Perceptions of inequality in Brazil:
The lived experiences and oral histories of mining communities in Ouro Preto

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The investment in cultural heritage is common in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Mining activities in the area date back to colonial years and when thriving in the region, mining wealth produced baroque constructions. The relationship of mining and heritage is thus, most of the time, one of reciprocity: previous mining lead to wealthy constructions that are now preserved. The maintenance of such constructions is expensive and new mining industries often negotiate industrial permits offering as compensation the upkeep of cultural goods. Heritage, however, threatens mining and when the former grows, the latter has to move further out.

Adding to the complexity between mining and heritage is the fact that the wealth production through both mining and heritage are not always locally seized. Mining activities can create sceneries of destruction and local jobs not always follows depending on technology and training available. In the case of heritage, it not always leads to better living conditions as it often increases living costs.

Ever since Ouro Preto’s city centre was made a national monument in the 1930s and hailed as a World Heritage Site in the 1980s the town has seen population growth, with increasing numbers of students and visitors each year. However, everyday experiences in Ouro Preto, gathered during fieldwork in the year of 2013, demonstrate that preserved areas do not enjoy shared local engagement. Despite the fact residents find jobs in the local university, hotels, and restaurants, they often complain that their employment (commonly temporary) does not offer compensations that reflect the prices in a touristic and cultural/educational city. There is a sense of instability in everyday Ouro Preto, with residents relying on informal jobs and houses in a flagrant contrast with the permanence of buildings that temporary residents (students and tourists) enjoy. Thus locally, places and stories did not live up to their reputations as celebrated heroic national spaces and residents often view those spaces as echoing colonial injustices.

In addition, investment in cultural heritage, as a result of mining permits in the outskirts of Ouro Preto, contrasts with residents’ notions of improvements that could be
made to their vicinity, which would involve reducing the level of dust and noise and finding a solution to water problems caused by mining activities.

In this presentation I will explore how the residents of Miguel Burnier, a mining district in the city of Ouro Preto, perceived temporalities and gains in the preservation of cultural heritage and the renewal of some local constructions as a compensation for mining investments. I take as mine the task to interrogate to what extent is the imagination of another time (past and future) available to residents facing present pressing scarcities. I reflect on the work of scholars such as Appadurai (2013) and Souza (2010) who have stated the social limits of imagining another time in the face of present decay. According to that scholarship, the horizons in choice for the poor are often “material and proximate” (Appadurai 2013, 188). However, a body of anthropological literature also exists which foregrounds the use of a future time to transform a distressing present (Nielsen 2014, Baxstrom 2013). In this case, “the present becomes the effect of the future rather than vice-versa” (Nielsen 2014, 166).

By grappling with the perspectives presented above, I ask whether imagining a different future for Miguel Burnier – through preserved architecture and upcoming urban amenities – may mediate a troublesome present, characterized by a deficit in infrastructure, depopulation and industrial pollution. Despite current scarcities, imagining another time may be possible to residents when they are involved in the process of considering their past and future path. The second question I look at in this article is thus connected to participatory city planning.

When residents are directly involved in city planning and preservation, do past and future may have a more tangible form? In other words, does participation have the ability to generate for the poor new ways to imagine another time? I will suggest an answer to the above questions by examining the opportunity offered to residents to discuss their vicinity in grassroots negotiations with a mining company.