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Blurring the '-ism' in youth climate crisis activism: everyday agency and practices of marginalized youth in the Brazilian urban periphery

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects upon the everyday agency of marginalized youth in the Brazilian urban periphery in responding to the climate crisis. In the context of the global covid-19 crisis, which has exacerbated patterns of social exclusion between urban centers and peripheries, we reflect on the extent to which current theorizations of youth activism are appropriate for understanding youth agency in the periphery of Sao Paulo. We seek to 'blur the -ism' in climate activism by introducing more multi-faceted understandings of agency based on young people's everyday (inter-)actions with their environment as well as their contradicting emotions regarding their vulnerabilities and potential.

Engaging youth in the urban periphery in climate action research: opportunities and pitfalls

In 2016, a major flood hit the municipalities located in the basin of the *Juquery* river in the periphery of the Sao Paulo Metropolitan Region, Brazil, causing several deaths and severe socio-economic damage (Canil, Lampis, and Lopes dos Santos 2020). On 10 February 2019, Sao Paulo witnessed equivalent to 50% of rainfall levels that normally occur during one month within a timespan of only three hours. The heavy rainfall caused landslides and flooding in various parts of the metropolis. Environmental hazards such as these are not unique: they have tended to occur regularly during the rainy season, albeit with an increased intensity and frequency over the past few decades. Many studies have developed an integrated conceptualization of the relationship between environmental hazards, vulnerability and climate change (Canil, Lampis, and Lopes dos Santos 2020; Kelman 2020) with an increasing focus on the social construction of risk (see Marchezini and Trajber 2016). We share the understanding that disasters are not natural; rather, they are a function of hazards and underlying processes of systemic vulnerability (Kelman 2020).

Albeit recognizing that disadvantaged children and youth represent one of the groups most at risk of environmental hazards, in our contribution to this Special Edition, we aim to go beyond a perspective of youth as 'victims', struggling with adverse socio-economic and environmental conditions. Instead, we focus on the capacity and potential of youth as everyday agents and young citizens, although with restrained available choices, in overcoming vulnerability in the urban periphery (Klocker 2007; Abebe 2019).

To explore the everyday agency of youth in peripheral disaster-prone communities, we have been engaging young people aged 12–18 in the municipality of Franco da Rocha, in the periphery of the

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Sao Paulo Metropolitan Region, in participatory youth action research. Field research started in February 2020 as part of a research project on youth agency in the context of resource insecurity, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation. As participatory research activities came to a sudden halt with the onset of covid-19 in Brazil, we found ourselves struggling with new challenges of researching youth agency while 'going virtual'. Covid-19 threw into sharp relief the existing inequalities and mechanisms of socio-economic exclusion in the urban periphery in Brazil. Although structural inequalities also impact some of the more central neighborhoods of Sao Paulo, peripheral communities suffer from more pronounced forms of marginalization resulting from two main exclusionary factors: distance and time. Difficult access combined with precarious public transportation and long distances enhance the gap of opportunities in terms of access to education, the labor market, and leisure.

Covid-19 also highlighted young people's variable capacities for remote learning and interaction, given limited access to the internet, mobile technologies and adequate learning spaces (Tenente 2020). As covid-19 exposes and deepens the social gap between the periphery and urban centers in Brazil, we have been rethinking the nature of youth agency in the context of the simultaneous climate crisis.

Despite decades of conceptual and empirical work on youth agency, this paper reflects on whether and how current theorizations are appropriate for understanding youth agency in the urban periphery. We develop a more nuanced discussion of 'what matters' when engaging with youths' perceptions of their own vulnerabilities and potentialities. Through our contribution, we seek to 'blur the -ism' in climate activism research by introducing more multi-faceted understanding(s) of youth agency. We illustrate this through several vignettes considering the pitfalls and opportunities of our participatory research with youth.

From traditional to hybrid conceptualizations of agency

Traditional theorizations of 'agency' have generally been human-centerd, concerned with 'voice' or 'voicelesness' and questions of 'Politics' (Kraftl 2013; Kallio and Häkli 2011). When thinking about youth agency and climate change, young activists like Greta Thunberg – who inspired the global #fridaysforfuture movement – come to mind. Theorizations of youth agency, especially when relating to climate change, have been mainly about agency for change and intergenerational justice (Walker 2019). Young people have become symbolic of this – through their politicized presence on the streets, in high-level policy events such as the United Nations Conference of the Parties, and through their social media presence (Greta has 4.1 million followers on Twitter).

Yet, we feel that these more conventional understandings of agency may be one-sided and do not do justice to the discrepancies in young people's realities and their different modes of engaging with climate change-related issues. As a starting point for broadening the discussion of agency, we draw on feminist, new materialist, post-humanist scholarship that seeks to question or decentre human agency (Kraftl 2020). We propose taking a more 'hybrid' perspective which includes the *agency of disasters* themselves. Disasters have a – disruptive – agency over people's everyday lives as they impinge upon livelihoods, processes, and routines. This has become most evident in the light of the global crisis of covid-19, which has changed lives worldwide regardless of social status – although, again, the most vulnerable are the most affected. On a smaller scale, this can also be observed in the case of local hazards such as flooding and landslides which, when paired with conditions of social vulnerability, turn into disasters. The agency of disasters, in other words, is material, social *and* political, as disasters expose the manifestations of long-term oppression, social exclusion, and environmental destruction. A disaster in an urban peripheral community seems like a 'finger' that points out structural inequalities between urban centers and the periphery, including poverty, unregulated urban growth and precarious housing which put pressure on local resources and ecosystems (Canil, Lampis, and Lopes dos Santos 2020). Where multiple disasters such as the global covid-19 pandemic and climate-change related disasters overlap, they produce the 'wicked' situation of a compound socio-economic, climate, and health crisis which cascades the situation of risk,

especially for those who already suffer from precarity (CEPEDES 2020). The controversial and insufficient Brazilian responses to covid-19 have vividly emphasized such multi-factorial vulnerabilities. In a society divided by a deep political crisis and threatened by a dramatic economic situation, denialist speeches by the president of the republic juxtaposed a scenario of resistance against the efforts of local governments to promote social isolation and prevent the spread of the virus. In this context, in the city of São Paulo, for example, the risk of dying from covid-19 is 50% lower in wealthy areas compared with peripheral areas with a high social vulnerability (Marques Moralejo Bermudi et al. 2020). The disruptive socio-political agency of disasters shows that we need to be careful not to simply (re)produce notions of agency which would not do justice to young people or the contexts with/in which they live. Thinking with the agency of disasters, it is young people like Maria[1] from Franco da Rocha who *experience* and *feel* the material and social *force* of climate change. More intense and frequent rainfall means that water floods the unpaved streets and Maria complains that she ends up with mud in her shoes. Sometimes, Maria says, her way to school is cut off by the floods. Although Maria might have much to say about her *lived* experiences regarding climate change, she does not engage in any 'visible' forms of activism – neither online nor offline. Maria falls off the grid of emerging research initiatives on youth voices (e.g. Kids in Action ICPHR), which focus on young protagonists with a presence in political debates and social media channels. This trend has been reinforced during covid-19 when social interactions have been shifted largely online. When asked about what she would like to improve in her neighborhood, Maria mentioned access to a public library and a swimming pool. Maria also talked about her struggle to contribute to the family income. She however did not mention climate change impacts – even though she lives in a risk area and walks to school with water in her shoes.

In the initial phase of our research, we have observed a tendency amongst young people to downplay or even *negate* their everyday reality in relation to climate risks. When asked how she feels about issues such as landslides and flooding, Maria did not perceive her community as 'at-risk'. What we as researchers may perceive as a 'problem', thus may be 'normal' for Maria, who is used to the flooding of her street or an intermittent water supply, whilst still other issues or deficiencies may be perceived as a 'problem' instead. This 'denial' and disengagement with her own reality, and this differentiation of priorities, may be related to a low sense of self-efficacy (McLennan, Marques, and Every 2020) and a lack of trust in change happening locally. One of our hypotheses is that young people, with little or no space in the institutional and adult arenas, do not see themselves as part of the solution and perceive few opportunities for improving the neighborhood. For young people in the periphery, change and transformation often means leaving the communities in search of a better future elsewhere, thereby excluding themselves from possible processes of change. Caught up in the daily struggle to make ends meet, some young people may not be able to think beyond their immediate necessities (Santos 2019).

Yet, does this mean that Maria does not care about the impacts of climate change in her community? Or has climate change activism in its current expression through youth activists such as Greta become a possibility only for the wealthy? Admittedly, in Brazil there are also examples of national NGOs such as *Engajamundo* which promote youth leadership by bringing the diverse voices of youth into international climate dialogue and decision-making (Santos 2019). Maria's experience, however, shows the limitations of '[(re)producing] a particular version of activism' (Horton and Kraftl 2009, 15) which is centerd on the 'glamorous or heroic' (Pile & Keith 1997, *vi*, in Horton and Kraftl 2009, 16) activist practices of key leaders or organized movements. We argue that it *is* feasible to conceptualize strategies of negation as forms of agency and even activism. Yet, to understand the everyday agency of young people such as Maria we may need a more multi-faceted conceptualization of agency which breaks the '-ism' of 'activism'. We need new approaches that reflect the realities of youth in the urban peripheries who are not able to imagine a 'tomorrow' (Santos 2019).

(Re)thinking youth agency in parallel with Horton and Kraftl's (2009) notion of 'implicit activisms', conceptualizations proposed by Kallio and Häkli (2011) may offer an inspiring starting point for reflecting on mundane forms of 'transformative resistance' (Santos 2019) in the urban periphery. When we '[acknowledge] nonparticipatory action' (Kallio and Häkli 2011, 63) rather than

'[viewing] non-participation as apolitical' (63), the discussion about 'what matters' in conceptualizing agency broadens in a direction which shows that youth agency is more than *Politics*. We suggest shifting the focus to how young people's experiences with their local environment matter in themselves. In this, we may need to broaden an interpretation of the term 'environment' beyond a focus on 'nature' to understand young people's *lived* environment (Pedrini et al. 2010; Reigada & Tozoni-Reis 2004). We suggest looking more closely at young people's *emotions*, including their complex and sometimes apparently contradictory engagement with their own vulnerability. This can provide important lessons for dialogical interactions in youth participatory action research as well as other forms of (virtual) engagement which aim to engage youth in critical reflection on their relationship with climate change.

Blurring the '-ism' in climate activism and new notions of youth agency

As outlined in the previous section, in (re)conceptualizing youth agency we build on previous work which questions the boundaries between activism and everyday lives and opens the debate to 'banal, day-to-day practices' (Horton and Kraftl 2009, 16), 'ambivalent and emotional' (Horton and Kraftl, 2009,17) and 'implicit activisms' (ibid, 17). We feel especially that this plurality of the of notion 'activism*s*' is key for opening the debate on agency to a broader range of matters that youth experience. It is in this plurality that youth may find spaces of expression for their variable, and sometime contradicting, forms of 'experiencing, belonging and acting' (Kallio, Häkli, and Bäcklund 2015, 113) in relation to climate change. Past research on everyday agency has mostly been deemed political and has juxtaposed young people's voice and agency (Kraftl 2013). While we do not seek to do away with such understandings, we propose a notion of agency which captures the diverse facets of young people's engagement, their emotional relationships, as well as their (changing) interactions with their everyday environments – especially in the highly politicized context of climate change.

Furthermore, we recognize that young people may not be able to exclude themselves from being 'politicized' (by others) in how they position themselves in their everyday environments. Yet, we feel that any form of politicization of youth activism should acknowledge the diversity and complexity of the expressions of youth protagonism – of youth in both urban centers and in the periphery (Kallio and Häkli 2013; Santos 2019). As in the example of Maria above, young people in the urban periphery experience a climate crisis which is *at the same time* a crisis of the absence and precarity of public (leisure) spaces – both inside and outside their homes (Souza and Adorno 2020; Tenente 2020). Resource insecurity alongside the insecurity of public space(s) has been exacerbated during covid-19. Youth in the periphery suffer stigmatization as their presence on the streets is perceived as a threat to public security (Hartas 2008; Punch 2016). During the period of lock-down, the image of peripheral youth as troublemakers was exacerbated. Those who refused to abandon their everyday space(s) on the streets during the period of lock-down were stigmatized in the media under the title 'teenagers choose to challenge the pandemic' (Souza and Adorno 2020). Structural shortcomings such as the lack of adequate conditions for youth to stay at home, due to overcrowded housing or a lack of quiet learning space, were hardly questioned (Tenente 2020).

In the following, we present several vignettes from our research with young people in the periphery of Sao Paulo to stimulate a more nuanced and critical reflection on questions of youth agency and activism*s*. Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis, the vignettes aim to spark a broader conceptualization of youth agency by introducing different elements into the discussion.

'How boring?!': bridging the youth-adult gap of a disconnected environmental discourse

One of the first challenges in our research was: what exactly do we ask young people to engage in when we ask them to engage with their everyday environment, resource insecurity, and impacts of climate change? Young people in the urban periphery engage with these issues on an everyday

basis. Nonetheless, we felt that the ways in which they articulate them may not match with language that we use as adults, academics, and policy-makers when attempting to discuss the current climate crisis. This however does not mean that young people are 'disconnected' from their local environment and larger issues such as climate change (Kraftl et al. 2019). Rather, young people (including some in our study) may perceive the monotonous and repetitive climate discourse of adults in the government, the media, and formal education as 'boring', top-down and remote from their daily reality in the urban periphery. Public discourse is often a discourse of blaming and shaming which presents peripheral communities, including youth, as the problem rather than part of the solution. Hence, what we face is not necessarily a disconnection of youth from their *environment* but rather a mismatch between 'what matters' to *them* and processes of communication around environmental issues and the agency of different groups. Overcoming this rupture, requires a collaborative process based on the dialogical and reciprocal interaction with youth to create legitimate knowledge. Understanding youth perceptions of their own vulnerability and their potential as young citizens requires (re)creating the dialogue according to their coding (Wallerstein et al. 2017; Giatti 2019). This means identifying and connecting with the social representations associated with their views, experiences, and emotions related to their local environment and global climate change – moving beyond 'listening' to their 'voices' (Kraftl 2013).

Building trust for dialogical interactions: the challenges of (virtual) engagement

One of the main challenges for creating the above kinds of 'dialogical interaction' in our research was breaking with traditional researcher-subject dynamics. Creating the conditions for a symmetrical and reciprocal interaction around vulnerabilities and youth potential requires confidence. To build trust with potential participants and engage in an informal dialogue about their lives within their own everyday spaces, we participated in a 'youth party' at one of the community social centers. Breaking the ice in between candy, hotdogs, and music was key. Receiving a European researcher in their community was a novelty for the young people. Hence, curiosity about *each other's* everyday realities, such as food and music preferences, was genuine. The informal setting also allowed a first approximation with the research project around questions such as: what is it like when it rains in the periphery of Sao Paulo as compared to cities in Europe? Quite quickly, initial shyness was overcome.

Yet, reaching potential participants who were not 'regulars' in the youth groups at the community social center was challenging, although we actively invited young people at their homes and at school. Some of the young people live in areas that are difficult to reach, especially during the rainy season when streets turn into mud. Their agency may further be compromised by their 'subordinate positioning as family members' (Punch 2016, 356) in cases where parents were unsupportive of their participation in extra-curricular activities. Although our research spans the age range from 12 to 18, we recruited especially participants between 12 and 15 who were keen on learning and not yet as involved in the daily struggle for survival at home by contributing to the family income.

Despite young people's initial curiosity, we soon faced another challenge: how to create a dialogue around youths' – sometimes contradictory – social representations of their local environment? Upon being asked to draw their street during one of the activities, one girl whispered somewhat ashamed: 'This hole?' Participants were hesitant to open-up emotionally about parts of their reality reflecting conditions of resource risk or insecurity. Tellingly, they also showed a tendency to perceive that 'things were worse off' elsewhere. Geraldo (14) perceived that his part of town got flooded because people in another community 'there in the favelas' were throwing garbage into the water. Literature on psychological disaster preparedness may offer an important lead for understanding the cognitive aspects behind such process of dislocation, denial and disengagement, such as self-awareness or emotional self-control (McLennan, Marques, and Every 2020). Moreover, the concept of the 'lived environment' may be helpful for understanding the spatial context for disengagement. Participants

may perceive 'problems' such as an intermittent water supply as 'normal' as long as their access to resources is not fully compromised and hence becomes life-threatening.

Continuing activities virtually during covid-19 created additional challenges. Many of the young people did not have access mobile phones. Some of them were able to use their parents phones sporadically but with little access to the internet and limited data capacity. This reduced the options for conducting remote activities which require large volumes of data for sending photo and video files. Our attempts at conducting photo-voice activities with some of the young people through a Whatsapp group, did not generate any responses. Interaction worked better when engaging into one-to-one chats (written or audio). A possible explanation for young people's lack of responsiveness, apart from structural conditions of technological inequality, was participants' low sense of trust. Moreover, their appropiation of the activities was low since only few face-to-face meetings had taken place before lock-down.

Me, an expert? Empowering creative and dialogical interactions

Successfully creating dialogue around young people's social representations of the local impacts of climate change and identifying their codes requires creativity. Initially, some of the young people in Franco da Rocha were shy and did not feel comfortable suddenly being seen as 'experts', especially in a setting that resembled a classroom and where it was difficult to not perceive us as 'professors'. We aimed to break this researcher-subject divide through activities that created more horizontal adult-child relations, enabling young people to perceive their very own abilities and talents rather than orienting them towards adult views and values (Brock 2020).

One example for co-designing pathways for (re)connecting to young people's local territories and realities were youth-led community tours. These were designed to observe and critically reflect on access to resources and the impacts of climate change with participants acting as tour guides, interviewers, and photographers. Participants were encouraged to 'speak up' (Brock 2020) and share their perceptions of their lived environment in different ways; one girl, who was usually very shy within a more formal setting of group discussions, found her very own mode of expression through the lens of a camera. Similarly, some of the young people quickly found themselves taking on the role of 'youth interviewers', engaging with peers and becoming more confident when interacting with adults. These brief examples confirm the findings from previous research on youth agency showing that '[by] participating and taking action, youthful agents gain self-respect and trust, become more aware and knowledgeable, [and] learn new skills and practices that help them to express themselves and influence matters important to them' (Kallio and Häkli 2013, 10). But they also challenge the assumption that simply 'giving voice' or seeing young people as 'experts' is enough – ascribing roles or capacities is not a one-off process. Through participatory action research, and more generally through dialogue about young people's *senses* of their *own* agency and capacities, young people may gradually reach more awareness of what they can do, within their reach, to create the world they wish for (Santos 2019).

Final reflections

We sought to introduce and evidence a more careful and critical understanding of the notion(s) of youth agency and activism*s* in the current climate crisis, and even more so, in a context where underlying vulnerabilities are being exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic. Rather than perceiving different expressions of agency and youth activism*s* as contradictory or mutually exclusive, we highlighted the need for a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding. We hope that our reflections provide an inspiration for continuing to blur the '-isms' in future research and debates on youth climate activism, especially when capturing young people's everyday socio-environmental realities in urban peripheries in Brazil and other similar contexts. As reflected in the example of Maria, an important starting point for (re)defining more pluralistic notion(s) of agency were the (sometimes) conflicting

feelings of youth in their everyday encounters with their local environments and with climate change. Moreover, we perceived a mismatch between youth representations of the environment and the overall 'adult' discourse. It is this discourse, not the environment or climate change, which is distant and disconnected from young people's everyday realities. Youth emotional relationships to their environment may sometimes seem unconventional (Kraftl et al. 2019) and possibly even contradictory; yet, they reflect young people's very own experiences, stories, and emotions. This sense of 'belonging' and 'connection' is fundamental for young people to start perceiving themselves as part of the solution.

At the same time, participants' tendency to negate certain issues made us rethink the importance of confidence, trust, and any assumption that young people will see themselves as 'experts' just because (visiting, adult) researchers ascribe that role to them. Indeed, the issue of building and maintaining trust can be a constant concern for ongoing participatory research processes (Christopher et al. 2008). This becomes especially relevant during the current context of covid-19, which amplifies current and future conditions of vulnerability and exacerbates systemic shortcomings related to opportunities for virtual learning and engagement (CEPEDES 2020; Tenente 2020). This increases the risk that those who are already marginalized will be left behind even further.

Despite these challenges, we perceive important opportunities for youth to develop a changing, possibly more sustainable relationship with their environment, and to experience an increase in self-esteem as well as enhanced capacity to communicate matters of concern with both peers and adults (compare Kraftl 2013). Finally, our experiences show that stimulating youth leadership is strongly connected to emotions such as fun and humor; youth engagement must be both 'playful' *and* take young people seriously to incentivize their participation and enable horizontal youth-adult relations.

Note

1. Maria is not a real person, she is rather the 'aggregated' voice of some of the young people we met through our research.

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