

Research Agenda

Thanks to the generosity of the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS), I traveled to Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil to conduct fieldwork for eight weeks during the summer of 2019. This fieldwork builds on my previous pre-dissertation research examining the counterspaces Afro-Brazilian women create and participate in within the Universidade Federal de Rio Grande do Sul (UFGRS). My research uses interviews, observations and artifact analysis to examine how young Afro-Brazilian women students' participation in organizations which center subaltern knowledges contribute to the ways they resist marginalization within higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. In the following summary, I will discuss several preparations that I made prior to arriving in Porto Alegre as well as a few lessons that I learned throughout the data collection process. I conclude by reflecting on my opportunity to immerse myself in a community and culture different from my own.

Preparing for Fieldwork

There were many factors that contributed to my productive fieldwork experience during the summer of 2016 including working with a supportive international hosts, interviewees and community members who were generous with their time and resources and being flexible and open to changes. Two months before arriving in Porto Alegre, I contacted my international host to discuss my timeline and goals. This was a key step as he provided me with crucial information including informing me of important dates related to my research. He put me in touch with several other professors and students to learn more about their experiences at the university and ensured that I had access to printing, office space and library materials as needed.

Although I hoped to schedule my interviews and have a clear outline of my interview dates and times prior to arriving in Porto Alegre, it was not feasible due to the time constraints of

my interviewees and their desire to get to know me not only as a researcher but as a human being. I prepared for fieldwork by: developing a semi-structured interview guide, keeping up to date on current events in Porto Alegre, researching local events related to my study on social media, and notifying potential interviewees of my arrival and time of stay. However, I found it most helpful to schedule the interviews when I arrived. I learned that interacting with people face to face allowed them the opportunity to connect with me on an interpersonal level and provided me a chance to better explain my research interests. This initial trust building process helped make the interviews flow more organically. As a result, many of the interviewees referred me to their peers including fellow university students and community leaders. I met with various leaders of community organizations, professors, faculty and university students. During my stay in Porto Alegre, I attended several Atinúke meetings, a collective designed for women of African descent consisting of many university students and community members. During these meetings I was able to connect with several of the participants and organizers and many of the young women informed me of upcoming events and activities that were related to my research.

Having a growth mindset and being open to change significantly contributed to successfully conducting international fieldwork. In spite of researching current events and keeping up to date on political happenings, I learned very quickly that there was a lot that I did not know and/or understand especially as it related to understanding the Afro-Brazilian women's unique experiences in the south of Brazil and in higher education settings. During the interviews, there were moments where I had to use our interview time to better understand contextual and historical aspects including the difference between being a woman of African descent from the south of Brazil compared to being an Afro-Brazilian from the North. When I designed the interview guide, I developed most of my questions to better understand the space(s) of higher

education and the counterspaces the women created to resist marginalization. I learned very quickly that women's experiences within their space in higher education could not be separated from their historically assigned, racialized and gendered place in society. Many of the interviewees shared interpersonal and institutional forms of oppressions they experience regularly in higher educational spaces. Most of the women also viewed their struggle and resistance in higher education as part of their responsibility to give back to family and community. The women understood their pursuit of higher education as something much larger than resistance to marginalization within the university – many shared their resistance to marginalization at a community and global level. Their struggle was much greater and went beyond the university.

Conclusion

During my time in Porto Alegre, I interviewed and learned from community leaders, professors, faculty and university students about the formation of unique counter spaces inside and outside of the university. My research was further contextualized by attending community events and department meetings with the two organizations with whom I worked. I am immensely grateful to the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) for funding and supporting my travel to Porto Alegre, Brazil. This fieldwork experience provided me with the opportunity meet and interview young women who are resisting racialized and gendered forms of oppression in higher education by creating spaces of their own.