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Choosing schools, choosing (adult) friendships

National language, progressive self-fashioning, and social envy among Brazilian and Puerto Rican elites

Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas

She discovered with great delight that one does not love one's children just because they are one's children but because of the friendships formed while raising them.

—Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Drawing from extensive ethnographic research among upper-class parents affiliated with private schools in Brazil and Puerto Rico,¹ I argue that upper-class parents viewed school choice not only in terms of aspirations for their children but as a reflection of therapeutic, personal growth projects and forms of self-cultivation and self-fashioning to which they themselves aspired. Not unlike middle and upper classes throughout the world, school choice among parents in the neighborhoods of Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and El Condado in San Juan, Puerto Rico, indexed political and religious leanings, language ideologies, and intergenerational aspirations.² However, these very choices were intricately connected to the

parents' efforts to resolve the social contradictions in their lives as members of racial and classed elites in two of the countries with the highest levels of inequality in the world. Schools were sites of friendship and social network building, as well as of an elite growing interest in psycho-spiritual projects of the self. Rather than reflecting an orientation to one's children, school choice was, ultimately, about who the parents wanted to be or become. Friendships among upper-class parents were enmeshed with moral distinctions about the relative worth of people, explicitly in terms of class and implicitly in terms of race and competing definitions of a good life and a moral economy of privilege. In this sense, Gabriel García Márquez's quote above is fitting as a point of departure.

While most psychological literature and lifespan models have focused on adolescence as the most rapid and active period of identity development, an equally powerful investment in identity – an “adult identity” – takes place in adulthood, largely forged around parenting practices and ideologies. Parents' desires for the cultivation of adult friendships and psycho-spiritual goals figured prominently in the school choices that Ipanema and El Condado parents made, based not only on their aspirations for their children but also on the psycho-spiritual, cosmopolitan, and “progressive” identities they wanted to cultivate for themselves and present to others. Ultimately, school choice was suggestive of an inherent ambivalence that the Ipanema and El Condado upper-middle class harbored and an inclination to belong to a parenting friendship group that reflected their sense of self as “good people” who possessed a neoliberal orientation toward “diversity” and “inclusion.”

School choice fostered discussion about the value of religious versus secular education, native-language education versus English-dominant instruction, and ways to “poke the bubble” of their privileged children, as I examine in this essay. Moreover, I discuss the increased circulation of a language of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” and “inclusion” that is associated with a US identity politics model. I consider how parents in Ipanema and El Condado adopt this neoliberal language, albeit with ambivalence, trepidation, and emotional discomfort, to associate their wealth with morality, progressive politics, and cosmopolitanism. Finally, I examine the strategies that wealthy parents deployed to introduce their children to socially mixed contexts, and the counterintuitive “social envy” those strategies generated among urban Latin American elites. I argue that these discursive, ideological, and affective perspectives on which Brazilian and Puerto Rican elites framed their choice of schools served as the building blocks to therapeutic cultural projects of self-cultivation which wealthy parents deployed to re-

cast structural social inequality in light of a moral economy of privilege this is how they associated school choice and adult friendships with understandings of themselves as “good” or “moral” people.

Parenting ideologies, languages, and social networks of elite schooling

There was a small universe of schools that Ipanema and El Condado parents considered suitable for their children. In El Condado, they consisted of about five schools where the wealthy parents or other family members had attended; in the case of Ipanema, the group of schools was equally small, but they reflected pedagogical preferences, not family legacy status. Among parents in both elite Latin American neighborhoods, the process of school choice pointed to the heterogeneous dispositions and subjectivities within the upper class, its disagreements and hierarchies, and the different orientations toward national sovereignty, cosmopolitanism, and the psycho-spiritual self. Parents went beyond rational analyses of college placement, course offerings, and class size to focus on a sense of familiarity, affinity with the school culture, and perceived similarity of values in their choice of school. Even families who occupied the same socioeconomic position made very different school choices according to a constellation of values and a series of subjective elements that reflected these parents’ largely cultural and idiosyncratic positions.³ While “progressive” parents in global urban centers in the United States and Europe typically seek public (state-supported) schools where their children could come into contact with a “good mix” of people across class and race lines, not one single family in El Condado or Ipanema considered public school a viable option for their children; in fact, in Brazil and Puerto Rico, only the very poor or low working class – those who couldn’t even attend a low-tuition religious school, in fact attend schools run by the state. Notwithstanding the unanimous choice of Catholic and secular private schools, Ipanema and El Condado parents insisted that they wanted their children to learn to “be comfortable” among different types of people. Stories of emotional discomfort and awkwardness in socially mixed spaces raised questions for parents about how to help their children “work through” that discomfort.

School selection criteria highlighted how nation-state projects were narrated in El Condado and Ipanema as a function of elite school affiliation and the psycho-spiritual goals of the parents making these school choices.⁴ There were three criteria for school selection common to Ipanema and El Condado: moral and pedagogical ideologies (e.g., religious versus secular, progressive versus traditional), language of instruction, and about becoming parents who were interested in “poking the bubble” of privilege in which their children lived.⁵

“Spiritual but not Religious”: Altering religious tropes in Latin American elite school selection

Silvana Villela Mattos constituted part of a cultural and social Ipanema elite whose material wealth was rendered legible through presumably altruistic goals for their children. Silvana wanted her child to be concerned with social justice and an agent of global change, to rely on “his own merits and efforts,” and to

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develop personal and educational strategies to be happy, fulfilled, and successful. Like other Ipanema parents, Silvana talked about her decision not to send her son to the “elitist” Escola Britânica: “Could we have afforded the Escola Britânica? Yes. But we didn’t want to raise the kind of child who feels entitled to go skiing three times a year, and talks about the hotel in Aspen and skiing equipment with great familiarity. The families in Escola Britânica go on those trips just to be inside a hotel with other Brazilians. They are not connecting with the local surroundings. Ultimately the question becomes: Who do you want as friends?” Parents were, either intuitively or explicitly, aware that excessive elitism or setting rigid social boundaries around themselves would weaken the forms of symbolic and cultural capital through which they signified their material wealth as moral and cosmopolitan. Yet, for Silvana another critical aspect of school choice had to do with her approach to spirituality as increasingly

detached from conventional religious affiliations. She noted:

Since César [her husband] is Jewish, we did not want to choose any of the possible Catholic schools near Ipanema. That would leave us with [Colégio] Corcovado, a secular German school, but between César's Jewish identity and my own Polish background, that seems like a crazy joke. For us, the only acceptable school was Escola Parque, which has a constructivist, secular orientation. Just because it is secular doesn't mean that it doesn't have values. It is that the values of the families there are more about being human beings, caring about the environment, not being wasteful or consumption-driven. The parents at Parque are more concerned about becoming their best selves, and inculcating those aspirations in their children, and the school fosters that.

Silvana's choice of school, while driven by her husband's Jewish identity, ultimately was also about shifting concerns with school choice away from the consumption-driven practices she associated with flashy, wealthy parents at the Escola Britânica, toward schools where parents favored self-cultivation and a non-Catholic psycho-spiritual orientation.

Being critical of the Catholic Church and Catholicism in general was considered a sign of cosmopolitanism and expansive worldview, as shown in the following conversation with Liliana González Padín and her husband, Raúl Bustillo, residents of El Condado whose children attended St. John's, a secular private school in the Puerto Rican neighborhood.

LILIANA: We grew up Catholic, like everyone here. But once we went abroad [to college in the US], we had friends from all over the world, from India, China, other parts of the US. We met Jews, Hindus, Buddhists.

RAÚL: St. John's, being a secular school, draws parents who are more cosmopolitan, more global, who are spiritual, yes, but not in that mainstream Catholic way. You have your typical American ex-pats, but you also have Puerto Rico-born generations of Hindus, Chinese – jewelers, owners of those Chinese restaurants, ice cream places. And you have a huge Jewish community. It is a Puerto Rico that you don't know exists when you attend regular Catholic school. It is the multicultural Puerto Rico, multiethnic. They don't become 100% Puerto Rican either, because St. John's doesn't promote that. It is more generic. You don't have a nationality. You also have more of the sophisticated Puerto Ricans.

A common remark among El Condado parents, like Liliana and Raúl, was that Puerto Rico tended to be perceived as ethnically homogeneous, and that they had come to experience "true diversity" when they

had lived or studied in the United States. The choice of the secular St. John's School was not only a way of challenging historical associations between Puerto Rican elites and Catholic education but also a way of reframing one's elite status as a global, cosmopolitan individual. Worth noting, moreover, is the generalist Orientalist focus; while the largest non-Puerto Rican population on the island consists of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, cosmopolitanism and school belonging in St. John's do not apply to Dominicans, who are generally viewed as poor and racialized populations in Puerto Rico. Rather, there is an almost Orientalist leaning in how Liliana and Raúl come to value diversity. Like many other parents, both in El Condado and in Ipanema, St. John's School parents had been drawn to Eastern religious practices and philosophies in their personal self-cultivation and personal growth projects.

Regardless of how anticlerical and admiring of Eastern philosophies Brazilian and Puerto Rican upper-class parents were, however, they were not entirely opposed to the Catholic Church or Catholicism. In this regard, they tended to be like most Latin American elites everywhere, even the ones most invested in modernizing projects. Like the Argentine elites studied by Victoria Gessaghi (2020), political elites in Brazil and Puerto Rico never considered it necessary to eliminate the church-state union. Catholicism, and Catholic schools, stressed the contradiction between money and values, and the Catholic focus on gratitude appeared to be a common way in which parents addressed that conflict. Presumably, God or destiny gave some people a lot and others nothing, and those who got a lot needed to be grateful and give back in the form of community service or being aware and appreciative (Howard 2013). In fact, an equal number of parents in El Condado and Ipanema chose Catholic schools.

Parents viewed community work as formative events that shaped their children's inherited wealth to conform to specific moral requirements, even if this "service work" in fact required no contact or minimal contact with "the needy." Parents wanted schools that helped them, in a sense, become a modern type of noble oblige, individuals who had a social responsibility and cosmopolitan orientation and whose children developed specific "ethics" and "ethos" about their future role in their communities, nations, and the world. This was how an almost inevitable engagement with race and racialization practices, long avoided, undermined, disregarded, and altogether invalidated by the white Brazilian and Puerto Rican elites, came to acquire nominal and even strategic salience at the intersection of parenting cultures and everyday forms of sovereignty.

Fernando Coutinho Leite and Gabriela Braga Vellozo, an Ipanema couple and parents of a student who attended Colégio Santo Agostino, an elite Catholic school near the Ipanema-Leblon border, remarked that “in Brazil, it is very common to be Left and liberal in terms of politics, but to be more conservative in terms of religion. These are very common contradictions in our society, particularly among the upper classes. They get married in church, baptize their children, but rarely go to mass.” Gabriela added, “Santo Agostino has a strong sense of social commitment. They maintain a crèche at Jardim de Allah [poor community] and are always raising money to help the children there. The older students travel to the North of Brazil, where the school also supports poor communities. A student from the school even founded an NGO to construct a school in the Amazonian region. The Catholic school has a Left political leaning and had a strong role during the military dictatorship.”

Through various religious orders, the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico and, to a lesser degree, in Brazil took on the education of the children of upper and middle classes through a network of schools that range in levels of prestige; in Puerto Rico and Brazil, only the poorest and lowest working-class families attended public schools. The choice between secular and religious (which always meant Catholic among my interviews in both Ipanema and El Condado) was less about a dogmatic approach to Catholicism or a secularist rejection of religious education than about parental perspectives on a form of Third-World cultural (rather than dogmatic) Catholicism and projects of the self; in some ways, this choice solidified Catholicism as a national religion, while allowing parents to be selective about which aspects of the religion to integrate into their own familial practices and psycho-spiritual goals. Whether secular or religious, upper-class urban parents chose schools based on psycho-spiritual directives that tacitly configured privilege and inequality in terms of feelings of gratitude and noblesse oblige. These values further contributed to the cultivation of interiority currency⁶ and would, in turn, bestow on the parents and children a level of social responsibility expressed through charity and community involvement. Parents in Ipanema and El Condado, and possibly in other progressive upper-class neighborhoods across Latin America and beyond, enlisted elite private schools not only to meet familial intergenerational social reproduction goals but also as institutions that affirmed parental self-cultivation and self-fashioning objectives; therefore, school choice becomes associated with less evident forms of capital not only (or primarily) for students but for wealthy parents invested in foregrounding their cosmopolitanism and emotional depth.

Defetishizing English: A Latin American elite’s anti-imperialist critique

While we waited for our falafel sandwiches at a trendy Middle Eastern café near Carlos Varela’s Silicon Valley-style office near El Condado, I asked him, the executive director of an educational nonprofit in Puerto Rico, what he felt were the things that, as a father, he would most like to teach his son. I found Carlos’s answer a bit unexpected. Almost choking, he stated, “For me the most important thing is that he learns Spanish really well. I want him to feel very proud of being Puerto Rican.” I was taken aback, not only by his response, but by the evident emotions this evoked in him.

Paula Pelegrino Da Costa, an Ipanema mother of two college students, had worked at Rio de Janeiro’s Escola Britânica, an international school considered highly selective but also associated with Barra da Tijuca, an upper-class area of gated communities who Ipanema residents disparagingly referred to as “the Brazilian Miami.” Paula noted that the few Ipanema parents who had maneuvered to get their children into Rio de Janeiro’s international schools often ended up transferring them to the constructivist Escola Parque or the elite Catholic school Santo Agostinho. “Why is that?” I asked. Without hesitation, Paula responded: “Because they realized that the Portuguese language is very important to them, as Brazilians... The main concern of Ipanema parents is to get their children ready for a type of presence in the global world. But there is another side to this. I’ve known many parents who are at first adamant about a bilingual education, but, once they realize the Portuguese language will suffer, they change their mind. They end up seeking a traditional Brazilian school where Portuguese is the primary language of instruction.”

Numerous studies have claimed that Latin American elites place a premium on English language instruction as a leading globalization, cosmopolitan, and social reproduction tool (Piller and Cho 2013). However, while all parents in El Condado and Ipanema expected their children to learn a second language, with English often being the preferred one, they were just as concerned about their children learning a “proper” version of their native language, Spanish or Portuguese, respectively.

Among many Ipanema parents, what they viewed as the “fetishization of English” was associated with a business or economic elite with questionable intellectual curiosity, psycho-spiritual dispositions, and other forms of non-economic symbolic capital.

That business and economic elite was considered in contradistinction to what many Ipanema parents called an *elite intelectualizada* (cf. Windle and Nogueira 2015). The Brazilian elites in Ipanema did not seek to position themselves within a global field of power defined by US hegemony as much as they sought to confirm their power domestically, in everyday ways that focused on cosmopolitan ease, as well as privileging national sovereignty and civic leadership. Importantly, the undemocratic nature of access to English, or any second language, in Brazil – the fact that 80% of the Brazilian middle class speaks only Portuguese – was reinforced by this elite through the provision of English almost exclusively in extracurricular language courses. Nevertheless, maintaining local sovereignty required a classed and racialized insistence on having children who spoke “proper” Portuguese.

Moreover, and while privileging “proper Portuguese,” Ipanema parents would only value communicative knowledge of English when speakers possessed total fluency and a correct accent; that is, a strong Portuguese-accented English was often the object of ridicule.⁷ Likewise, in Puerto Rico, US-raised and return Puerto Rican migrants – people who had lived in working-class urban neighborhoods in the United States – were also fluent in English. However, while this could have rendered English fluency an ineffective status marker in Puerto Rico, the opposite was true: for English to carry symbolic capital, it had to be close to a standard English with no trace of classed or racialized – “ghettoized” – origins. Ultimately, these Ipanema and El Condado parents considered English valuable provided it was spoken in a standard form and did not interfere with one’s ability to speak “proper” Portuguese or Spanish. Thus, while everyone valued English as a secondary language, there was an equal, if not greater, value placed on the national languages as elite symbols. In a few cases, especially among Ipanema parents, the emphasis was as much on learning English as on knowing any other second language beyond Portuguese; several parents had considered German-language schools, for instance, and many others signed their children up for Mandarin or French programs.⁸

Among the Puerto Rican upper and upper-middle classes in my ethnography, the English language was a symbol of both status and undesirable (colonial) assimilation to the United States. The upper- and upper-middle-class individuals I interviewed in Puerto Rico felt they had inherited the experience of US racialized Puerto Ricans. A focus on “proper Spanish,” for them, was intended to struggle against those racialized US-based images, as Spanish became almost a practice of ethical self-conduct to fashion themselves an interior space of reflexive selfhood. Perhaps more

than any other context, schools provided not only institutional spaces of linguistic performance but also spaces where upper-class anticolonial critiques were forged, particularly among self-fashioned progressive elites in El Condado.

“Race talk,” multicultural self-expression, and shades of whiteness

Notwithstanding academic perspectives that suggest race is not a topic of discussion among Latin American elites (Sheriff 2001), school choice and parental self-fashioning were fraught with conversations about race and color, the need to teach children about adequate “racial talk,” and expressions of white privilege through perhaps unorthodox racial aesthetics pursuits. Rather than viewing race as something they identified exclusively in darker others, the upper-class individuals I met in El Condado, and to a lesser degree in Ipanema, were constantly assessing, managing, and discussing degrees of whiteness and blackness in themselves, in their school friendship groups, in their extended families, and in relation to their children. In fact, Latin American white elites articulated racial privilege as *the privilege of racial choice and malleability*, not necessarily a pretense that race did not matter. This was not a version of the “mulatto escape hatch” (Skidmore 1993) or a recrafting of national mythologies of “racial democracy” typically associated with both Brazil and Puerto Rico (cf. Velho 2008). Instead, wealthy parents in Ipanema and El Condado examined their own friendship groups in relation to how these personal networks perceived racial and social inequality and engaged with whiteness. This was manifested, for instance, in how parents crafted ways of “being white” that offer a range of choices about how to “be white” and what that meant for their racial privilege across various scales, including the neighborhood, the region of the country, the nation, and transnational or global referents.

An El Condado resident who was the mother of two sons who attended an elite Catholic school, Maru Ramírez de Arellano had undergone a radical transformation from her adolescence through her mid-forties. While she explicitly described this transformation in relation to personal growth and interiority currency, at the level of the body this transformation was most evident in photos, including those in her high school yearbook. Those closest to Maru knew that she had had a nose job and chin and cheekbone implants, making her face more elongated and narrower, and a breast implant that highlighted considerable weight

loss. This was neither a big secret nor a source of gossip; it was just part of Maru's life in her post-high school decades. She had also strengthened and highlighted her previously curly dark hair. Maru was not a brown-skinned person aiming for a white aesthetic, but a white person aiming for a more stereotypically "Euro-American look."

Maru pursued Latin American white privilege through aesthetic projects that could be situated in a broader context of a renowned Puerto Rican intergenerationally wealthy family, which included her parents and three sisters, whom I got to know well over the time of my fieldwork. Over the years, I witnessed how preferences and affective attachments circulated among the Ramírez de Arellanos. While it would be impossible for me to attribute definite favoritisms to differences in each family member's race or color, I did know that Maru felt her other sisters were the respective favorite daughters of her father and mother because they were, in Maru's mind, more conventionally attractive and successful. By undergoing an array of cosmetic procedures, Maru in fact looked more like her sisters. Maru was not the only, nor even the most dramatic, example of these racial aesthetics. Among El Condado and Ipanema parents, Maru represented one of several cases on how cosmetic surgery intersected with gendered and racialized expectations of beauty; a recasting of privilege not as whiteness but as racial choice; and a repositioning of race and wealth in the realm of affective and familial perspectives on race and colorism among wealthy Latin American elites.

In reference to Afro-Brazilians in Salvador da Bahia, Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman (2015) notes that "the unequal distribution of affective resources in families leads to differential experiences of support, love, and encouragement, which has a lasting impact on one's life chances. ... Racial hierarchies in families lead to an unequal distribution of emotional resources and differential family interaction that influence perceptions of support, love, competency, and belonging" (Hordge-Freeman 2015, 131). The structural or material consequences of racial choice for Maru were not equivalent to those of the Afro-Brazilians Hordge-Freeman describes; however, the focus on race as the lens through which Maru engaged in perspectives on affective and family belonging were similar.

While I would have considered most, if not all, of the Ipanema and El Condado parents I met as white by local colorism standards, only some of them felt they would qualify as white on a global scale or in Global North racial logics. Focusing on the plight of Brazilians who are "white but not quite," Patricia de Santana Pinho examines how racial ambiguity is projected onto people's faces, hair, and bodies, thus transforming their whiteness into a mobile intermediary

position, which "sometimes moves up and sometimes moves down in the racial stratification of Brazil's pigmentocracy" (2009, 40).

Zaire Dinzey-Flores presents a "dynamic situational model of racial binaries" as a framework to highlight that deploying binaries in everyday social encounters in Puerto Rico is not inconsistent with the idea of the continuum.⁹ In Dinzey-Flores's compelling analysis, these are spontaneous binary distinctions with a singular color line; in this sense, a "panchronic structure of race in Puerto Rico may be continuous, but the synchronic elements are constituted through binaries" (2006, 11; cf. Cerón-Anaya 2018). White Puerto Ricans are likely to spend the sum of their "binary" experiences on the nonblack side without difficulty or challenge. Maru's approach to race as something that could be "chosen" or somehow manipulated was emblematic of the racial aesthetics of the upper class, the privilege of racial malleability, and a "racialization of class" dynamics (Cerón-Anaya 2018). Wealthy parents' memories of their own schooling and school-based choice of adult friendships often solidified class and racial privilege through a cosmetic approach to Latin American whiteness which, in turn, deliberately contributed to producing an embodied racial logic devoid of structural or political economic grounding.

Maru often remarked that one of her sons was "the darkest one" in his elite Catholic school. Being the "darkest one" in such a school context, however, meant being the "least white" student, not being a non-white student; it would be highly unlikely that her son would experience racial discrimination or structural marginalization because of his skin color. So why the focus on what she views as her son's limited whiteness? Statements like "aquí no hay nadie feo" ("nobody's ugly here"), a comment Maru made in reference to her observation that all the families at a school event were light-skinned, exemplified moments in which "attractiveness" as racial talk focused on aesthetics to allude to the nature of race and racism in relation to whiteness.

Unlike other Ipanema parents who explained anti-Blackness in Brazil by deploying intellectual narratives circumscribed to a national history of slavery, Vera Ferreira de Oliveira, a mother and Ipanema resident in her 40s, attributed a change in the public language of race to an understanding that not being proficient in racial talk was associated with being *antiquado* (dated or passé) or not cosmopolitan. In fact, the aesthetic approach to whiteness noticed in Maru's case dovetailed with how the wealthy progressive parents in my ethnography engaged with neoliberal multiculturalism as a cosmopolitan language; particularly in Puerto Rico, these wealthy parents expected to teach

their children “racial talk” and about global multicultural practices as a way to prepare these white Latin American students to deal with the racialization they were presumably likely to face once they attended college in the US.

As Omar Tartak, a Puerto Rican-Lebanese parent whose son attended a secular private school in El Condado, noted: “In high school, race or racism were never talked about. Because here in Puerto Rico there’s a denial of racism and because race is more fluid in general. I only came to hear those discussions [about race] in college [in the United States].” In Puerto Rico, the concept of *estudiar afuera* (study abroad) was entrenched enough in elite parenting culture, US colonial relationships, and popular conversation that there was no need to specify that “abroad” meant the United States.¹⁰ El Condado families viewed going to college or seeking temporary work opportunities in the United States as moments when their children’s bubbles would definitively be poked, as they would be presumably considered “minorities,” labeled “Hispanic,” or identified as “people of color.” Like El Condado and Ipanema parents, Omar had encountered Latin American elites of different nationalities while living in the United States. Perhaps unlike other Latin American elites, however, Puerto Ricans had stories about having their Latin Americanness questioned or their Spanish ghettoized by most South American and even Central American elites. Puerto Rico’s political status as a US colony limited economic agency in the geopolitical region, and distinctions in how prestige was differently disbursed to the “Caribbean” versus continental “Latin America” also shaped Omar’s experience.

Choosing schools that confirmed their understandings of whiteness and their interest in navigating the world of US identity politics and neoliberal multiculturalism with ease revealed some of the subjective aspects that forged adult friendships among wealthy parents across the variety of elite schools I considered in my fieldwork in El Condado and Ipanema.

Poking the bubble: Social envies, emotional discomfort, and mixed-income experiences

Notwithstanding the unanimous choice of elite Catholic and secular private schools, Ipanema and El Condado parents insisted that they wanted their children to learn to be comfortable and at ease among “different types of people” and in different social contexts. Stories of emotional discomfort and awkwardness in socially mixed spaces raised questions for parents about how to help their children “work through” that dis-

comfort. El Condado and Ipanema elites chose adult friendships that would support their goal of raising children who were conversant with issues of inequality, diversity, and multiculturalism, while known to navigate encounters with social “difference” and who dared to be “uncomfortable” in pursuing such social ease (Gaztambide 2009; cf. Khan 2010).

In her discussion of entitlement among wealthy New York parents, sociologist Rachel Sherman (2017) identifies two strategies that parents deployed to demand that children behave appropriately and treat others as equals: a “strategy of constraint,” which sets limits on consumption and behavior, and a “strategy of exposure,” which made children aware of their advantage relative to others. Versions of these strategies resonated with how Ipanema and El Condado upper classes resolved tensions around being an elite in countries where drastic inequalities and poverty were endemic to everyday neighborhood landscapes. While these were goals the parents had for their children, they were more than that: having children who ventured into experiences and spaces of social discomfort was grounded in premises around a US psycho-scientific language of “emotional intelligence” (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso 2000) and inner-world dispositions that parents associated with their own self-fashioning as “*personas sencillas*” or as individuals invested in emotional “*afinidade*” in their relationships in El Condado and Ipanema, respectively.

I witnessed frequent gestures toward what Allison Pugh (2009) terms “symbolic deprivation,” the strategy to manage children’s consumption, as a function of upper-class parents’ own anxieties over the desire to raise good people who treat others well, consume reasonably, and locate themselves appropriately in social space. These parents, for instance, were careful not to come across as arrogant or individuals who spoiled their children. Fernando Coutinho Leite, the father of a Colégio Santo Agostinho student, remarked that he would never take his child’s side against a teacher, because he wanted to create a sense of “*afinidade*” with the teacher; instead, he would view his role in settling student-teacher disagreements as one of “educating the teachers about who his child is as an individual, psychologically, affectively, and emotionally.” These parents were often successful in pushing schools to consider the latest methods, philosophies, and neuropsychological/pedagogical research, and to treat their children in alignment with their views on emotional depth, anti-consumption elitism, cognitive diversity, and global pedagogical trends.

Ultimately, a question that emerges in these attempts to “poke the bubble” of hyper-indulged children might be: Why were Ipanema and El Condado elites so concerned with pushing themselves and their

children toward experiencing the “emotional discomfort” that they associated with social interactions across class (and race), endemic to pushing the boundaries of homogeneity? In theory, the Latin American and Caribbean elite parents at the center of this ethnography could have continued to ignore the poor and dark, the marginalized or those “below,” and just carry on with life in socially segregated, homogeneous circles, as many Brazilian and Puerto Rican elites in fact did by moving to gated communities (Dinzey-Flores 2013; Ramos-Zayas 2020). Presumably, such homogeneity could continue to bestow the comfort of familiarity and like-mindedness. Upper-class Ipanema and El Condado parents, however, frequently mentioned that being emotionally indulgent or overly protective of their children would limit not only their children’s “understanding of the world” but also their own personal growth goals as adults and parents. In the few instances in which parents succeeded in poking their children’s and their own social bubble, however, they faced unexpected and perhaps counterintuitive unease, as I now discuss.

Fractured adult friendships: Rich jealousies and social envy in income-mixed experiences

In the exceptional cases in which intimate relationships developed across class lines among parents in Rio de Janeiro and San Juan, these relationships evoked “social envies” (Hughes 2007). The directionality of these envies, however, might seem counterintuitive. Through the conceptual framework of social envies, Hughes discusses how envy among individuals at the bottom of the class structure can have important political stakes in social change. Hughes’ model assumes that social envy is unidirectional, from the poor or socially marginalized toward the wealthy. However, in increasingly competitive parenting contexts, characterized by opportunity-hording in social, educational spaces and various levels of institutional commitments to “diversity,” and an increased level of capital attributed to being “self-made” rather than having inherited wealth, the envious gaze was frequently reversed: from the wealthy to the lower classes.

Alejandra Rodríguez Emma, an El Condado resident whose children attended an elite traditional Catholic school, took great pride in her ability to have friendships “from all social backgrounds.” From such relationships she had developed her own sociopsychological theories about how the poor’s self-presentation clashed with how her wealthier friends described those populations. More significantly, and perhaps

less expected, was Alejandra’s anxiety when she realized how her privileged son falls outside a valued meritocratic discourse:

There is a mom at [son’s school], Marisela Pabón, whom other parents consider an *arrimá* [social climber] and *come mierda* [snobbish], but I know the background. Her and her husband’s entire salaries go to pay tuition and swimming classes for their daughter. The girl is really smart, responsible, motivated, a ranked swimmer. ... The other day, I called this woman’s house because my son had forgotten the English homework, and I wanted to get it from her daughter. The girl was asleep, and the mother tried to read the English homework to me. I couldn’t figure out one word she was saying, because her English was that bad. I told her to tell her daughter to call me later with the homework. But you know what occurred to me? Who would Harvard want [to admit]? A kid like my son whose parents went to college and grad school and are still calling someone else to get the homework he forgot, or this girl who is in his same school but comes from those other circumstances and had to overcome obstacles and is still thriving?

It is important to note that Alejandra was not suggesting that her son and his working-class classmate deserved the same opportunity for an Ivy League slot. Quite the contrary. To Alejandra, the social envy emerged because it made perfect sense that Harvard, as a proxy for elite US education, would choose a mature, self-sufficient girl from a working-class background over her son who, despite having all possible material resources and social capital, still needed his mother to call about his homework. Like other upper-class parents, particularly in El Condado, Alejandra was drawn to other people’s rags-to-riches life stories, which she could not reproduce for her own children.

The dynamics of status-bridging relationships have broader implications for processes of social segregation and the reproduction (or intensification) of social inequality. When managing these friendships, people try to resolve structural contradictions at the micro, everyday level. In contexts of mixed-income friendships and close acquaintances, Ipanema and El Condado parents encountered and handled not only economic inequalities but also moral dilemmas around deservingness, the lure of meritocratic narratives, and the consequences of having raised sheltered and privileged children who often lacked basic life skills. Social envy among the Ipanema and El Condado wealthy acquired concreteness through processes of “intensive parenting” or “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2011). School-based adult friendships, while overwhelmingly homogeneous, admitted some level of social porosity along class and racial lines; however, rather than creating adult solidarity across class or

race, they ultimately raised anxiety and social envy among wealthy parents who feared that their children lacked the drive, resilience, motivation, grit (and other terms conventionally associated with the psychological language of “emotional intelligence”) that they saw or assumed in working-class or darker skin families.

Final remarks

Private schools were an important incubator of adult relationships in Rio de Janeiro and a foundation of class identity and enduring social networks in San Juan; as such, private schools provided institutional grounding to always-changing strategies of social reproduction among Latin American and Caribbean elites. A relatively small number of elite schools produced, transformed, and translated, in contradictory and diverse ways, family histories, racial aesthetics, and social connections upon which adult friendships were forged among Latin American elites. Self-fashioned as “progressive” and cosmopolitan, these elites remain firmly grounded in national cultural conventions and ideologies, even as they view global travel and connections as indispensable socialization strategies. El Condado and Ipanema upper-class parents recognized that the neoliberal language of diversity and multiculturalism was an increasingly important one to master on a global stage, and they hoped their friendship group would reflect such desired heterogeneity in ways unknown to older wealthy generations. Adult friendships mediated by the school context were instrumental in fostering and circulating broader ped-

agogical and cosmopolitan parenting trends. Focusing on adult friendships, and the role of schools in mediating them, allows an examination of how a moral economy of privilege operates among elites in neighborhoods like Ipanema and El Condado, which are viewed in contradistinction to “conservative” elite neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro and San Juan, respectively.

Choosing and cultivating relationships with specific schools, developing adult friendship networks that were extensions of the schooling experience, and viewing elite schools as vehicles to develop intersocial “ease” and learning race talk were fundamental aspects of a moral economy of privilege. Friendships that emerged or were cultivated as a function of schools – whether one’s own school or the schools one’s children attended – revealed important moments of alliances and fragmentation among Latin American and Caribbean upper classes in Ipanema and El Condado. The forms of relatedness, routines, and ethical ideals built around school choice gave institutional shape to how elite parents understood processes of self-cultivation and personal growth, not only in terms of psychological goals but as a function of social ease in contexts of inequality; achieving competency in the language of race and diversity and moving through the discomfort of socially unequal spaces became a proxy for emotional intelligence among these parents. More significantly, as schools collaborated with parenting goals and interests, they also framed neoliberal approaches to education and social difference, including supporting the white privilege of racial choice and malleability and revealing social envies.

Endnotes

- 1 This essay draws on a comparative ethnography about parenting, wealth, and whiteness in Brazil and Puerto Rico, which I conducted over eight months in each country, from 2012 to 2017. See Ramos-Zayas (2020).
- 2 While it is difficult to categorize this elite in traditional sociological rubrics (e.g., old/new money, intellectual/political/corporate), almost all my interlocutors benefited from some generational wealth either directly passed on through inheritance or from occupying high positions in family businesses. Most of them were also employed in creative labor niches that yielded surprisingly high incomes, including architecture, creative writing, psychotherapy, and jewelry and clothing design. Perhaps unlike European and US urban elites (e.g., Sherman 2017), Ipanema and El Condado elites valued cultural nationalist practices, like the preservation of linguistic and other traditions, even when they were generally sympathetic to US imperial, corporate, and colonial influences. Unlike older generations who unapologetically displayed and inhabited their wealth, these contemporary elites were aware of how
- wealth was globally associated with corruption and frivolous consumption.
- 3 The literature on school and elites has compellingly shown how social and cultural capital convert to economic opportunity (Bourdieu 1977); how processes of social reproduction and inequality operate (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009); and how school-family connections impact institutional culture (Torrueillas 1990). In the context of Latin America, one such work is Luciana Reátegui, Alvaro Grompone, and Mauricio Rentería’s *De que colegio eres?* (2022).
- 4 While income distribution inequality in Latin America decreased between 2008 and 2015, when most countries prioritized social development, this pace slowed between 2012 and 2015, and current levels remain very high (CEPAL 2019). During the time of my research, Puerto Rico had the world’s fifth highest level of inequality in the world, with a Gini index of .547 in 2014, significantly above the US average of .481. See Informe Desarrollo Humano de Puerto Rico (2016). Likewise, the Gini coefficient in Brazil was 54.1 in 2016 and slightly decreased

- to 53.8 in 2017. Even by the standards of Brazil and Puerto Rico, respectively, the cities of Rio de Janeiro and San Juan were highly unequal (Santiago Lindsay 2021).
- 5 Leticia Marteleto and Fernando Andrade (2013) note that most studies examining the effects of family cultural capital on educational achievement have focused on countries with a large middle class and high levels of income. In highly unequal societies, like Brazil (and Puerto Rico), they find that academic gaps associated with cultural capital are in fact magnified. In Brazil, schools mediate the association between family cultural capital and educational achievement; thus, the wide gap in school resources that characterizes low-income, highly unequal countries yields even greater differences in student achievement, and this is exacerbated by differences in quality between public and private school sectors. High-quality private schools act to further inequalities found at the social level, and research has shown a strengthening of the inequality in private school access in Brazil.
 - 6 In Ramos-Zayas (2020), I define “interiority currency” as an elite form of class and racial positionality and self-fashioning characterized by a salience of psychological language and a confessional quality in sociability and inter-personal relations. Hence, “rather than reiterating Bourdieu’s assumption that social action is always already oriented toward accumulating capital or advantages of different forms, I focus on how an inner-world orientation is irrevocably connected to evolving relations to class and racial inequalities and forms of positioning oneself in relation to conventional understanding of austerity and corruption in Latin America” (2020: 98)
 - 7 Both in Brazil and Puerto Rico, parenting practices have been marked by a heavy investment in English and in international travel to Global North destinations. However, knowing English, even being perfectly fluent in the language, was always subordinated to high levels of diction in Portuguese and Spanish, respectively.
 - 8 Funie Hsu (2015) shows how the policies of English instruction normalized colonial occupation. Neoliberal practices of global English mystify the fact that for many communities that have historically experienced colonial stratification, no level of English fluency can guarantee an equal footing in a world order that has been predicated on the hierarchical difference (Hsu 2015, 139). In Puerto Rico, for instance, English instruction in the classroom enforced the bonds of US colonial capitalism and prepared Puerto Ricans to meet US labor interests.
 - 9 Isar Godreau (2000) refers to this as “la semántica fugitive de la raza” (the fugitive semantic of race) to ethnographically demonstrate the everyday currency of the racial continuum, as opposed to the racial binary, in Puerto Rico. The continuum continues to have traction, even though as far back as the 1960s scholars like Eduardo Seda Bonilla (1968) and Rogler (1948) showed how black Puerto Ricans experienced lower socioeconomic levels and access to political institutions, were perceived to be unattractive, lived in segregated housing, and were discriminated in daily life. See also Cerón-Anaya’s theorization of “the racialization of class” (2018).
 - 10 Importantly, Ipanema parents and even some El Condado parents did not consider going abroad to college, or having international academic credentials, as indispensable for the goals and aspirations they had for their children. Studies in law, for instance, were viewed as something one had to do in Puerto Rico, at the University of Puerto Rico Law School. In part this was because there was a strong connection to gaining expertise in the particularities of Puerto Rico’s legal system if one aimed to pursue political or corporate careers on the island. In Brazil, an equivalent was studies of education or psychology – mental health, for instance, was viewed as context-specific – a degree from a European or US university would not provide the knowledge required to practice in Brazil. These perspectives were more common among families who belonged to a more traditional local bourgeoisie, where parents and relatives were influential and entrenched in the country’s economy and politics.

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