Education Abroad

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From August to December, 2018, I was an exchange student with the Department of Education at the University of São Paulo in Brazil. My semester in São Paulo was filled with experiences that changed my outlook on my research and on life. During that time, I collected my dissertation data, which is on black Brazilian women’s afro hair activism, and the impact of that activism on education. I interviewed activists and women who were studying to become teachers on what afro hair means to their identities, on their experiences with afro hair discrimination in schools and in society at large, and on why it is important for them to teach others to embrace afro hair. I learned from my participants that afro-hair activism to them is both antiracist and black-empowering.

I rarely encountered another person from the United States in Brazil. I spent most of my time traveling by myself to learn about black activism and history and around people who would be my research participants or who would connect me with participants.

I was immersed in perspectives that were distinct from mine, although they were also in many ways in alignment with mine because we were all black women. My participants were divided into two categories: undergraduate education majors at the University of São Paulo (USP), and afro hair activists from around São Paulo. Although Brazil has the greatest number of Afro-descendants in the world after Nigeria and the University of São Paulo is the largest university in Brazil, black Brazilian students and professors are a small minority at USP. To meet students for my study, I attended a black feminism course at USP. That course opened my path to meeting participants, learning about literature, and learning about afro hair events.
I also gained connections to activists via a hair salon. I went to a hair-braiding salon in São Paulo to get my hair braided. I decided to ask the salon owner and hairdresser about natural hair activists. I figured they would be more open to providing me with resources than they might be if I had called the salon without visiting and paying for services there. The hairdresser was a man, and therefore did not fit the criteria of my study. However, he connected me with a poet who writes about natural hair and holds events in which she performs her poetry. She participated in Saraus throughout the semester. A Sarau is a term for an artistic public conversation or performance. I attended one of her Saraus and met other activists there. I later participated in a Sarau, in which I discussed natural hair with participants. I also met an undergraduate education major there, who would later become one of my participants.

Another important experience throughout my semester was attending a ‘Blackness Meeting’ at a children’s school that is located within the University of São Paulo. This meeting is comprised of undergraduate students from various majors and an advisor. They are responsible for creating black and indigenous empowerment events for the students at the school (which consists of grades K-12). The undergraduate students receive a grant for their involvement in the meeting. I attended the meeting after an administrator in the Department of Education recommended it to me. One day, I discussed my project at the meeting. Two of the meeting participants were black women and had natural hair. I mentioned my project to the group, and they suggested that we create an event on natural hair for the children. We led an ‘afro hair workshop’ with a gender-diverse group of high school students. We used films by black women directors to critically discuss afro hair and black discrimination and affirmation, and then we adorned ourselves with turbans, which are a tool of resistance among afro hair activists.

I am thankful to have had the opportunity to learn from brilliant activists, high school and college students, and faculty members in São Paulo. I am also thankful to be getting my PhD, and to have a career in which I can contribute to the knowledge that is generated from academia, which is ultimately transpired to our society. It is through this contribution to academia knowledge and my honoring of the communities that teach me that I become a scholar-activist. Thank you to Jane Aparecido, director of the Brazil Gateway, for remembering my research interests and telling me about the exchange program in the Department of Education at the University of São Paulo. Thank you to my international advisor Fabiana Jadim for supporting while also being consumed with scholar-activism. Thank you to Sheila Perina de Souza, a master’s student in education at the University of São Paulo, for taking me to meet potential participant activists. I will never forget
my experience, and I look forward to continuing to honor you in my work.