# Freedom, mobility and marginality: An interdisciplinary study of the historical roots of contemporary street youth in urban Brazil

**Abstract**

This study is focused on the lives of street youth in urban Brazil through an interdisciplinary and cross-historical approach, providing a conceptual analysis of three different but interconnected sources of knowledge: A historical study of vagrants in the 1800s by Fraga Filho (1996), the novel *Jubiába* by Jorge Amado ([1935] 1984) on the life of a youth on the streets in the 1930s, and empirical material from a current ethnography of boys and young men on the street. This approach facilitates a broader perspective on stability and change regarding the dynamics of street life, allowing cross-historical themes to surface. It reveals how young men on the street challenge socio-spatial and moral boundaries. While their marginal position empowers them and increases their mobility, it also encumbers their trajectories. The conclusion arrived at is that marginality and mobility are closely interlinked, as marginality is not only the cause but also consequence of mobility, and sometimes even the obstruction of it.

Key words: street youth, Brazil, history, mobility, marginality, resistance

1930s: He alone is the owner of the city, because he alone knows it all. He wanders through all its streets, taking part in whatever uproar or disaster might be happening.

(Quote from the novel *Jubiába*, describing the main character)

2000s: I know everything here, from one end to another. That’s because I’ve run a lot around here: Running, stealing, hiding in whatever alley.

(Excerpt from interview with a young man, 20 years)

In *Jubiába* ([1935] 1984), Jorge Amado wrote about the life trajectory of Antônio Balduíno (Baldo). Baldo spends his 1930s childhood in a poor neighbourhood in Salvador. Orphaned, he lives with his aunt. He does not attend school and learns about life by playing in the neighbourhood with his peers and listening to adults’ conversations on street corners. When Baldo is 12, his aunt is sent to a mental asylum. The boy is entrusted to an upper class family where he is raised together with the family’s biological daughter. The family cook abuses him, and eventually falsely accuses and punishes him, resulting in his flight to the street. Baldo spends his teenage years as part of gangs roaming the city centre until a violent encounter with the police disrupts the gang’s operation. Baldo seeks adventure and financial opportunities at the social, spatial, as well as economic margins of society. His years as a young adult are marked by spatial mobility, temporary livelihoods and fluctuating social relations, working as a boxer, circus artist, plantation worker, and dock worker.

When I came across *Jubiába* in a bookstore some years ago, it immediately caught my interest. Being engaged in an ethnographic research in a street environment in the same city almost a century later, I became fascinated with aspects of the novel that echoed the voices of the street youth I encountered. Reading *Jubiába* sparked the idea of connecting the past to the present, exploring the historical roots of contemporary street youth. I soon discovered that historical sources that describe the everyday lives of the lower economic segment of the Brazilian population are scarce (Fraga Filho 1996)—and those portraying the lives of the young generations even scarcer—and their voices are rarely represented in memoirs, correspondence, newspapers, or novels (Borges 1992, 7; Hecht 2002). In fact, despite a presence of children and youth on the streets in Brazil since the 17th century (Costa Leite 2001), the phenomenon was presented as something new when ‘discovered’ by journalists, social workers, human rights activists, and politicians in the mid-1980s (Hecht 1998, 97). Historians’ general lack of interest in young people on the street leaves contemporary street youth in a vacuum—‘displaced from history’ (ibid.)—making it difficult to place today’s generation in a historical context.

I aim to contribute knowledge about the historical roots of poor boys and young men in Brazil, adding a socio-historical dimension to the growing body of international research on young people on the street. I used an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, youth studies, and literary studies in order to provide a conceptual analysis of three different but interconnected sources of knowledge, all focusing on young street dwellers in Salvador, Brazil. By comparing the three sources, I seek to retrieve the social memory of poor boys and young men who were denied the opportunity of publicly narrating their experiences by the racial and socio-political oppression in colonial and post-colonial Brazil. More specifically, this article has three main objectives: (1) To show how an interdisciplinary methodological approach facilitates a more advanced study of street youth, enabling a connection between the past and the present. (2) To contextualise street youth historically to afford a broader perspective on stability and change regarding the dynamics of street life and enables cross-historical themes to surface. (3) To provide a conceptual analysis of mobility, marginality, and of the ways in which street populations’ daily life transgresses moral boundaries of mainstream society.

The article is focused on the interrelated nature of marginality and mobility by revealing how vagrancy contains a contestation of mainstream society—particularly values connected to work, domesticity, and family life. In this way, vagrancy and related activities deemed immoral or illegal work are seen as signs of resistance. Yet, as the analysis divulges, marginality and resistance do not only enable a cherished mobility but also enforce or obstruct it. In so doing, the article demonstrates how marginalised youth have historically used mobility in order to circumvent their circumstances of vagrancy but also to counter-voice representations of vagrancy and homelessness as a historical phenomenon.

The article is structured as follows. I first present the interdisciplinary methodology and the three sources I draw on. Then I describe the socio-historical context of the city and the conditions of growing up at the margins of it. The analytical discussion is divided into four parts, exploring common themes of the three sources. Finally, I provide concluding reflections on the methodological approach and the conceptual analysis, connecting it to the wider academic debate on young street people.

**Combining ethnographic fieldwork, historical sources, and literary analysis**

The city of Salvador, situated in the North-Eastern coast of Brazil, is the main locus of the three sources of analysis, which are an ethnographic study, a historical analysis, and a literary novel. Being the site of where Portuguese settlers came in and later on served as the first capital of Brazil, the city’s history precedes that of other Brazilian cities. Yet the urbanization of Salvador and its long history of young people roaming the streets are similar to that of Rio de Janeiro and Fortaleza, sites of previous studies analysed below (e.g. Butler 2009; Hecht 1998). A vital difference is the city’s predominance of Afro-Brazilians due to the sugar plantations’ dependency on slaves during colonial rule. The North-East also experiences higher levels of poverty than the rest of the country.

The first source is empirical material stemming from an ethnographic study of a street environment in the heart of the city in six fieldworks stretched over a decade (2005-2015). The location was primarily chosen due to the presence of street youth, but it also holds strong historical value and is closely connected—socially as well as spatially—to areas mentioned in the historical analysis and the literary novel. The first two fieldworks (2005-2006) form the backdrop of the following analysis. They entailed participant observation and in-depth informal social interaction with young people (aged 10–24) on the street in the chosen neighbourhood. The excerpts presented in the analytical discussion emanate from narrative interviews with key participants executed in the four latter fieldworks (2008-2015).

The key participants were 12 young men who either continued to live on the street or appeared regularly in the vicinity of the neighbourhood of study. I knew all but one from the previous fieldworks. They were on the verge of adulthood when first interviewed (aged 18 to 28), while the oldest was 36 years in the last interview. Four of them were interviewed three or four times while eight of them were interviewed once or twice as I encountered difficulties tracking them down throughout the course of the study. While a couple of them lived on the street almost continuously (only interrupted by imprisonments), most migrated between the street and *favela* housing. In addition to disappearance and reappearance of some key participants, two died and two disappeared.

The interviews were conducted at times and places the participants suggested, most commonly secluded parts of public space. They lasted approximately between one and two hours, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. All participants were informed about the project and provided verbal informed consent prior to each interview. The themes of the interviews were personal trajectory; family life; previous places of residence (family homes, neighbourhoods, institutions); relationship to drugs, crime, peers, police, middle class residents and tourists; reflections on their street situation, becoming parents, important life events, death, religion; and dreams for the future. Other relevant questions were developed as the conversation evolved (see Ursin 2013 for detailed overview of methodology).

The second source is Walter Fraga Filho’s ‘*Mendigos, moleques e vadios na Bahia do Século XIX’* (‘Beggars, street urchins and vagabonds in Bahia in the 19th century’, 1996). In his historical analysis, Fraga Filho uses a wide range of official records such as archives of the state and municipality, monasteries, medical institutions, libraries, and newspapers. He outlines the socio-political and economic context of the Bahian society in the 19th century before he explores the everyday lives and social relations of the most marginalised strata of the urban population in a historico-anthropological manner (Pereira 1996). Fraga Filho’s work is exceptional in that it not only engages with people involved in informal work, begging, and crime, but also describes the destinies of younger generations of homeless people. In addition, he explores the connection between slavery and vagrancy.

The third source of analysis is the novel *Jubiába* by Jorge Amado ([1935] 1984). The novel is used as an artistic testimony that enables a better understanding of the cultural processes and social reality of the epoch in which it was written. It is seen as a cultural text—reflecting social reality—rather than as a historically accurate representation of real events. Since the novel portrays the fictive lives and destinies of boys who grow up at the social, spatial, and economic margins of Salvador in the 1930s, it provides an interesting parallel with the empirical material and historical sources. The contribution of the novel is to advance theoretical and conceptual analysis and understanding rather than assert historical validity.

Although the novel is treated as a cultural text rather than a historical source, it is necessary to ascertain the author’s knowledge of the social environment in which the story is embedded (Kjeldstadli 1998, 103-104). Jorge Amado (1912-2001) lived in the neighbourhood in which much of the story takes place in the years prior to publishing the book and he used his personal acquaintance with young street dwellers as a foundation for the book (dos Santos 1993, 73; see also Amado [1945] 1966, 217)1. He is renowned as a representative of Bahian people due to his personal experiences and ‘intense life, side by side by all kinds of people in the city’ (Rabassa cited in da Silva 2011, 13), and is recognized by scholars as a ‘cultural intermediary’ (Seltzer Goldstein 2002) for writing in a social anthropologist manner (Risério 2004, 458). The novel is at the same time typical and unique, where the typicality betokens the social consciousness of that period of time—which is pivot in the following analysis—while the uniqueness emanates from the author’s individuality. Although Amado might have set out to describe real life of contemporary Bahia, his personal interests and engagements in left-wing politics saturate his novels, turning them into politico-literary works (dos Santos 1993). Yet parts of *Jubiába*’s political dimensions—including the main protagonist’s sentiments of injustice, revolt, and urge for freedom—are detected in Fraga Filho’s (1996) historical analysis as well (as further explored later), revealing the complex and intersecting character of individuality and social consciousness.

By using diverse sources of knowledge, the aim is not to compare or validate individual sources but rather search for and highlight resonance *across* them. By drawing on three diverse sources, their differences are not perceived as obstacles but rather as complementary, as they cover three historical epochs and three kinds of sources— empirical, archival, and literary—completing each other and enriching the analysis.

**The socio-historical context**

***Tracing the socio-historical roots of urban Salvador***

The city of Salvador was established in 1549 by Portuguese colonisers. Due to its strategic location and enormous sugar plantations, the city was the main port and first capital of the colony before Rio de Janeiro succeeded in 1763. At the turn of the 18th century many Africa-born and African-descendants were held as slaves. During the following decades rebellions occurred regularly throughout the region, where ‘the emancipated did not aspire another freedom except the right to live in cities’ (Calmon cited in Risério 2004, 308, my translation). The number of slaves gradually reduced throughout the century, particularly in the urban centres. However, the hierarchical structures and inequality remained through profound divisions between masters and slaves, whites and blacks, rich and poor, and between slaves, freed, and free (Fraga Filho 1994).

The region’s economy was incapable of absorbing free labour, and most of the free and freed depended on intermittent livelihoods. The condition of the lower segments of the urban society worsened in the mid-1800s with widespread poverty, famine, and epidemics of yellow fever and cholera (Risério 2004). The slave abolition in 1888 and failed politics to integrate the freed into educational and labour institutions resulted in a sharp increase in young vagrants in the late 19th century (ibid.). At the same time, rural droughts, international changes in commercial demand, and industrialisation forced people to migrate to Salvador. The number of inhabitants increased from 130,000 in 1872 to 290,000 in 1940 (Borges 1992).

In the early 20th century, the working class in urban Brazil was affected by unemployment, misery, and diseases (Risério 2004) while stark class divisions endured (Borges 1992). The demographic mixture of impoverished workers, vagabonds, prostitutes, and street urchins was increasingly perceived as threatening by middle class elites (Rizzini 2002, 167). Urban centres were of great symbolic value, emblematic of everything ‘modern’ (Fraga Filho 1996; Rizzini 2002) whilst the presence of poor was perceived as moral degeneration (Borges 1992, 79). To avoid impressions of decay and anarchy and prevent social mobility, the poor masses were gradually expelled from central Salvador (Sangodeyi-Dabrowski 2003). Embedded in a legacy to punish slaves, the main task of the police forces continued to be controlling the poor, restricting their access to city centres, and arresting vagrants (Caldeira 2000, 147).

A centre-periphery-model was employed in Salvador, re-instating a colonial border between the inside—the civilized—and the outside—the barbaric (Sangodeyi-Dabrowski 2003). The city was described as a ‘medieval city surrounded by African villages’ in the 1930s (Pierson quoted in Borges 1992, 10), referring to the socio-spatial segregation between the city centre and the mushrooming shantytowns in the surrounding wastelands and hills. Some of these shantytowns originated from *quilombos*—communities established by freed and runaway slaves—,which later attracted hordes of rural immigrants while being gradually incorporated in the growing city (Sangodeyi-Dabrowski 2003). What started out as a deliberately distance to the colonial city—escaping formal control—eventually turned into governmental neglect, enduring until today (Caldeira 2000; Sangodeyi-Dabrowski 2003).

Contemporary *favelas* cover great parts of urban areas. While shacks have been replaced by houses, and access to water, sewage, and electricity improved, these areas remain poverty-stricken. More acute, however, is the alarming increase of crime, drug trafficking, and violence(Lyra 2013; Zaluar 1985). Fear of violent crime has provoked affluent residents to withdraw from public space and re-enforce segregation through closed enclaves of condominiums, shopping malls, and private clubs (Caldeira 2000). At the same time, the poor continue to take to the street (DaMatta 1991) despite being perceived as intrusions.

***Coming of age as urban poor: past and present***

Young people have moved from deprived outskirts into the centre of Salvador for centuries. Fraga Filho (1994) documents how the street trajectories two centuries ago bear resemblances with contemporary research findings, describing how some children are orphaned or abandoned while others decide to leave the family due to poverty and domestic violence. A difference worth noticing is the vast number of young vagrants who escaped servitude in the 19th century (Fraga Filho 1994). In a society governed by colonial ideologies of European-descendants’ supremacy and legacy to rule over Afro-descendants, poor children—most often offspring of slaves or freed slaves—were perceived first and foremost as labourers. The idea of childhood as a period of nurture and protection was not yet popular and children were expected to learn to labour at seven years of age (Fraga Filho 1994, 130). Even those who were freed or born free were employed in subservient positions with rigorous discipline, corporal punishment, and gruelling tasks (ibid.) and many ran away.

A philanthropist discourse emerged among the Brazilian upper class in the late 19th century, rendering poor children as vulnerable and in need of protection (Rizzini 2002). The new discourse was double-edged—as childhood was perceived as a period of life where people were most inclined to develop ‘bad’ habits such as vagrancy and delinquency (Fraga Filho 1994, 138)—poor young people were recognized as endangered but also potentially dangerous (Costa Leite 2001; Rizzini 2002). A solution to the ‘problem’ was confinement and institutionalization (Fraga Filho 1994, 144)—the 1927 *Código de Menores* (the Minors’ Code) allowed the state to apprehend all minors considered neglected, abandoned, or orphaned, or whose parents were vagabonds, beggars, prostitutes, missing, arrested or declared incapable (Rizzini 2002) with the primary goal to control the poor and ensure the formation of future labourers (Fraga Filho 1994).

During the military dictatorship (1964-1985) young people on the street were seen as a threat to national security, and institutionalized children and youth were raised in a military style, emphasizing discipline and obedience (da Silva 2004). In the 1980s, Brazil experienced a social movement mobilizing the population in the defence of the rights of children. This led to the implementation of a progressive law in 1990, the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (Child and Adolescent Statute). The Statute refers to children and adolescents rather than to ‘minors’, ‘offenders’, or ‘abandoned’, and incorporates a constitutional obligation to family, society, and the state to ensure the rights of young people.

The number of allies of the Statute has steadily increased, gradually leaving the correctional-repressive perspective behind. Yet, recent updates on policing in Brazil reveal a persistence of the perception of poor young people as dangerous and a threat to the social and economic order, requiring repressive and aggressive actions (Rizzini 2011). As the Statue provides legal protection of children and prohibits prison measures, an unforeseen consequence of the Statute emerged: an increase of extrajudicial sanctions and homicides of marginalised children and young people (Hecht 1998).

Although prime targets of correctional, oppressive, as well as philanthropist policies, movements and legislation for over a century, children continue to grow up in challenging environments in urban Brazil. Racial and socio-economic divides endure; while 25% of white children lived in poverty in 2009, 44% of coloured children did (Bush and Rizzini 2011). In 2010, 3.4 million child workers were registered (IBGE 2012), many of whom engage in informal work in the city centres. Another 24,000 children and adolescents in a street situation were registered (Bush and Rizzini 2011), some of them weighing the perceived benefits of returning home against sleeping on the street with peers, close to recreational and economic activities. Drug addiction, drug debt, crime involvement, and death threats by drug cartels and militias have also become common reasons for young people to seek refuge on the street (Ursin 2011, 2014), which is related to the aforementioned omnipresence of drugs and fire weapons in deprived areas with gangs targeting and recruiting young people as they are allegedly protected by the Statute.

**Freedom, mobility and marginality among street youth**

The analytical discussion is divided in four interconnected parts. First, the socio-spatial mobility among street youth as liberating is explored. Second, street life’s rejection of dominant values and expectations is described. Third, reinforcing processes of social exclusion and rebellion are analysed. Finally, the three former sections are connected into a discussion demonstrating how mobility, freedom, resistance, and *revolta* are intersected in complex and manifold ways.

***Vagrancy as a call for freedom***

Amado ([1935] 1984) depicts the life trajectory of the main protagonist, Baldo, in terms of a pervasive longing for individual freedom. This ‘ethos of liberty’ is echoed in many contemporary Brazilian studies on street culture (e.g., Butler and Rizzini 2003; Gadd 2016; Hecht 1998; Ursin 2011)—‘appearing as one of the central nodes upon which their identity is hinged’ (Butler 2009, 19). Vagrancy as synonymous for freedom is linked to urban space—contrary to rural and peripheral space—as governed by individualism and equality (DaMatta 1991), symbolizing freedom and social mobility (Sangodeyi-Dabrowski 2003). The 1800s burgeoning city centre of Salvador was perceived as liberating as it facilitated livelihoods for poor youth (Fraga Filho 1994), in a similar manner as urban space and the wealth of the upper class residents and tourists attract youth from the periphery today:

Here [in the city centre] you help parking a car, you can earn fifty *centavos*, one *real*, two, five, quickly. At the end of the evening, minding cars, you realize that you have 20, 30 *reais*. [On the contrary,] in the neighbourhood you spend an entire day, doing nothing, earning nothing (interview excerpt 2008).2

Street life in the 19th century involved finding time and space to hang out and have fun, pleasures poor young people usually were deprived of as they were expected to work (Fraga Filho 1994). This is akin to contemporary street youth’s perception of urban space as a place where they can be free, play, and socialize (Butler 2009, 19).

Contemporary city centres are also perceived as vitally different from the urban periphery in terms of violence, as one young man described: ‘Everything is more difficult in the *favela*. The only thing that is easier in the *favela* is weapons and drugs’ (interview excerpt 2012). Because of fewer fire weapons and more vigilance by police and security guards, many street dwellers perceive urban space as safer than their home communities (Ursin 2011; 2014), especially if they have experiences with drug cartels or militias:

I have used arms and everything but I stopped, I don’t like it anymore, this is why I stay in the streets, because in the streets, at least, I obtain money more tranquil, in an act that isn’t a crime (interview excerpt 2008).

It was common to perceive the street and its invisibility as a refuge, for instance as a response to drug debt: ‘There are those who ended up owing in the drug outlets, left there and came here to hide’ (interview excerpt 2009). One young man also explained that he was safer on the street than in his previous neighbourhood because no one knew him—and his previous misdeeds—thus he was perceived as a sufferer rather than a criminal by passers-by. In this sense, their invisibility is liberating.

Poor youth’s communities of origin are marginalized spaces that stand as an antipode to the metropolis in terms of the socio-economic status of its residents and its socio-spatial characteristics. By migrating to the city centre and appropriating spaces that were created for the upper classes—bathing in fountains (Fraga Filho 1994, 116) or sleeping in the doorways of the modern skyscrapers (Ursin 2016a; 2017)—they transgress socio-spatial boundaries. Although they become ‘matters out of place’ (Douglas [1966] 2002; Ursin 2011), their position as betwixt and between in the highly segregated society also enables them to move through different kinds of social spaces. This makes spatial mobility a vital aspect of their sense of freedom—roaming the streets without compromising (Fraga Filho 1994, 133-134).

Historically, this freedom of movement through space entailed not only invading the space of the upper classes, but also accessing places that upper class citizens avoided or were excluded from, such as poor neighbourhoods, street parties (Borges 1992, 64-65; Fraga Filho 1994, 133-134), the beach, and the harbour (Fraga Filho 1994, 103; Risério 2004, 482-484). Street youth’s range of movement within the racialized and classed society was thus broader than that of both their poor and affluent counterparts. This resembles contemporary socio-spatial patterns where the upper classes’ mobility is restricted to fortified enclaves while the young men from the *favelas* enjoy great freedom of movement (Gough and Franch 2005).

Although nomadic existence is pervasive and desired, young vagrants also have gathering points. In the 1800s and in Amado’s ([1935] 1984) account from the 1930s, important meeting places were the port and the nearby beach. Fraga Filho (1994, 103) argues that these sites were popular because dock workers and sailors from Bahia and abroad frequented them, creating a vibrant social ambience while also enabling openings for odd jobs. Although the port has lost its significance among contemporary vagrants, the site of study shares many of the characteristics: It is a middle class residential area and tourist destination with a social blend of people on the move, including street dwellers, backpackers, and tourists. Just as the port, the bustling environment facilitates livelihood opportunities (see Ursin and Abebe 2016). Both places are dynamic sites with diverse social encounters, characterized by mobility despite their fixity.

These place-relations suggest that the freedom of vagrancy is not only connected to the ability to cut through space but also to develop sentiments of socio-spatial belonging, a paradox captured by Amado ([1935] 1984) when depicting the main protagonist:

He alone is the *owner* of the city, because he alone knows it all. He wanders through all its streets, taking part in whatever uproar or disaster might be happening. He *knows* all its secrets. His job is inspecting the life of the city that *belongs* to him. He watches all its movements, is acquainted with all its brave men, goes to its colourful fiestas, sees the travellers on and off all the ships. […] He eats at the most expensive restaurants, uses the most luxurious automobiles, sleeps in the newest skyscrapers. He can move anytime he likes (49, emphasis added).

The excerpt illustrates movement, both in Baldo’s life and urban space, but also a vital spatial knowledge and sense of belonging. This is echoed in contemporary street narratives, as one young man said: ‘Here I know everybody, everyone, I know every hole in the ground, therefore I felt at home’ (interview excerpt 2009). Profound spatial knowledge and a sense of belonging are therefore part and parcel of the vagrant lifestyle (see also Gadd 2016; Ursin 2011).

***Vagrancy as resistance***

Vagrancy was and continues to be enabled by a life without commitments and obligations in regards to family, school, and work (Fraga Filho 1994; Ursin 2011). Independence from parental, patriarchal, and institutional control is emphasized in the current street narratives, as in the words of a young man ‘I like to be free, [name of researcher]. I don’t like giving satisfaction to anyone’ (interview excerpt 2012). Similarly, another young man explained:

Why I left for the streets again? Because I didn’t handle being inside the house anymore, the streets attracted me, it was a lot of things, I thought I was the chief of my own nose and inside my residence, together with my family, I had to listen, I had to do, I had to say, thus I thought I was going to be independent [. . .] making it on my own (interview excerpt 2008).

By leaving the family house they gain control over their time, money, and decision-making, again opening up for new opportunities of intermittent livelihoods, leisure, consumption, and adventure. Youth vagrancy—in past and present—implies a betrayal of family values and the familial order. In 19th century, street youth’s situation outside domiciled and familial domains was perceived as violating the patriarchal ideal where every man has his place (Fraga Filho 1996). In a similar vein, discussing how street youth differ from their equally poor siblings and peers who do not consider themselves as such at the turn of the 21st century, Hecht (1998) notes how the former ‘have betrayed motherdom, the moral and economic logic of the matrifocal home’ (105).

Since vagrancy implied a moral contestation of work, domesticity, and family life in the 1800s, Fraga Filho (1996, 131-132) argues that it also conveyed contempt, indifference, and protest against the adult world of limited opportunities, epitomizing ‘infant-juvenile resistance.’ He links the roots of this resistance to slavery, agreeing with Kowarick (in Fraga Filho 1996, 104) that many poor people preferred vagrancy to submissive employment. Although Amado’s ([1935] 1984) novel unfolds nearly 50 years after the abolition of slavery, he also draws lines between vagrancy and the urge for freedom from oppression as the main character rejects the tradition of servitude, recognizing the freedom of street life as a last remnant from his ancestors’ lives; ‘the tradition of freedom in the African forest’ (26). Echoing Fraga Filho’s argumentation, Amado ascribes a reluctance to conform to the social expectations of his class in Baldo to work on plantations, harbours, or factories as rooted in a feeling of injustice.

The political consciousness of contemporary street dwellers is less explicit than in Amado’s novel as many tend to blame individuals in their personal lives for their suffering rather than injustice on a systematic level, accentuating homes or communities marked by neglect, abuse, and addiction, or drugs and violence (Butler 2009; Hecht 1998; Ursin 2011). Yet several also express a deep sense of class inequality and social injustice, as for instance one young man:

The bourgeoisie is something peculiar. Humility is something few of them have. So if I am to talk about the bourgeoisie, I will talk sincere: The bourgeoisie don’t like the poor, don’t like the street dwellers. Do the rich like the poor? No. Only as their slaves (interview excerpt 2015).

Engagement in illegal and violent livelihoods is often justified by unequal class relationships and a responsibility of the affluent to share their material resources with the poor: ‘You’re rich and I’m poor. If I ask for an opportunity of you and you don’t give me, I know you have [the material resources to give it to me]—what will I do? I’ll take [it]’ (interview excerpt 2015). In this sense, their involvement in illegal activities can be interpreted as resistance to marginalization and exclusion, similar to previous epochs, an issue further analysed below.

What the poor youth of the 1800s perceived as strategies to avoid labour exploitation, increase autonomy, and reassure their status as free, the elite considered as idleness and indolence: While work gradually came to symbolize wealth, order, moral, sobriety, and civilization, vagrancy became the antithesis, representing moral collapse, unproductivity, and economic regress (Fraga Filho 1994). Labour laws implemented in the 1930s strengthened the emphasis of work as a signifier of social value (Millar 2014). The laws drew a line between formal and informal labourers, where the former became the main marker of citizenship while the latter lacked recognition as well as rights. This created a worker-criminal dichotomy that not only persists today, but which is also strengthened due to drug trafficking, urban violence, and fear of crime (ibid.). Street life still represents the ‘wrong way’ of living in contemporary Brazil (Gough and Franch 2005).

**Revolta *and social exclusion entwined***

Poor youth’s reluctance to engage in formal work and have a fixed dwelling was not only condemned morally in the 1800s, vagrancy was also seen as the root of crime and a threat to social order (Fraga Filho 1994). Street children, beggars, and vagrants were ‘unwanted elements’ in the cityscape, to be removed or eliminated. This perspective endures today, as exemplified by a young man: ‘They want to remove street youth, making a world only for themselves [middle class residents] and the tourists’ (interview excerpt 2009). Another young man described:

Everyone discriminates those who live on the street, thinking that everyone on the street is a thief. […] We can’t even sleep on the street at night because there is this police car, if they find us sleeping or entering the supermarket, they put us in the trunk, take us to a deserted place and start beating (interview excerpt 2015).

While public space is (ideologically) egalitarian, it is structured by unequal class relationships (Caldeira 2000, 142). Social exclusion saturates encounters across classes in urban space, often imbued with avoidance, stigmatization, and fear (Ursin 2012). One young man lamented that while minding cars, ‘women, when going to *Bompreço* [local supermarket], would pass terrified’ (interview excerpt 2009). Amado ([1935] 1984) depicts a similar scene, illustrating urban relations in the 1930s:

The men who pass […] don’t even look at the ragged black boy who smokes a cheap cigarette and wears a beret over his eyes. The elegant women who give him coins shrink away from him so as not to get dirty from his touch (49).

Butler (2009) argues that familial neglect, social exclusion, and structural injustice cause anger, frustration, and *revolta* (rebellion and rage) among young people on the street in contemporary Brazil. He finds that *revolta* is one of the three main pillars of street identity, together with and closely connected to an urge for freedom and desire for social inclusion. Similarly, *revolta* is described as an essential force throughout Baldo’s life course, rooted in his childhood in poverty ([1935] 1984, 26).

*Revolta* is displayed through challenging the prevailing hegemonic moralities of the adult world (Fraga Filho 1994). First and foremost, by challenging labour and domesticity, but anarchistic undertones also mark the wider street culture, contesting hegemonic ideas concerning legality and morality. As street youth of the 19th century (Fraga Filho 1994, 117-118), the street youth in Amado’s ([1935] 1984) novel smoke cigarettes and drink rum. Many contemporary street youth use drugs, primarily marihuana, crack cocaine, and cocaine (Ursin 2014). *Revolta* also accrues an aggressive attitude in them, for instance seen in the ways they exert territorial rights, habitually declaring ‘The square is ours’ and ‘It’s us in the area’ (see Ursin 2012). Similarly, Fraga Filho (1994, 119) describes that young vagrants seized the nocturnal streets of the 19th century with laughter, mockery, whistling, and swearing.

Violence and disturbances seem to be part of the cultural repertoire among street youth in the 1800s (Fraga Filho 1994), 1930s (Amado [1935] 1984), and today (Ursin 2012, 2016a), targeting both peers and passers-by. *Revolta* involves cultivating impressions of fear, as described by Amado ([1935] 1984) in the following excerpt from *Jubiába*:

This time the street was deserted. Nobody passed through that specific alley. And the man with the overcoat was in a hurry. There was a red flower in his buttonhole. Antônio Balduíno came closer, the gang following.

“Give me a coin…”

“I’ll give you a punch in the face, you no-good!”

The boys drew closer.

“You’re a rich man. You can give us a lot of money.”

The man didn’t say anything more, for he was now surrounded by the gang. Antônio Balduíno’s face was very close to the man’s. The Negro boy’s hand was hidden in his pocket. A razor appeared.

“A big handout.”

“Thieves, eh?” the man had courage to say. “When they start out as kids, they really go bad–”

Antônio Balduíno laughed, opening the razor. The others closed in on the man in overcoat.

“Here, thieves.”

“You’d better watch out, we might meet you again someday.”

“I’m going straight to the police.”

But they were accustomed to this threat and paid no attention. Antônio Balduíno took the ten mil-reis, put away his razor, and the whole gang ran off, scattering through the nearby streets (57-58).

When the gang fails in begging, they seize the mainstream society’s image of them as unpredictable and dangerous, and assault passers-by. This is akin to how assaults are carried out today according to one of the interviewed street youths: ‘I come talking nice and everything, ask where they’re from and stuff, and if I see that the person is humble and stuff, I don’t do it… [I assault] the people who are arrogant, who deserve it’ (interview excerpt 2009). Another one explained: ‘From when I turned 16 and onwards no one gave anything, even when begging, no one gave. That’s when I started to rob. I started to use a weapon, putting an *oitão* [.38 calibre revolver] in their face’ (interview excerpt 2015).

Street culture has its own moral codes, discerning between those who deserve it and those who do not (see Ursin 2012, 2016a). By cultivating fear, street youth may increase their mobility, as suggested by the way Amado ([1935] 1984) depicts how Baldo and his gang ‘sleep in the doorways of the newest skyscrapers where all the employees know that the urchins have razors, switchblades, and knives’ (60; see also Ursin 2012). In this sense, fear is used to conquer the spaces of the upper classes.

***Trapped in mobility?***

Through violence, youth not only cross boundaries of morality and legality, they also increase enemies among police and previous victims (Ursin 2011). The fear they impose on others conﬁrms hegemonic prejudices that further exacerbates the hostility and the exclusionary practices towards them (Ursin 2012, 2016b). Hence they are not only fearsome, but also fearful. Their vulnerable positions on the street make them both potential offenders and victims of violence. Street life is haunted by death, and those who survive become symbols of resistance, as explained by one young man a couple of days after he had stabbed a street peer:

I’m still alive because I’m a *guerreiro* (warrior) and the *guerreiro* has to fight for his life, which is the only thing he has, he has to fight to survive […] so when the soldier goes to war it is either kill or be killed (interview excerpt 2012).

Likewise, Amado ([1935] 1984) describes how violence and death are integral parts of life on the margins. When the main protagonist kills a plantation worker, he reasons that he was ‘born to fight, to kill and one day to die of a shot in the back, a stab in the chest, maybe even a razor slash’ (Amado [1935] 1984, 155).

As the police was given the mandate to control urban space, apprehension and corporal punishment of young vagabonds became customary in the 19th century (Caldeira 2000; Fraga Filho 1994, 124). Although police violence against poor people has a long history in Brazil, the number of incidents and lethality escalated after democratization (Caldeira 2000). Today’s street youth do not only encounter severe police violence, but they are also victimized by drug cartels and quasi-institutionalized militias, particularly if they are involved in crime or drugs. The outcomes of such episodes are often fatal due the extensive access to fire weapons and the moral codes of drug cartels and militias, executing indebted users, rival cartels, and petty criminals (see Ursin 2012; 2014). Furthermore, the high level of drug trafficking and addiction among street youth deteriorate their social relations within the street environment, increasing the violence among peers (Ursin 2014; 2016a). Contemporary street narratives reveal a consciousness of risk factors and vulnerability, exemplified by one young man:

I was insecure [on the street] because, wanting or not, there were many victims. […] No one saw nothing: In the car you go, on a motorbike. You were hampering their business, their work, as they say, no one will investigate the death of a beggar. [In the eyes of the police], those who committed the murder, did them a favour (interview excerpt 2008).

Although street youth—both in past and present—initially seek refuge in the chaotic and impersonal streets of the city centre (Fraga Filho 1994; Ursin 2011, 2014), their invisibility is conditional. While transgressing socio-spatial, moral, and legal boundaries they also step into an unwanted visibility, being targeted by revenge. Their independence and their distanced relationship to domiciled and familial life intensify this visibility as it reduces possibilities of hiding, as the young man who had stabbed a street peer lamented:

Friends at this hour, [name of researcher], only God, because many people know what happened, but they don’t help, they don’t say: “Damn, brother, I got a place for you. Damn, brother, give it some time in this hideaway”. Do you understand? Become invisible (interview excerpt 2012).

In fear of reprisals, sentiments of belonging are often eventually substituted by anxiety and rootlessness while the visibility turns into a mortal threat (see Ursin 2011, 2016a). Paradoxically, *revolta* is not only tightly interconnected to the urge for freedom but also has potential implications: By transgressing legal and moral boundaries—as part of the quest for freedom—young people risk losing the very sense of freedom that they treasure. As described by Amado ([1935] 1984), after the homicide Baldo feels trapped by his wrongdoings: ‘He was no longer the emperor of the city […] Now the city was strangling him like a rope around the neck of a suicide’ (116). Akin to this, the aforementioned young man on the run was afraid of being imprisoned or executed by the victim’s brothers, constantly on the move in the shadows of the cityscape. The unwanted visibility pushes many young people into mobility, continuously seeking refuge. He complained: ‘My life is worse than a witch’s cauldron! I don’t have anywhere to go. Running from the police, owing others, with warrant for search and seizure’ (interview excerpt 2012). The young vagrants’ mobility is not merely positive, liberating, and empowering, but also restraining and, at times, suffocating. In this sense, street life often involves a ‘reluctant mobility’ forced by circumstances rather than choice (Jones and Thomas de Benitez 2009). As the subsequent discussion shows, mobility is not necessarily opposed to fixity yet some young people are fixed in it (Jackson 2012).

**Centuries of marginality: Concluding comments**

Although ignored in most historical accounts, young people are ‘enmeshed in almost all aspects in Latin American history’ (Hecht 2002, 9).By drawing on a historical study of young vagrants of the 19th century, the literary novel of the 1930s, and a contemporary empirical study, this article sought to retrieve parts of the social memory of ‘lost’ generations of street youth in urban Brazil. The theoretical analysis reveals that many socio-spatial patterns of colonial times—social exclusion, resistance, and counteraction—prevail. It divulges the continuous paradoxes of urban space from the perspective of street youth; representing both inclusion and exclusion; invisibility and visibility; mobility and belonging; freedom and entrapment.

By exploring the lives of street youth in a cross-historical perspective, themes of mobility, freedom, and *revolta* emerged. The historical, literary, and empirical material demonstrates similar patterns of socio-spatial, moral, and legal transgression. These patterns of transgression reveal how the marginal position of street youth empowers and encumber them at the same time. By occupying spaces outside deprived neighbourhoods, they are ‘matters out of place’ (Douglas [1966] 2002; Ursin 2011).Yet this position as betwixt and between—neither outside nor inside society—increases their spatial mobility, navigating across socio-spatial boundaries of class and urbanity. In this way their marginality is empowering and deeply intertwined with their call for freedom. Moreover, their marginal position relies on an absence of parental and patriarchal commitments and a reluctance to conform. Their urge for freedom and contempt for conventional (adult) way of living can be traced back to a resistance against slavery and exploitative class relations. A vital part of this resistance and search for freedom involves challenging conventional moral boundaries, not only when it comes to domesticity and employment, but also regarding intoxication, violence, and crime.

The marginality of street youth is closely entangled with mutual reinforcing processes of *revolta* towards and social exclusion by mainstream society. Both these processes can increase or reduce their mobility. Their position as betwixt and between increases their mobility while their ‘out-of-place-ness’ curbs it when they are in need of hideouts. Acts of *revolta* may increase their spatial mobility as they gain territory by imposing fear on others, yet aggressive acts may also reduce mobility or force mobility as well as avoidance of no-go areas when they are wanted by police or previous victims (see Ursin 2012). In this sense, their marginality is not only the cause but also the consequence of their mobility, and sometimes even the obstruction of it. Moreover, their marginality enables the freedom they cherish but also contains a risk of losing it, feeling haunted or becoming imprisoned.

Describing mobility and marginality at the core of street life is not new within the literature on the lives of young people on the street. Researchers have documented street mobility to be fluid and circular, ‘involved in wider geographies, moving across greater distances and adapting to changing surroundings and environments’ (van Blerk and Ansell 2006, 449), driven by a search for new identities (Beazley 2003; van Blerk 2005), livelihoods and survival (Abebe 2008; Beazley 2015; Evans 2005; Ursin and Abebe 2016), and safety and freedom (Beazley 2015; Butler 2009; van Blerk 2012; Ursin 2011). Although not always explicitly stated, there is often a notion of resistance in the mobilities detected. As Beazley (2015) reports, Indonesian street children’s mobility is ‘spreading their subculture and subverting the state’s discourse on the need for stability and immobility and dominant ideals of family, home, and the ideal child’ (17).

The documentation of mobility among young street populations in recent decades is not only a response to the ‘mobility turn’ within social sciences (see Cresswell 2010), but more importantly a part of the wider literature within children and youth studies, which often echoes an erroneous assumption that street youth ‘are not simultaneously victims of larger political and economic machinations that severely impact their lives’ (Kovats-Bernat 2006, 7). The historical evidence and ethnographic data show how young people’s mobility is complex, manifold, and ambiguous. The conceptual analysis reveals that mobility is not merely a response to but also enabled by and a result of the marginal position the young street dwellers hold. It thereby supports recent arguments challenging the perception of mobility as essentially positive, liberating, and empowering (Cresswell 2006). As Massey (1993) asserts, mobility is differentiated, ‘some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it’ (61). This article adds to the line of argument of Jones and Thomas de Benitez (2009), who found ‘reluctant mobility’ among young Mexicans on the street—oscillating between street and institutions due to unhappiness rather than choice—and van Blerk (2013), who witnessed how the everyday geographies of young people on the street in Cape Town were heavily constrained during the FIFA World Cup.

The article shows that a conceptual analysis drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, historical sources, and literary analysis is helpful. First and foremost because it adds a socio-historical dimension to the growing body of research on young people on the street. This is of importance *per se* since marginalised young populations are underrepresented in historical studies (Fraga Filho 1996; Hecht 2002) and because street children are habitually presented as a recent phenomenon (Hecht 1998, 97). In this lies a critique of literature that tends to represent contemporary homelessness, marginality, and poverty as ahistorical ‘social ills’ while ignoring the ways in which the phenomena are structurally embedded in society. The analysis of the three sources situates homelessness in a historical context. Moreover, the cross-historical analysis enables us to explore patterns *across* history. In so doing, it reveals a connection between the periods of slavery, wake of abolition, and today by linking *revolta* and vagrancy to resistance of servitude, submissive employment and class hierarchy. An imperative essence of street life—consisting of freedom, *revolta,* mobility, and marginality—materialises, not merely as something contemporary but also persisting through time and in spite of temporal changes. The cross-historical and interdisciplinary approach thus advances the theoretical discussion around mobility and marginality, opening up for a more nuanced perspective of mobility as not something exclusively positive and empowering.

A limitation of an analytical comparison through a historical lens and a search for patterns is the risk of glossing over differences. It is vital to emphasize the additional challenges and risks that street youth encounter today. This includes drug addiction, weapons, and a normalization of lethal attacks by police, drug cartels, and militias. These factors are reinforced by and continue reinforcing processes of marginalization, both on an individual and structural level (Ursin 2012; 2014). The similarities of growing up on the socio-economic margins of urban Brazil in the 1800s, 1930s, and 2000s lie in marginality, and how street youth’s position is entwined in the social dynamics of class society. The analysis reveals how marginality is related to the ways in which street youth transgress boundaries and how this works in both empowering and disempowering ways, strengthening as well as constraining their sense of freedom.

**Endnotes**

1 *Jubiába* is a complex novel that characterizes many vital aspects of Amado’s Bahia—such as Afro-originated culture and religion, the rural life on the sugar plantations, and unionist struggles at the docks—yet these aspects are of less importance in this article. Two years after *Jubiába* waslaunched, Amado published *Capitães da areia* ([1937] 2013). The main protagonists are a gang of children who roam the streets of Salvador. *Jubiába* serves as a more valuable source in this article as it depicts the transitions from childhood to youth and young adulthood whereas *Capitães da areia* only portrays children aged seven to 15.

2 It is 100 *centavos* in one *real* (pl. *reais*). One *real* was equivalent to approximately 0,42US$ at the time of the interview.

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