from all over the city, lasts three days, and only begins to diminish on Monday mornings. On more than one occasion, a theater company from the periphery, whose artists are

local residents, would walk the neighborhood streets staging everyday situations and dialogues about racism, gender inequality, and socio-spatial segregation.

Prompted by these issues, the research gained an unexpected direction: were young people in the neighborhood losing their sense of territorial belonging, or did their urban experience and political engagement involve other themes and arenas? How does the cultural production of local youth relate to the peripheral space they inhabit, and what kind of political engagement and territorialities do they trigger? How have historical transformations in Brazilian peripheries changed modes of political subjectivation, and what do they tell us about the very idea of the periphery?

To answer these questions, a group of researchers went into the field, combining ethnography and participant observation with various qualitative research methodologies, such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews with key interlocutors. To encompass young people from the territory with different profiles and age groups, we conducted seven focus groups during the study. The profile of the participants in each group was defined based on initiatives promoted by the NGO, existing youth groups within the territory, and dialogue with local institutions such as neighborhood association, evangelical churches, and the state school. Thus, over a period of twelve months, we organized three rounds of conversations with young residents: a) boys aged 9 to 13 who were students at the soccer school supported by SAB; b) boys aged 15 to 19, students at the soccer school; c) girls aged 9 to 13, students at the soccer school; d) members of the student council at the state school; e) participants in the youth group of a local evangelical church; f) young people benefiting from peripheral entrepreneurship programs promoted by the NGO; and g) young people from artistic and cultural groups in the neighborhood.

During our conversations, we were guided by a previously prepared list of questions but sought flexibility to include topics and discussions suggested by the participants. In groups with children, we also sought to incorporate methodologies that mitigated the risk of adult-centric interpretations and sought to recognize children's agency in the research processes (Cohn 2005, 2013). In this sense, we sought to give them free rein to play with recorders and research materials, and proposed playful activities with drawings and colored pencils.²

Finally, we also conducted focus groups with long-time residents who discussed the history of the territory and modes of mobilization in the past, in addition to selecting some of them for in-depth interviews. Furthermore, we spoke with current leaders of different collectives that operate in the area. This methodology helped us provide a broad view of what it means to live in the periphery for current and past generations, presenting the historical transformations of local mobilization methods and their relationship with changes in Brazilian society. However, before presenting the ethnographic data, it is necessary to briefly review the concept of periphery in national urban studies.

2 The research with children also required specific ethical precautions, including the use of a Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), signed by their guardians, and a Free and Informed Assent Form (FIAF), signed by the children themselves after receiving an adequate explanation of the objectives and procedures of the Focus Group.

PERIPHERY AND ENGAGEMENT

Initially, the concept of the urban periphery of large Latin American metropolises was understood as a logical consequence of the peripheral insertion of underdeveloped nations into the global capitalist system. As an expression of the development of Brazilian peripheral capitalism, urban peripheries and favelas were seen as territorial manifestations of the material overexploitation to which third world workers were exposed in the context of dependent modernization. The resulting urbanization process produced geographically demarcated places where entire populations are systematically excluded from the benefits of urbanization, while simultaneously used as a means of capital reproduction (Kowarick 1979; Bonduki and Rolnik 1979; Santos 1993; Maricato 1996; Mautner 1999).

It is no wonder that the theme of self-construction among the working classes gained so much traction during this period. The “urban question,” as it was framed at the time, focused on revealing the forces that drove the city’s uneven growth at its margins and at the expense of the overexploitation of the time needed for the social reproduction of the national workforce. Authors of the period sought to demonstrate how the instrumentalization of popular self-help practices and traditions, such as collective neighborhood work projects and migrant solidarity networks, were essential to Brazilian urbanization. This phenomenon, presented in 1975 in the book *São Paulo, 1975: crescimento e pobreza* (São Paulo, 1975: growth and poverty), was summarized more succinctly in the term “urban spoliation” by sociologist Lucio Kowarick who argued that the unpaid overtime worked by the proletariat when building their homes, commuting in the city, or developing practices and strategies to deal with the precariousness of urban settlements, gave shape and meaning to the “urban question.” By instrumentalizing the traditional practices of newly arrived populations, the urbanization of large Brazilian cities reflected the contradictions of peripheral capitalism. The accumulation of capital by the emergent urban bourgeoisie could only be achieved through a paradoxical combination of “archaic” and “modern” practices. This process would ultimately relegate the country to chronic underdevelopment, visually expressed in divided and geographically segregated cities.

This theoretical tool located the transformative potential of Brazilian cities in the class division marked by this territorial segregation. Since the peripheries are where the working class lives, the political engagement present there should mirror the level of organization and consciousness of the urban proletariat (Durham 2004c). In other words, the driving force behind political engagement in cities and the forms of engagement of peripheral populations should be triggered by the contradictions found in the original space of exploitation of the wage-earning masses: factories. The focus on the space of production meant that the moment of reproduction and consumption of the popular classes — that is, their traditional practices and rituals, their support networks, the built environment of their homes, and the relationship they establish with the territory and the urban — was considered a mere epiphany of the material structure or, at best, an instrument of domination and exploitation.

However, contrary to expectations, the popular mobilizations and movements that took hold in the peripheries during Brazil's redemocratization did not arise in factories, but in moments of leisure and communion of these peripheral populations. Surprisingly, solidarity and self-help networks were not only supports for the accumulation of capital by local and global elites. For the residents of the peripheries — immersed in an exhausting daily routine of commuting between the well-equipped center and an unstructured periphery — they were, above all, a lived experience. Collective work projects and raffles to raise money, mobilizations and festivities, solidarity and food and donation campaigns, or the very circulation of bodies and artifacts through the city streets were shared experiences of the popular classes. Moving around the city and participating in these forms of self-help were also ways of theorizing about them. This daily experience of local exclusion and solidarity produced evidences and understanding of the fundamental division in society that was plain to see.

Looking at society means immediately perceiving a basic inequality: that which opposes us, the poor, to them, the rich (...) In most everyday situations, it is enough to talk about “rich” and “poor” to make oneself understood (...) it is not necessary to spell them out at all times, since they are more or less shared by a whole group of people, their equals. (Caldeira 1984: 150)

Thus, society seen from its margins, mediated by the daily experience of exclusion that opposed the sense of community and communion present in the peripheries,³ was not only a mechanism for extracting capital, but constituted, above all, modes of political subjectivation and forms of identifying adversaries and allies, defining projects and strategies for social mobility — whether individual, family, or collective. In a period of strong industrialization, expansion of the labor market, and the conquest and consolidation of labor rights, it is not surprising that the urban experience came to be popularly described by the division between “workers” and “the rich” (Caldeira 1984). However, as the urban anthropology of the time demonstrated, these terms said less about positions within the structure of the productive system than about moral codes and conduct shared among equals. In this sense, processes of political subjectivation in Brazilian peripheries were not only organized through the insertion of workers into the productive structure of factories, but were mainly defined by the perception of society's consumption relations. That is, by the daily experience of exclusion, by urban circulation, by the level of consumption of each household in opposition to the homes of the “rich” or the “bosses,” by neighborhood networks, and by the idealized sense of community. This fact, rather than producing strictly proletarian grassroots movements, gave rise to numerous protest movements during the period of redemocratization, which organized their members through shared needs — the homeless, the landless, etc. (Durham 2004c, Sader 1988, Doimo 1995). Thus, the periphery, composed of different neighborhoods, *quebradas*,

3 On the production of a sense of community in Brazilian urban peripheries, see Durham (2004a).

and communities, came to be understood as the place of “workers,” and its transformation and integration into the city became the main objective of these organized residents.⁴

In the 1970s, when anthropology turned its theoretical tools to Brazil’s large cities, the suburbs began to be analyzed from within, from the daily life of neighborhoods and their networks of sociability. In keeping with the spirit of the times, discussions began to focus on how urban segregation produced symbolic systems that ordered the world and guided the political actions of these city dwellers. In this sense, the notion of “workers,” widely used as a means of self-identification by peripheral residents and often opposed to that of the “rich” and “bandits” (criminals), would bear less similarities to the Marxist theories in vogue, being better represented as a shared code of conduct. Their rules were derived from the self-help practices of migrant populations, their festivals and rites, which, when resignified in a peripheral context of deprivation, found a channel for political expression with the intense mobilization of labor unions, parties, and progressive sectors of the Catholic Church during the end of the military dictatorship (Durham 1973, 2004c; Caldeira 1984; Magnani 2012; Sader 1988). Thus, while sociology sought to analyze modes of urban exclusion and marginalization produced by economic structures of peripheral capitalism, both modern and archaic, anthropology sought to understand the daily life of the neighborhood, linking itself much more to Lefebvre’s literature on the “right to the city” (Magnani 2012).

These two efforts share similarities. Whether through the uprising of the proletariat confined to distant peripheries on the outskirts of the city or through the political subjectivation produced by varied cultural practices resignified in urban contexts, both perspectives worked with an integrationist view of the peripheries (Feltran 2012). Perhaps motivated by the spirit of the time, which was inspired by the end of authoritarianism in Brazil, authors from different perspectives analyzed the challenges of expanding civil and social rights, integrating segregated areas into networks of urban services, including residents in the formal labor market, and mitigating, or even abolishing, social inequalities. In reality, dialogue with different institutions and organizations that were arriving in peripheries at that time — the state, unions, parties, social movements, Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEB), etc. — led to the wide adoption of the language of rights, or the “right to have rights,” by residents of the periphery.

However, from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, the economic crisis, factory restructuring, labor market deregulation, intensifying inequality, the decline of social movements, the growth of

4 It is important to note that terms associated with urban peripheries in Brazil reflect symbolic disputes between stigmatization and the assertion of identity. Historically, terms such as “favela” and “vila” were associated with representations of urban precariousness and social marginalization. In the 1970s, the term “periphery” came to be used by urban sociology as an analytical category to describe structural processes of socio-spatial segregation and “urban dispossession” (Kowarick 1979). Since the 1990s, a semantic shift has been observed. While public policies and institutional discourses began to favor the term “community,” to mitigate stigma and emphasize social cohesion (Valladares 2005), cultural and youth movements resignified native categories such as “quebrada,” transforming the experience of deprivation into a language of territorial belonging, cultural power, and political resistance (Feltran 2012). In this context, the different nomenclatures oscillate between stigmatizing external classifications and local processes of self-affirmation and territorial valorization.

the third sector, and, above all, the exponential increase in crime and urban violence would call this integrationist vision into question (Feltran 2012). These processes would put an end to labor-centered family projects of social mobility and render inoperative political subjectivities built on this shared morality. Social and urban integration became a mirage, and the concept of the periphery was transformed. More than a shared physical space or symbolic systems, the periphery came to be understood as a field of disputes and a frontier in eternal tension through which different orders and lines of force shape political subjectivities and order peripheral bodies.

In a scenario in which integration into the city was not reflected in equal rights or income, popular movements, neighborhood associations, and unions were dismantled or lost their importance (in comparison to the newly arrived NGOs and social projects), and basic ecclesial communities gave way to the growth of evangelical churches. Above all, in a period when peripheral populations are squeezed by state repression and criminal violence, the processes by which peripheral residents recognize themselves as equals and create territorial belonging have fragmented (Telles and Cabanes 2006; Feltran 2007; Hirata 2018). Different actors and institutions, such as the state, NGO technical staff, organized crime, and evangelical churches, now compose an increasingly heterogeneous scenario in which the production of peripheral subjects is in dispute. Thus, a new bibliography has been analyzing how these different spheres — law, “crime,” work, family, religion, politics, the state, consumption, the virtual, among others — produce successive discursive regimes that find their form of expression in the idea of the periphery.

However, in these new times, in which the fragmentation of the sphere of work has ceased to provide parameters and repertoires for processes of political subjectivation, phenomena such as the insertion of the C class — as the lowest earning and most precarious portion of the middle class is categorized in Brazil — into circuits of consumption and cultural production, the popularization of university education, and the spread of social media use (D’Andrea 2020; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2014) have caused the word *periphery*, previously restricted to academic debates, to be reclaimed and re-signified by its residents, engendering “a historical process of modification of its meanings” (D’Andrea 2020). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, analyses of the peripheries began to oscillate between pessimistic ones, which denounced the end of politics and the beginning of the era of “poverty management” (Telles and Cabanes 2006; Telles 2010; Hirata 2018; Rizek 2024), and those that saw forms of resistance and subversion in the immanence of the emic discourse on favelas (Nascimento 2011; Feltran 2012; De Tommasi 2013; Aderaldo 2017; D’Andrea 2022).

In this reformulation of the concept of periphery, engendered by a two-way street between the academy and peripheral subjects, the objectified culture of the periphery — which circulates as symbols, products, ways of dressing or speaking — resurfaces as a new form of aesthetic production and consumption, as a space for political dispute, as a renewed mode of identification of equals and political subjectivation, and, finally, as a privileged locus for the production of narratives about a shared future (D’Andrea 2020; Facina 2022).

In this sense, we ask ourselves, at a historical moment in which different forms of peripheral political subjectivation coexist, how are territorial belonging and political action expressed within a neighborhood of the São Paulo periphery?

“EMBRACING THE CAUSE”: LIVING IN THE PERIPHERY

Line 12 — Safira, of the São Paulo Metropolitan Train Company (CPTM) runs along much of the city’s border with Guarulhos. Its current route after it leaves the city center was completed in 1934, when it became part of the main rail link between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the two largest cities in the country. At the beginning of the last century, it passed through rural landscapes with few population centers. Longtime residents fondly remember the days when they rode horses, picked fruit from trees, and swam in an old lake. However, in just two decades, much of the area between the old, bustling center of São Paulo and the small rural villages became subdivisions, and the trains that ran along the tracks were integrated to the city’s public transportation system. The sale of small plots of land at affordable prices in distant areas without city infrastructure substituted the absence of housing policies for millions of migrant workers arriving in São Paulo, especially after 1950.

Since then, the social mobility strategies of two or three generations of children from the lower classes began to be defined by what Mautner (1999) called the trilogy of the Brazilian urbanization process, that is, land subdivision without infrastructure, home ownership and self-construction. Based mainly on the irregular occupation of low-cost land on the outskirts of the city, the process of acquiring a small piece of land in a distant area without services, self-building one’s own home, and entering the booming labor market provided the basis on which many migrants projected their futures and understood themselves as peripheral subjects, or in the jargon of the time, “workers.” In other words, these goals, common to thousands of migrant families from Brazil’s Northeast who arrived year after year to work in industries in southeastern Brazil, were more than just family strategies for social mobility. Their goals articulated local self-help networks and provided the cognitive basis on which members of the urban working classes projected their futures and identified their peers.

At that time, even though they had to endure long train and bus journeys to their jobs in the Brás neighborhood of São Paulo, or to homes of family in the central region, and were exposed daily to the discrepancies between an urbanized city and peripheries lacking infrastructure, for the overwhelming majority of these residents, the future looked better than the recent past (Durham 2004b). Thus, migrants from rural areas marked by hunger and misery, and their children raised on collective memories of the pain of migration, envisioned better days ahead, with hope for social advancement through work and faith in progress.

However, if family acquisitions, such as a small plot of land and their own home, were material evidence of those days to come, outside the door, in regularly flooded and muddy streets without asphalt or lighting, the busy and exclusionary daily life of the city constantly

reminded them of their social condition. It was then, in this encounter between the hopes of the working classes and the conditions imposed by the city, that modes of political subjectivation and mobilization practices were born.

“It wasn’t easy here, son,” said Dona Teresa. She is a 68-year-old Black woman who has lived in the neighborhood since she was 5 years old and spent her childhood working in her uncle’s farmyard with her parents and siblings. “The men killed the goats and the women washed and dried the intestines to make *buchada*. It was all rural here!” she says.

Dona Teresa spent her childhood in a neighborhood in transition. The streets had no lighting or pavement, and the region’s economy still revolved around small local businesses, such as family markets or raising farm animals. In the 1970s, during her youth, she worked in several factories in the eastern zone of São Paulo. At the time, jobs were plentiful, and over several years, Dona Teresa jumped from job to job at companies in different productive sectors. João, another longtime resident of the neighborhood and an active member of the local neighborhood association, also remembers that time fondly. During a conversation at his home, he lamented the fate of younger people. “Back then, you just had to walk past the factories and they would hand you a formal employment contract,” he says, recalling the period when he worked in the textile companies of Brás.

However, that was before the economic restructuring of the 1990s. With the loss of jobs, Dona Teresa began selling bed, table, and bath linens to neighbors and friends in the Zona Leste (the eastern portion of the city). Fortunately, while still working in the factories, she managed to save money. In the late 1970s, when the Tietê River was diverted for the construction of the Rodovia dos Trabalhadores highway and new subdivisions began to spring up in the new open space, Dona Teresa saw an opportunity. With enough money to buy her own lot and move out of her uncle’s house, she decided to build her home in the neighborhood. She faced many difficulties balancing a job with caring for her young children. Dona Teresa had to cross dark, muddy streets at five in the morning to get to work on time. However, the difficulties did not dampen her hope for better days:

I fell in love with this place (...) I was already married, already living there, already had my daughters, because I have four daughters, right? Then, when they diverted the Tietê River, they subdivided the land here. So, I said, I’m going to embrace this cause.

For Dona Teresa, as for an older generation in the neighborhood, living on the outskirts was exactly that: “embracing a cause.”

We lived by *lampião* (gaslight). And do you know how we ironed our clothes? With those old heavy irons. I would come to my aunt’s [house], and I had to put charcoal inside [the iron]. Today we have everything. So when we tell our story, they [people who didn’t get involved] say, “But were you the ones who went to city hall to fight?”

Thus, living in the periphery was not only a personal cause involving building a house, marriage, children, and formal employment, but also a collective cause. Not only because

access to land for the working classes was achieved through the overexploitation of their labor during their free time, but especially because self-help networks established and reformulated forms of local sociability, and contributed to a way of theorizing about society and its power relations (Caldeira 1984).

In Dona Teresa's narrative, the perception of shared inequality and deprivation becomes an integral part of narratives and performances about social exclusion that organized peripheral mobilization practices and defined individual and family projects for the future. Furthermore, the successive mobilizations created a strong bond between this group of more active residents, producing a sense of belonging to the place. According to Dona Teresa:

Wow, boy I loved going to protests like that, says Dona Teresa. I would get the girls together, and we would sing. We would arrive at City Hall singing! We took City Hall down! They were scared to death of us there! Of our little group. Yeah, son, and I won't give up, I said: "Until things get better here, we're not going to stop." Because otherwise, it would be worse here. It would be worse, my son. Son, there wasn't even supposed to be electricity or water here, we went to SABESP, we went to SABESP to fight. This is a community!

Given this, the shared narrative of poverty and exclusion constitutes a "performative act" through which

(...) people who narrate their stories are not only relating events from a narrative (...), but are also involved in the performance of who they are (...) Performances are above all performative acts, that is, they are narratives through which subjects reinvent, reiterate, and modify themselves, their own experiences, as well as the contexts in which they live. (Lopes et al. 2019: 34)

In other words, within conditions of segregation and exclusion, these "narratives of hope" (Facina 2022) organize and guide futures to be built from experiences of common adversity.

These narratives and networks of sociability were not only organized in the words of these interlocutors, but also by the infrastructure that had been achieved and by the symbols and events that took over the daily lives of its residents. At that moment, the neighborhood, its continuous transformation, and gradual integration into the city sustained such narratives, especially because the territory was not only the basis on which local solidarity networks were organized, but also the focus of transformation.

As the local landscape changed rapidly, in less than a generation, simple houses built by residents and their families, gained more and more rooms, mirroring the transformations of the neighborhood. During that period, hundreds of people gathered on weekends next to the football field, built through collective efforts organized by SAB. On the embankment that bordered the side of the field and where the CPTM railway line ran, residents gathered as if in an improvised grandstand, shouting and supporting the teams of their family and friends. Aparecido, a retired metalworker and founder of the team and the association, recalls more than one occasion when a spectator was injured because of the proximity to the railway. "They really got hit by the train," he recalled. However, despite the risks to those participating, the improvised atmosphere that

emulated a stadium, with large flags, chants, snack and beer stands, also highlighted the differences between social groups in the city. The local teams are remembered for their “fighting” but “honorable” character and for being made up of “workers,” as opposed to the teams from adjoining neighborhoods that also participated in these competitions. From lower and more dangerous areas, places considered to be strongholds of “bandits,” came “more violent” and “dishonest” teams, while from the west side came the teams of the “rich kids,” from neighborhoods with better houses and who had “always clean uniforms,” as well as new balls and cleats.

The neighborhood association, originally formed to build the soccer field and organize competitions, then began to promote social actions, such as distributing food and offering tutoring programs. It soon became a reference in the region and supported by politicians, merchants, and businesspeople in the East Zone. The parties it organized, usually after the popular championships, were enlivened by local samba groups who, through their lyrics and music, performed the notion of a peripheral neighborhood inhabited by workers and humble people.

Dedé, the son of a family of samba musicians from the neighborhood and currently a football coach for the neighborhood association, recalls the time when he accompanied his parents during the “batucadas” (samba parties) and games and sums up well the feeling of an entire generation that saw the neighborhood grow and transform over the years:

“I only have my neighborhood to thank. I will only move from my neighborhood if it is to Morumbi or London and if they pay me money. Because I was born and raised here!”

“IT’S BAD BECAUSE THE NEIGHBORHOOD IS ALSO BAD”: WORK, VIOLENCE, LEISURE, AND SOCIABILITY

“It’s bad because the neighborhood is also bad,” said Guilherme during a conversation at the neighborhood school:

I came here this morning, and honestly, in my opinion, the students think the school has turned into GTA.⁵ It’s turned into GTA! It’s turned into fucking GTA, man! Three kids said they were going to fight me. Three little kids! Bro, those kids were lucky that I was really late for class. Otherwise, I would have made sure to hit all three of them.

His colleagues laugh and talk among themselves, imagining the scene described by Guilherme, a tall, athletic Black youth running after elementary school kids. However, they all agree with their friend’s diagnosis. For this group of young people, members of the student council between 16 and 17, the neighborhood and the school itself have deteriorated over the years.⁶ The younger generation, they say, is even worse off.

5 Grand Theft Auto, a video game popular among young people in which the player is a car thief.

6 This phenomenon was also described by the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP), whose indicators from the last three assessments show a significant deterioration in the education of students at the neighborhood school. The school now ranks among the lowest in the city of São Paulo.

The group of young people analyzed has a varied socioeconomic profile. This diversity is evident in their housing conditions, with participants residing in both established areas and more recently occupied regions without urban infrastructure and located in low-lying areas susceptible to flooding. Additionally, the group is diverse in its religious affiliations, and in its ethnic-racial and gender backgrounds. What they have in common is a negative view of the neighborhood, mediated and motivated by the precarious conditions of the school they attend and the violence they witness in their daily lives or on their cell phone screens.

During the conversation, the young people recalled with fear the day when fourth-grade elementary school students destroyed the classroom when they were left without a teacher in charge. The school has various infrastructure deficiencies, and teachers are often absent or take sick leave, routinely leaving entire classrooms without activity or supervision during school hours. In addition, reports of *bullying*, racism, drug use, and violence among students are constant and widely shared on social media.

While some of the older residents still fondly remember the days of struggle and mobilization for improvements, young people born after 2000 have a completely different perception of the territory. Most are unaware that there was a lake in the region that is now buried under the football field and various irregular occupations that emerged in the 1990s. They complain constantly about the lack of leisure options and social spaces. Their experience is different than that of older generations. Although their parents and grandparents did not experience the neighborhood's former quiet, rural routine, have fond memories of the rapid changes they witnessed in a short period of time. Furthermore, as they moved to São Paulo in search of employment or were born in the capital, they became the first generation of migrants in their families and grew up hearing stories about hunger and poverty in other places — or even experienced this themselves — and were taught about the fruits of hard work and the benefits of urban integration and formal employment.

However, the economic recession of the 1980s, the opening of the Brazilian economy in the 1990s, and the subsequent growth of informal markets and economic inequality put an end to modes of production based on territorial ties and political identity. The explosion of violence in the 1990s, when people were killed indiscriminately and “shot just to see the other fall,” as witnesses from that time say, as well as the subsequent pacification and ordering of the criminal world decreed by the PCC, brought new elements and order for thinking about the image of the place (Feltran 2007).⁷

“Why is the neighborhood bad?” Guilherme continued his ramblings with a rhetorical question:

7 The First Capital Command (PCC) is Brazil's largest criminal organization, having originated in 1993 within the prison system of the state of São Paulo. Unlike traditional hierarchical cartels, the PCC operates as a horizontal network governed by its own code of conduct, exercising a form of “criminal governance” that regulates conflicts and establishes norms of conduct in numerous urban peripheries (Feltran 2018). Over the past few decades, its influence has extended beyond the prison system, consolidating a monopoly over the drug market and shaping the dynamics of socialability and public safety in vulnerable territories (Biondi 2010).

More because of the drugs, right? Let's agree that I've caught So-and-so three times doing coke behind my house. I see people smoking marijuana all the time. And whether we like it or not, this ends up rubbing off on children, because they think, "Wow, my dad is smoking marijuana, it must be something cool." Because a child will copy their father.

Guilherme lives in a recently occupied area. His parents built their house after an "invasion" of one of the last available areas in the neighborhood. Lacking sanitation or regular electricity, this region is recognized by many residents as a precarious and dangerous place for children. According to older residents, the relationship with drug use has changed significantly in recent years. Using drugs in public had been uncommon and seen as shameful. But it is now common to see people smoking marijuana or synthetic drugs on the streets, including children. This increases the feeling of insecurity for many. In general, the explanations given for the indiscriminate drug use in the region tend to range from moral failings of families, as explained above, to structural problems in Brazilian society, such as income inequality and the exploitation of the working classes:

"We live in a peripheral neighborhood!" continues Guilherme:

Here we don't have what other neighborhoods have, which would be a peaceful upbringing. Whether he wants to or not, a father leaves home at seven o'clock and doesn't spend time with his child. He doesn't have time with his child (...) On Saturdays, the father probably won't remember that he has to spend time with his child: "Because I have to raise him to be a human being." The child wants to spend time with his father. He wants to spend a day just talking to his father (...) I wanted to do that. I didn't have that. Talking to my father. I never talked to my father, honestly. (...) Not even with my mother. And yet, I understand them. Because they were working to give me a future. I understand that. But children won't understand. Because after all, [today's] parents are concerned with other things, like getting drunk or using drugs. Whether they like it or not, children will see this and think it's cool.

Unlike the previous generation, young people today no longer see the world of work as a tool for social advancement, nor does it offer the moral rules of conduct that guided generations of residents of the periphery. In the view of these teenagers, who have witnessed their parents waking up at dawn and returning home late, yet little or no change in their socioeconomic status, adult life is characterized by the precariousness of the job market and the various adversities that exist in the periphery. Thus, as a rule, in conversations with different young people in the neighborhood, the arrival of adolescence is marked by a rupture, not only with the tranquility and absence of responsibilities present in childhood, but with the relationship that young people begin to weave with the territory. If during childhood the neighborhood is seen as a source of pleasure, adventure, and freedom, with the arrival of adolescence, the world of work and crime, as well as the responsibilities of adulthood, the relationships established with the place are reconfigured.

During an activity, we asked young men aged 15 to 19, students at the local soccer school, how they would define childhood in the neighborhood. One of the participants responded bluntly and without hesitation: “Happiness!” This statement is quickly supported by everyone else:

“No worries about anything. No responsibilities,” continued Carlos, a 19-year-old evangelical Christian and carpenter who dreams of finishing college and starting his own business.

All I had to do was brush my teeth and go out on the street. Why did I turn 18? I could stay on the street, just playing. “Come have lunch,” [my mother would call]. Then I would have lunch and go back to the street. That’s gone! Now there’s a lot of responsibility. Now it’s work.

These statements were also reaffirmed in another conversation circle with boys aged 9 to 13. When asked where they like to play, the children point to a wide variety of places in the neighborhood, discussing which streets are best for each type of game, which roads have more children, and where they can find more friends to participate in the activities they create themselves. Many ride their bikes throughout the territory and adjoining neighborhoods without adult supervision: “I like to play ball, watch games (...) ride my bike. If I don’t have a bike, no problem! Lots of adventure (...) Lots of wind in my face. It’s like you’re on a motorcycle. You feel like you’re on a motorcycle. It’s everywhere,” says 13-year-old José Carlos.

His 11-year-old friend quickly adds: “It’s everywhere. As long as there’s no bike path for us, we’ll ride even on top of cars.”

Most of the boys live in flood-prone areas, but they all say they like the neighborhood where they live, they just don’t like “when it rains.” Notably, there is a difference between boys and girls. Many mothers tend to be more controlling with their daughters, not letting them go everywhere and not liking them to play with boys without supervision. Younger boys themselves recognize this difference, confirming that girls do not have as much freedom, and boys who have sisters do not like them to play with their friends. Meanwhile, girls aged 9 to 13 interviewed said they feel uncomfortable with the boys’ games:

“Actually, when you get your period, they keep saying they’re going to put you on the plate [slang for sex]. They say a lot of things, and then we don’t feel good,” said 11-year-old Júlia before concluding. “I’m afraid of getting pregnant. Because the other day my friend went to the bathroom and she had a really heavy period! She bled a lot! And she had to use two pads because it leaked so much, and I’m afraid that will happen to me.”

Her friend, who is the same age, agrees: “My mom said that if I get pregnant, she’ll kick me out of the house.”

Julia added: “Wow, every mom always says that!”

In any case, even though girls do not enjoy the same freedoms as boys, they have various strategies for playing in the neighborhood, either with the boys or among themselves. In general, they like to play in parks that they consider safe, and many climb over the walls of the daycare center to use the playgrounds and its equipment located outside the facility.

“I broke equipment there once,” said one of the girls. “No one knows (...), but we fix it when we break it.”

Thus, even though they have less freedom of movement, girls also like to play in the street: “[I don’t like playing at home] because my mom keeps fighting with me and bugging me. And on the street, we play, we just keep playing, there’s no time to stop. I like to play,” concludes Yara, 11.

Group games, bike rides, or even sneaky invasions of the daycare center, done with great care not to damage the space, are ways in which children take advantage of the neighborhood. For them, “living in the neighborhood” is good “despite the difficulties,” because they “know” the place, that is, they know where they can and cannot play, which places are dangerous, and who to ask for help if they need it, in addition to food and toys.

From the parents’ point of view, there is a division between the youth and children in the neighborhood. The main concerns guardians have about the neighborhood are drugs and violence, children playing in the streets is considered dangerous.⁸ This is a common perception among evangelicals, but it is not restricted to this segment of the population, being quite common among residents of the most vulnerable areas of the neighborhood:

“This neighborhood is really lost when it comes to drugs and teenagers,” says Jéssica, a practitioner of an African-based religion with two young children aged 9 and 11.

I know I won’t be able to keep them locked up for the rest of my life, but for now, as much as I can, I’m going to leave them inside the house with their cell phones, watching television (...) I’d rather have them addicted to their cell phones than addicted to K9, to cocaine.

Many parents follow Jessica’s example, although many of them believe that the isolation they subject their children to is also, in a way, harmful to them: “It’s the same old story here, there are the more sly ones and those who are already malicious,” reflects Tatiana, an evangelical mother who lives in a squatter settlement, commenting on the episodes of bullying her son has suffered. “There are those who grow up with malice and there are those who are sheltered at home, cared for by their mothers, and when they get to school, others bully them.”

A lack of “knowledge” of the neighborhood, resulting from limited mobility and fear of violence, also negatively affects teenagers like Guilherme, who is on the student council. Raised at home and without a father, his socializing is limited to casual encounters at the homes of friends and his girlfriend. However, some of the children who used to move freely around the neighborhood also notice a change in their socialization over the years.

For this segment, the arrival of adolescence is defined by the end of this dynamic, that is, by the end of a feeling of freedom and an absence of responsibilities. For young people

8 The exception is parents involved in the world of crime, who consider the place safe, since “everyone knows us” there.

aged 15 to 19 who attend the local football school, this is clear. Although they continue to circulate, the spaces available for socialization become scarce, non-existent, or dangerous. Furthermore, in addition to the prohibitive cost of accessing leisure facilities located in central areas of the city, the circulation of these Black youth in middle- or upper-class neighborhoods is viewed with prejudice and violence by certain segments of the population and the state.

“Like it or not, it’s still happiness for many children. Only now there’s a bit of misfortune,” concludes Carlos.

Born in a consolidated peripheral neighborhood, where urban improvements and public facilities are already present, albeit in a precarious manner, for young people like Guilherme, “the neighborhood may improve, but it will take time.” Thus, for this profile of residents interviewed, that is, young people and adults who consider violence and drugs to be the main problems in the neighborhood, the territory is just one among so many peripheral neighborhoods in the city that is marked by a lack of safety and leisure options.

“The first step is to leave here, because I don’t like it here,” Guilherme adds:

Most of my time, whether I like it or not, since I have a girlfriend, I spend time with her. We don’t leave the house much because I don’t like leaving the house (...) going out in the neighborhood isn’t very interesting either. There’s the issue of people trying to harass you, there are rude children, and the neighborhood is also dirty because people throw trash on the ground. It’s not the best environment if you want to go out on a date, if you want to go out and have a fun day.

However, these descriptions contrast with the huge flow of thousands of young people who travel weekly to participate in one of the largest open-air funk dances in São Paulo. The Baile da Várzea, which runs from Thursday at 11 p.m. to Saturday at 5 a.m., takes place in a nearby region and is a source of controversy within the neighborhood. For residents concerned about safety, the “flow” at these dances is constantly linked to crime, drug use, promiscuity, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. Although the event is not limited to this and many attendees are only interested in “having a glass of gin” after work, the dance is organized with the support and consent of local drug traffickers, and the use of drugs during the parties and the explicitly sexualized lyrics of the songs reinforce the perception among part of the local population about the lack of safe options for entertainment and socializing.

“What does the neighborhood have to offer? The weekend *flow*,” reflects a 32-year-old mother. “The kids hang out in the cellar and do drugs. The drugs come first.”

This view is quite strong among young people who identify drugs and violence as the main problems in the neighborhood, and is particularly intense among young evangelicals. Among this segment, religion appears as an alternative way of positioning oneself in the world. In a narrative where “evil” is embodied by the world of crime that plagues the sub-

urbs (Alvito 2012), the church emerges as a benevolent source of correct behavior and proper social relations:⁹

“I converted when I was 16,” says the 33-year-old pastor, leader of a local church youth group:

When I converted, it made a total difference in my life, because we know that the far eastern region of the city, the extreme periphery, has many bad opportunities. This is true anywhere, but in the periphery it seems to be doubled. Because these are people who sometimes have no prospects in life. They come from families that already have a drug user, they come from families that have gone through hardship, and sometimes, because there is a drug user in the house, the person gets carried away by it: “I’m going to use drugs because my father uses drugs, my mother uses drugs...”

The conversion process of a young evangelical woman at another church followed the same pattern. As a teenager she would “go out every weekend” to dances and parties. When she had her daughter she began fighting with her parents and sister. She herself recognized that she “was very impossible.” The arrival of the baby and her isolation caused her to develop “depression” and “anxiety.”

“I even took a knife to cut myself,” she said with tears in her eyes. “I did several things that make people look at me and say, ‘I can’t believe you did that.’ I had a lot of anxiety.”

Things changed after her sister took her to church. In her conversion story, this turning point was responsible for the change in her life. She opened a beauty salon, got her driver’s license, finished college, made new friends, and was healed of her depression. “I restored my dreams. All my dreams were dead. I had no hope for the future, no hope for myself.”

Her sister added:

Because of our mission, we were raised knowing the word, and we have other paths to follow as well. Because usually in the neighborhood there are only dances, parties, things like that. Bars, right? And not everyone wants to follow that, so I think it’s very important to have a church in the neighborhood so that children can learn about other things. Not just drinking, [you have to] get to know the other side (...) the good side of life, right? (...) Because Christians also live, they also enjoy themselves. There are parties too, right? [People] think that if you live in the evangelical world, you’re trapped, but in fact no, we are free. Because we can choose what we want to do. We can choose whether we want to be here or there. But a person who lives for other things, yes, they are trapped!

Although the reasons for converting to evangelicalism are multiple, spiritual, and personal, for many young people, becoming a member of a congregation helps to rebuild a

9 According to recent literature (Spyer 2020), in peripheral contexts marked by violence, evangelical churches play a crucial role by offering a discursive key to the spiritual and material battle that residents face. The Pentecostal worldview perceives society from a binary opposition between the “church” and the “world” (Alvito 2012), helping the Church to produce “an alternative life narrative for unemployed young people who are considering turning to crime, and it is also a way out that allows ex-criminals and drug addicts to rebuild their lives. This theology of spiritual warfare emerges as a framework for addressing everyday problems and extends to the material world. We will not address here the recent phenomenon of converted drug dealers (Paes Manso 2023). We analyze the world of crime from discourses external to it.

network of social relationships broken by fear of violence and the absence of safe leisure spaces. This is not a new. For several years, the literature on the subject has emphasized how evangelical churches function as a “kind of informal social welfare service (...) by offering material and immaterial help, from emotional comfort to food” (Spyer 2020: 122). Researchers such as Jacqueline Texeira and Lívia Reis affirm that the services offered, “peace, a sheltering, reception, fulfillment, completeness, community, communion, and unity” are the most common responses when people are asked “what brought them to church” (Texeira and Reis 2022). Thus, young evangelicals in the territory meet periodically in spaces considered safe to promote “fellowship”:

“I think that one of our main focuses is communion,” says one of the participants in a youth group at a local church. “Communion, intimacy with one another. Because we know that whether we are Christians or not, we need to have communion with others. So there is always an activity that allows us to become closer friends, that allows us to get to know each other better.”

Thus, it is common to find groups of evangelical youth gathered together in the evenings, on weekdays, and especially on weekends. They meet in churches, in their homes, in pizzerias, and in local shops. They usually frequent businesses run by evangelicals. In addition to being chosen because they are considered safe, this dynamic strengthens an endogenous economy that in many cases reinforces narratives about overcoming adversity and social advancement that are proclaimed by the owners after conversion.¹⁰

In any case, the controversy created by the rise of the criminal world as an organizing phenomenon in Brazilian urban peripheries leads different young people in the neighborhood, both evangelicals and non-converts, to present a similar narrative: the arrival of adulthood, responsibilities, and the dangers that exist in the peripheries marks a rupture in their lives characterized by the fraying of social ties and social isolation. In this narrative, the family plays a central role in opposing the world of crime. Evangelical discourse delegates to women the organization of the family structure, and responsibility for ordering the social and emotional life of the family unit and the extended community (Teixeira and Reis 2022). Non-converted mothers also have strategies for watching over and protecting their children from the dangers of the streets. In both cases, the family emerges as the greatest victim of growing violence and as a way out of the current situation.

10 Spyer (2020) pointed out that evangelical growth can also be explained by this endogenous relationship established by churches, which become a kind of “extended family” and help in the search for employment or the establishment of local businesses through their Prosperity Theology. In some field reports collected, conversion and the reconfiguration of the social circle are even compared to professional growth. After the conversation turns to the past at dances and parties, one of the young people comments: “Because one thing influences another. Because whether you like it or not, if you have a friend who drinks, a friend who does that, whether you like it or not, it will pull you in. Now, if you have a friend who [says], ‘Man, I’m here, I’m bringing you closer to God. I’m doing something that will add to your spiritual and personal life,’ you just have to grow. It’s the same thing when we’re in a company. If you’re next to someone who only does bad things in the company, you can’t grow in the company with someone by your side who doesn’t support you. But if you hang out with an intelligent person, they will help you grow in the company. It’s the same thing. With friendships, one thing leads to another. Our role is to bring the person here, and the person won’t pull us there, no!”

REORDERING CONTROVERSIES: PERIPHERAL CULTURE, GENDER, AND RACE

“We are actors and actresses on the street who are doing this theatrical work,” explains Milene during a conversation at the neighborhood reading spot. “Even before we began to better understand what this work was, we raised racial discussions within it, right? Questions of eugenics and how Brazil was formed.”

Milene is a writer, poet, and actress who, together with five other young people we spoke to, created a peripheral theater collective called “As Pardonizadas.”¹¹ The group stages a traveling play that begins at the Brás train station in downtown São Paulo, and continues inside the train cars as they cross the city’s eastern zone and reach the streets of the neighborhood. The narrative of the drama refers to the hard work routine of the region’s residents and their journeys through the city, and raises discussions about racism and gender inequality. When they arrive at São Miguel Paulista square, the actors recall the old indigenous name for the location and conclude by walking through the neighborhood’s public spaces, drawing the attention of many people who gather to watch the final act.

Many authors have pointed out how cultural and artistic practices act as crucial mechanisms of political subjectivation, resistance, and reconfiguration of life projects for young people in the periphery. Artistic practices offer a set of elements that allow young people to reframe their biographical trajectories, transforming social stigma into an emblem of pride and belonging (Pereira 2010; Nascimento 2011; Amaral 2015; Takeiti and Vicentin 2019). In the field, the appropriation of peripheral public space proposed by this collective contrasts with the fear and isolation of another portion of local youth, indicating the polysemy of practices and discourses about the neighborhood and the very notion of youth. As indicated by other authors, this polysemy of peripheral youth stems from “the various ways of experiencing youth, (re)invented in everyday life” (Amaral 2015: 43). For these authors, markers such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and different forms of segregation and social distinction produce styles, attitudes, and artistic and cultural expressions that transcend univocal definitions of youth, generating different ways of being and existing in society (Amaral 2015; Pereira 2007; Novaes and Vital 2006; Margulis and Urresti 1996; Sposito 1993).

During our conversations with the young people, it became clear how race and gender are articulated through artistic practices as central categories for the reordering of the participants’ biographies, transforming their way of circulating and perceiving urban inequalities:

“Why are we *pardonizados*, eh?” continues Milene:

Because we have this light skin, right? It comes from rape, right? It comes from people who invaded this country and caused our race to mix, right? (...) It comes from that. The term

11 The play on words of this name is explained shortly below.

pardonizadas, right? It comes from pardo (brown) and padronizado (standardized). And the real motivation for this is to understand how collectivity works.

Additionally, for these local artists, the discourse about society, or the “collectivity,” also includes a rejection of a grueling work routine that compromised their parents’ health and time. As Facina (2022) puts it, the activity of this group of young people is defined by the opposition they establish between their work and “meaningless, exhausting labor” (Facina 2022: 3). As the author puts it, this differentiation contrasts work as subjugation with “dream work.”

“Understanding how the collective that goes beyond work functions, right? It’s the collectivity of life,” continues Milene, with the attentive approval of everyone and then complemented by a colleague.

“Because it’s usually like this: ‘Oh, I’m going to work, pay my bills, man! I’m going there, yeah, give my working hours, my physical effort, I’m going to go home and that’s it. And no. Through your profession, you can do something that is worthwhile for you and for those around you!’”

This rejection of the world of work, understood as an alienation from life and social relations, was expressed in different ways by different groups of young people we spoke to. As Guilherme, a member of the student union, stated earlier, work appears to be a futile effort for survival that does not provide the money or resources necessary for the reproduction of life, and the time spent on work is not a source of professional fulfillment nor does it leave enough free time to enjoy moments of leisure.¹²

Or, as one of his colleagues summed it up at the time, just before commenting on her desire to leave the neighborhood and the country:

“In Brazil, we basically only work to eat, because things are so expensive. I started working, and I’m seeing all this. It’s impossible for people to work to do anything other than eat.”

In the discourse of young residents who do not like funk music and dances, or among those who see these spaces as places associated with crime or drug use, the periphery becomes associated with a lack of spaces for leisure and socializing. Added to this, the lack of prospects for social advancement through work, and the lack of “knowledge” of the place causes a portion of the local youth to isolate themselves in the few locations considered safe, such as home or church, and to want to leave the “quebrada”, as the neighborhood is known. During the research, there were many reports of depression, anxiety, and the desire to leave the territory for more central areas.

However, among young people involved in artistic work, “the kind that is worthwhile,” work is described as a form of professional fulfillment and personal rediscovery that not only

12 Among young people who participate in local programs that encourage entrepreneurship in the periphery, work can be a source of personal fulfillment, but low pay and excessive hours dedicated to their projects are also sources of stress and questioning. Although entrepreneurship is often associated with a political or personal cause, many young people do not see much difference between their “side hustles” and the precarious jobs available to peripheral residents in the labor market.

produces political engagement but also rebuilds these young people's ties to the territory, a place from which they draw codes and symbols for their identification as peripheral subjects (Pereira 2010; D'Andrea 2020). Unlike a previous generation, the forms of identification produced by these activities do not point to a "working-class" identity. Within existing artistic collectives, the major mobilizing issues involve discussions about gender and race.

For the artists who make up Pardonizadas, the discussion about what the group's name would be was part of a long and gradual process of racial recognition and confronting gender inequalities. During the discussion, marked by their urban trajectories and difficulties in accessing cultural facilities, race, gender, periphery, and culture became a way of theorizing and appropriating the city.

"People from the periphery have to have access to culture, because it's very centralized, right?" commented João, a resident of the neighborhood who has made several appearances in a successful TV series about daily life in Brazilian peripheries. "It's very centralized, the plays, dance stuff... And something like this: I'm going to put on a play and take the folks from the *quebrada* to the center? But what will this play be saying? (...) How can we, as artists, reach these kids from the *quebrada* with our theater? Not by doing white theater, centralized colonial theater, right?"

The decision to put on plays in the streets and along routes used by many workers came from the need to address "life beyond work" and the exclusionary access to leisure and entertainment opportunities in the city. In this process, gender and race became central elements in discussing the right to the city and to leisure.

In this sense, symbols of the *quebradas* are proudly carried and displayed by these peripheral artists. Afro hairstyles, shiny clothes that reference funk and rap culture, flip-flops, and shorts become part of the repertoire of these peripheral individuals who circulate and perform throughout the city with these symbols on their bodies.¹³ If in the past "embracing the cause" of the periphery was basically limited to movements that fought for integration into the city and its public facilities, justified by the working-class nature of its inhabitants, today's youth engage through symbols and discourses about the periphery that circulate in public and virtual spaces that go beyond the territory, being incorporated and performed in their journeys through the city and the neighborhood (Aderaldo 2017). In this process, social stigmas are reversed and transformed into markers of belonging and affirmation, evoking an *ethos* that includes notions such as strength, transgression, and risk (Takeiti and Vicentin 2019). This affirmation is part of an aesthetic-cultural production that challenges dominant discourses, converts prejudices

13 Recent literature demonstrates how, in a context of intense political instability, the body and emotions have become central to contemporary politics. The reconfiguration of activism, criticism of institutionalization, and the mobilization of notions of experience and intersectionality are key elements in this process (Facchini et al. 2020). In this sense, Black and peripheral bodies become the political locus of the experience of inequality. By carrying, manifesting, and producing the socio-spatial segregation of the city, the body becomes a central part of a subjective experience of exclusion and the locus of an itinerant territoriality (Perlongher 1987).

into positive discourses about strength, transgression, and risk, and uses stigmatization as a vector for careers and labor identity (Nascimento 2011; Pereira 2010).

Thus, for this new artistic generation, territory becomes an important social marker insofar as it articulates gender and race to produce Black and peripheral subjectivities and bodies. For their parents, territory was particularly important because of the consumer and social class relations it expressed (McClintock 1995).

“I intend to continue living here, only in the periphery, in the quebrada, right?” reflects João, who sports a hairstyle with long *dreadlock-style* braids. “I think it’s the place where I feel calm. At ease, right? The people I know at my work, right? It’s a place where I feel safe. It’s a place where I’m making art.”

“In the quebrada, I walk around in flip-flops, shorts, shirtless, and everyone knows me,” he concludes.

In this sense, for those involved in art, artistic work provides outlets for a plurality of questions that plague youth in the neighborhood today. Artistic work offers spaces for leisure and socializing for its creators and public, reformulates and maintains forms of “knowledge” and local recognition that are important for children in their daily circulation through the territory, constitutes an alternative to the grueling job market and spaces marked by violence and crime, and produces engagement and territorial identification.

When asked what the role of art is within the neighborhood, Milene tells a story that seems to sum up these issues:

We put on a show in the street, without any funding. [We had been] without a grant for four years. Passing the hat, but marking our territory. Saying: “Hey, people! Hey! What we do here is theater!” And Duda [came], she’s another actress from here. She’s all of 10 years old [laughter]. She’s already been to Belém, she’s traveled to Rio de Janeiro... She traveled here and there, to various festivals with us. Simply because she was playing in the street and there were people there arguing. She didn’t know if it was a fight, if it was a conversation, if it was dancing... She went to ask what it was and it was theater. She sat down to watch and today she’s part of [the group]. And I remember that day, we asked her: “Duda, what do you want to be when you grow up?” She said: “I want to be a police officer.” We looked at each other and said, “What do you mean?!” Today, you see her working in the arts, earning her own money. You go to the market and see her walking around with her little pink card, paying for her grandmother’s groceries. She’s shopping with money she earns from theater, bro!”

FINAL THOUGHTS

For some of the local youth, the presence of crime and violence, coupled with a lack of socialization and professional opportunities, marks the abrupt end of childhood, a period in which they could move around freely and had “knowledge” of the neighborhood. Pressured by their families to earn money and take on responsibilities, many young people do not see many possibilities for social advancement and improvements in their living conditions. This

situation is in stark contrast to that of their parents and grandparents, who had vivid memories of their migratory past and were hopeful about the promises of urban and social integration.

Unlike the previous generation, whose urban experience was mediated by the almost hegemonic discourse of work and progress, young people today are influenced by different typologies that consider the periphery as territory, discourse, identity, or object of intervention. In this process, forms of action, engagement, and socialization have been transformed. The explosion of violence in the 1990s and the subsequent pacification led by criminal groups altered domestic and public life in the periphery. Simultaneously, the concretization of urban integration, although precarious, appeased forms of local self-help that produced engagement and political identities linked to the world of work.

However, throughout this time, one thing has not changed: the increasingly pressing perception of social inequality and urban exclusion. As Caldeira (1984) put it, looking at society from its margins is to perceive, in an unavoidable and clear way, the existence of a fractured city, a metropolis divided between “us, the poor” and “them, the rich.” This is undoubtedly the great controversy that pervades Brazilian cities: after all, what are the implications and consequences of being poor in an unequal society like ours? Access to the labor market, public facilities and infrastructure, consumer products, cultural events, and modes of urban transportation is indelibly marked by this experience of social exclusion. But, as mentioned earlier, more than “urban spoliation,” the experience of exclusion is a way of theorizing and acting in the “collective.”

For more than half a century, city dwellers have been circulating through the streets amid this great controversy. Since the 1990s, Brazilian peripheries, once dominated by the public and hegemonic discourse of labor, have become a field of dispute of different orders — crime, evangelical churches, neoliberalism, and the third sector. However, the transformations in urban practices, the growth of illegalities and informalities, and the retreat of the state and social movements in favor of a technical and punitive management of the peripheries did not produce an absence of political activity, as part of the bibliography has suggested (Telles and Cabanes 2006; Telles 2010; Rizek 2024). By multiplying discourses and networks that act on the peripheries, recent phenomena in Brazilian society have fragmented elements that are appropriated in different ways in this public controversy over what it means to be poor in an unequal country.

The dynamics of the process demonstrate how urban peripheries are not only spaces of exclusion or deprivation, but rather complex spaces of specific territorial interactions and practices. As Lancione (2016) puts it, these territories constitute dynamic laboratories where marginality is an epistemological and political resource, revealed through complex assemblages of diverse elements. In this process, artistic and cultural movements have come to play a central role in the reordering of these elements (D’Andrea 2020).

Thus, the mediating elements that traverse Brazilian peripheries — the territorial manifestation of this experience of exclusion — have taken over the public sphere and are used and reinterpreted by their inhabitants in contact with these orders. With the passage of the

generations that actively built the marginal neighborhoods, different elements were called upon to compose this territoriality. If previously the world of work and its binding morality were an important element of differentiation and the production of collective identities, today other spheres and diacritical signs establish the relationship between the rich center and the marginalized peripheries. Understanding what these symbols are, what relationships are established between them, and how they continue to actively produce peripheries and political mobilizations is an urgent task at this moment, in which academia and local agents are working politically for social justice and territorial transformation.

“Young people no longer identify with the territory” was a phrase heard repeatedly during the research. Aware of the current dynamics of the peripheries and knowledgeable about past stories of mobilization and political engagement, the local NGO team from the neighborhood sought different ways to engage young people in the proposed activities and produce an inclusive, bottom-up methodology. With this in mind, local staff spent years dedicated to producing the Neighborhood Plan and promoting courses in peripheral entrepreneurship, in which local young people would generate income from initiatives developed by themselves and identified with the local reality. Thus, projects considered “social assistance,” such as sports classes; and play, recreational, and leisure activities; were overlooked in favor of assemblies for making decisions about the community and entrepreneurship courses focused on the job market and the local economy.

These formal spaces for political representation, more familiar to a previous generation that fought for urban improvements, as well as courses focused on the job market and income generation, although part of a legitimate effort to democratize and expand resident participation, did not resonate with the expectations and experiences of most local youth. Aware of this dynamic, the NGO coordinators recruited more engaged young people for working groups that developed proposals in the areas of leisure, childhood, and youth. However, internal conflicts began to arise as older residents dismissed or ignored initiatives focused on issues such as race and gender. In this direction, local artist collectives continue to be among the most receptive spaces for engaged young people to act, as they are places where the territorial experience of this new generation is activated and performed through elements and discourses that speak to the aspirations of these young people, criticizing a meaningless and exhausting job market and offering alternatives for leisure and socializing.

Research on different forms of mobilization and belonging found in the periphery of the eastern zone of São Paulo reveals a remarkable generational transformation in the urban experience. While the older generation of residents found the basis for territorial belonging and political subjectivity in the struggle for urban improvements and the discourse of formal work, today’s youth experience the periphery under new orders, where job insecurity, violence, and the absence of safe leisure activities lead many to isolation and the desire to migrate to more central areas. However, the lack of engagement in formal political spaces does not indicate inactivity, but rather a change of arena, with peripheral culture emerging as a vital field of dispute and

re-signification: artistic collectives, unlike the previous generation, use the territory to articulate central discussions about race, gender, and criticism of exhausting work, transforming social stigma into an emblem of pride and belonging, providing young people with the aspirations of leisure and sociability they so seek. In this way, the periphery continues to be a locus of theorization and political action, with new engagements challenging hegemonic discourses and producing active identities in a scenario of persistent social inequality.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of qualitative ethnographic materials, including fieldnotes and interviews, which contain sensitive information and cannot be fully disclosed. Selected anonymized excerpts are included in the article. Additional anonymized materials may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical review and data protection considerations.

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