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“STARTUP LIFE” IN FLORIANÓPOLIS AND BEYOND: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Virgínia Squizani Rodrigues

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Abstract: In this essay, I relate my personal journey around the world of startups in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil and Silicon Valley, California, USA through a critical analysis of my personal past experiences – first as a startup founder, then as a WebTV series host, and finally as a startup marketing “manager”. Using autoethnography as a research method, I present some of the values promoted by the culture of the startups from Florianópolis as well as the difficulties some entrepreneurs might face when building a new business. Supported by critical literature on contemporary ways of working, I portray some aspects of the *modus operandi* of the technological innovation center once known as “the Silicon Valley of Brazil”.

Keywords: startup world, work, gender, autoethnography, Silicon Valley, Florianópolis, Brazil

Introduction

This essay is an autoethnographic practice combined with a critical analysis of my personal past experiences. I employ this format to depict the difficulties I encountered as a young startup entrepreneur and marketing “manager”, as well as some aspects of the startup business culture in the *innovation ecosystem* of Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil, once known as *the Silicon Valley of Brazil*. My main goal is to describe the contradictions a person can experience in the startup world. How does it feel to be part of the re-enchanting industry of capitalism? Can the flexible life, filled with meaning and purpose through a job, actually materialize, or do entrepreneurs and workers have to confront conflicting discourses along the way? I draw on my own experiences to represent what it feels like to work in a startup, recalling how I went from being an “enthusiastic and committed entrepreneur” to a “critical anthropologist” currently studying the mental health of startup employees from the startup ecosystem of Florianópolis.

However, before proceeding, it is important to define what startups are

and how they are organized in so-called *innovation ecosystems*¹ around the globe.² Definitions of startups often praise the ability of entrepreneurs to assume *risks* along with the necessary *dynamicity* and *scalability* of new business models. According to entrepreneur Steve Blank (2010), “a startup is a temporary organization designed to search for a repeatable and scalable business model.” Eric Ries (2012), also an entrepreneur and book author, defines startups as a type of human organization designed to create new products under extreme conditions of uncertainty.

Anthropological and sociological research on startups, a relatively new subject of study in the social sciences, has become more prevalent in recent years. Jan English-Lueck (2017), for example, analyzes “the pervasiveness of technology” and how the promotion of “identity diversity” in Silicon Valley, USA, defines the emerging global culture. Richard Pfeilstetter (2017) focuses on how digital entrepreneurship in Manchester, UK, is filled with dreams but also a dose of cynicism in the pursuit of money and power. Recent theses also show how startups are a contemporary transnational phenomenon (Faria 2018; Schipounoff 2019; Chapus 2020; Lira 2020) that relies on entrepreneurship to drive *a new way of making things happen*. As Schipounoff (2019) suggests, startups intend to re-enchant capitalism by bringing discourses of freedom, autonomy, purpose, and meaning into the world of work. However, because we live in a neoliberal capitalism, entrepreneurs and startup employees, subject to market laws, cannot fully realize these values.

When analyzed in the light of *neoliberalism as a governing rationality* (Foucault 2008), it is possible to realize how contemporary practices in startups from different parts of the globe are the result of larger sociological processes initiated in the 1970s in the Western Global North. Therefore, the goal of this autoethnography, as “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context” (Spry, quoted in Denzin 2006: 419), is to record how I saw the startup ecosystem of Florianópolis emerge in 2013 and then in 2015. This is not an autoethnography that seeks to “break your heart” or “change the world.” It is the story of a subject (which in this case is me) trying to understand the contradictions of the startup world – from the promise of success to stressful and precarious work environments.

1 An innovation ecosystem is an association of startups, incubators, and investors whose main goal is to minimize market risks. It attracts human resources and financial capital from both private and public funds. According to company Startup Genome (2021), there are 280 innovation ecosystems worldwide.

2 Expressions frequently used in the startup scene are marked in italics.

Methodological and theoretical background

As Heewon Chang states, “autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (2008: 48). For Chang, this means autoethnography should not focus on *self* alone but just as any other ethnography, it should focus on the “understanding of others (culture/society) through self” (2008: 49). In a similar vein, I here articulate fragments of my own memoir with a wider social description of the startups emergent environment in Florianópolis and how it also relates to Silicon Valley, USA.

I am particularly interested in the Startup Ecosystem of Florianópolis for three main reasons: first, *Floriipa* (short name for Florianópolis) has been considered one of the most complete and complex Brazilian hubs of technology innovation (Leipnitz and Lóssio 2021); second, it is the capital of Santa Catarina state, which is also a Brazilian region recognized for its tech innovation hub; and third, it is also where I attempted to build a startup on my own. Furthermore, I privilege the description of the different positions I have experienced in the world of startups among the years of 2013, 2014, and 2015: from a startup founder in Florianópolis to the host of a WebTV Series in Silicon Valley, and back to Florianópolis as a startup marketing “manager”.

When I discovered the startup world in 2013, I fell in love with it. I remember feeling hopeful: maybe startup life would make work life not boring and alienating. I thought that maybe through startup life, I would have a chance to live a life with *meaning and purpose*. However, when I left the universe of startups in 2015 and decided to change my career path towards anthropology, my first impulse was to lock all those “startup experiences” in a box and, if possible, erase them from my past. I did not want to hear another suggestion about being part of a startup team. Considering I was completely immersed in the “startup ideology” while experiencing it, only time and my initiation into anthropological studies allowed me to distance myself from those experiences in order to face them with a critical perspective. Approaching the startup world once again as a researcher rather than an employee is an attempt to create an understanding of a process in which I have been transformed from “startup enthusiast” to “startup critic.” Therefore, this autoethnography essay is an exercise in reflexivity about why I have changed my perspective about startups in general. I hope that the episodes presented below can help readers get an insider’s perspective on “startup life” that is different from

the discourses of trial, failure, and eventual success that we often see in the business media news.

To proceed with an autoethnographic analysis, “a re-read with ‘ethical eyes’” has been applied to the text here presented, as suggested by Stephen Andrew (2017: 53), with the intention to eliminate potential harmful content to others. I have also made an effort to present the groups of people here described in the most “unknowable” possible way. Therefore, business partners, potential investors, business accelerators, and startups will be referred to as BP1, BP2, Accelerator 1, Startup 1, and so on. The only names of startups and associations that are mentioned are those I have never had direct contact with and whose information here presented were previously publicized.

Combining all this with *ethical eyes* led me to remove parts of the text that could intimately expose people who took part in my past. Even though the described episodes happened years ago, “our work is never context-free and this contextuality touches everything in the autoethnographic world” (Andrew 2017: 129). Bearing this in mind, one of the biggest challenges I faced while writing this autoethnographic essay was the need to improve my ability to balance my point of view and its contextuality. This is mainly because the episodes presented reveal not only my perspective as an “entrepreneur” but also my critical point of view after experiencing the world of startups and deciding to restore my own past with the purpose to produce some knowledge and compare it with other ethnographic works.

Besides, considering I am evoking personal experiences that happened over five or seven years ago, I have felt both the benefits and the harms of time and oblivion. If autoethnography demands time to process and reflect socially upon personal experiences with the purpose of transforming it into knowledge (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011), then I might say “time is on my side”. However, while writing, I have often asked myself if my memory was not playing tricks on me. Am I forgetting anything? Or worse: is my imagination covering the gaps I do not remember clearly? Hence, the literature provided by the startup community of Florianópolis itself has helped me to connect my personal experiences with the local context, just as comparative literature has helped me to perceive different startup practices in a broader context.

The quest for *autonomy*, *flexibility*, *sense of purpose*, and *profit* that have permeated my experience in the startup world were also highlighted in the

ethnographic works of Pfeilstetter (2017), Zanon (2019), Schipounoff (2019), Flécher (2019), Lira (2020), and Chapus (2020). From my point of view, these values resonate with the concepts of *neoliberalism* (Foucault 2008), *flexible capitalism* (Sennett 2015), *human capital* (Brown 2015) and the *entrepreneurial subject* (Dardot and Laval 2016).

According to Richard Sennett (2015), *flexibilization* supposedly enables people to organize their lives as they wish by attacking bureaucracy and prioritizing risks. As a result, long term plans are replaced by short term projects. At the level of businesses, new flexible companies emerge willing to promote *horizontal* organizations in which *dynamic networks* are prioritized over hierarchical institutions. Such a new order implies new forms of control that are often difficult to grasp and promote a conflict between character and experience. Unable to build long-term relationships, subjects struggle to build their own narratives and tend to present emotional distress in environments where trust is replaced by competitiveness.

Wendy Brown joins

Michael Foucault and others in conceiving neoliberalism as an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life. (2015: 30)

According to Brown, one of the effects of neoliberal rationality is the *economization of the subjects* in which the human being is remade as *human capital* seeking a competitive position in the contemporary world. As human capital, the subject becomes responsible for him/herself even though they are not human capital just for themselves, but also for the firms and states to which they belong. Therefore, subjects invest in themselves as human capital, prioritizing value-enhancing practices as well as trainings that hold a positive *return on investment* (ROI).

Dardot and Laval (2016) add to the debate by focusing on the *entrepreneurial self* and recognizing those subjects who completely surrender to entrepreneurial activities. The competitive subject that works to maximize his/her human capital in every possible aspect of their lives develops him/herself in order to continually improve their efficacy. Success becomes the predominant value while the risk of *failure* becomes a persistent threat.

Throughout the following essay, the practices I have experienced while working in the startup environment will be analyzed in the light of the concepts mentioned above. Before I continue, let me describe the

Brazilian technology market and the state of Santa Catarina as a hub of technological innovation.

Placing Florianópolis in the world map of startups

Brazil is the largest country in South America and has more than 213 million inhabitants. With an economy based primarily on agro-mineral exports, it is curious to see the importance that the technology sector has gained over the past ten years. Although the technology sector has attracted attention, Brazil still represents only 1.8 % of the global tech market (ABES 2019). Nevertheless, the Brazilian technology sector was surprised by a 12 % increase in its activities in 2020 (Silva 2020).

Ten years ago, startups were almost unknown by the Brazilian market when the Brazilian Association of Startups – ABstartups was established in 2011 (Abstartups 2022). A local initiative empowered by contemporary software entrepreneurs, its main goal was to map and promote new startup ecosystems in the country. As Pfeilstetter noted, one of the “first steps in the making of a Manchester tech startup community was the collection and display of statistical data that justified speaking of a startupcommunity in the first place” (2017: 95). We can see the same strategy being applied in the mapping of multiple Brazilian startup ecosystems nowadays.

The industry has grown rapidly since 2011. The association estimates there were more than 13 thousand startups operating in Brazil in 2021. Also, for ABstartups, the year 2018 marks an era of *maturity* since the Brazilian startup ecosystem expanded its startup culture through *successful case studies* and increased the number of incubators, business accelerators, and coworking spaces. The fact that the ecosystem has been able to increase access to financial capital that comes from local and international investors is also seen as a sign of maturity.

In the Brazilian startup scenario, the small southern state of Santa Catarina draws attention to its startup ecosystem. It is currently considered the third largest technology center in Brazil. According to Associação Catarinense de Tecnologia – ACATE (2020), the state has more than 24,000 technology entrepreneurs. Most of them are between 29 and 43 years of age, and 75.2 % of these entrepreneurs are men. In addition, the startup ecosystem employs 56,000 workers. Most of the employees from the technology sector are 33 years of age, and 57.3 % of them are male. Santa Catarina also hosts some of the largest startups in the country, such as

RD Station (with approximately 650 employees located in Florianópolis) and Conta Azul (about 420 employees located in Joinville).³

Brazilian technology entrepreneurs have been claiming over the past decade that Florianópolis may be the *Silicon Valley of Brazil*. In fact, the city has been betting on tech companies to such a degree that Florianópolis, the capital of the state of Santa Catarina, is home to the highest number of startups in the region and has the highest density of startups per thousand inhabitants in the country (ACATE 2020).

The “entrepreneurial” chapter of my life

It was March 2013 when I came across the very first Startup Weekend Event that was taking place in Santa Catarina.⁴ I was only 22 years old, unemployed, and I felt completely drawn to that working universe that was previously unknown to me. That weekend, I got there “empty handed”; however, 54 hours later, I left with a business partner, a set of mentors and, of course, a business idea. It felt incredible!

I met my Business Partner 1 (BP1) at the event after she pitched her own idea and convinced me to join her on her quest. We were two young women trying to find a *product-market fit* for our Startup 1 project.⁵ Our objective was to develop a software application that suggested outfits according to the person’s style. While my BP1 was supposed to run the company, I was supposed to run marketing strategies. After presenting and discussing our idea with several mentors who attended that Startup Weekend Event, we were invited to join a local business accelerator. The Accelerator 1 approached us with the proposal to guide our project, introduce us to potential investors, as well as help us to assemble a software development team. This led us to believe that our idea had potential and

3 According to Steve Blank’s (2010) definition of a startup, technology companies that have already found their *product-market fit* are no longer *start-ups*, but *scale-ups* as they are considered technology companies in the process of growth. In this essay, I will refer to scale-ups as “startups” because I am assuming a startup is more than a growth phase of a company and that, for several entrepreneurs and workers, startups represent *a certain way of making things happen*.

4 *Startup weekend* is a three-day program in which small groups of people come up with a business idea and try to develop a *minimum viable product* to see if there is a *product market fit* for it. Present in more than 150 countries, it is, nowadays, a global event (Startup Weekend 2022).

5 According to one definition, “product-market fit means being in a good market with a product that can satisfy that market” (Lean Startup 2022).

could materialize as our future career. Soon I was occupying a table in the Accelerator 1 office and sharing a coworking space with other startups. I was only 22 years old and running a new company. I felt empowered. However, looking back, I have realized that the fact that startups were not so common in the Brazilian market at that time was one of the reasons why it was “so easy” for my BP1 and me to find mentors willing to speed up our idea very quickly.⁶

Nowadays, startup accelerator programs, either in Brazil or in Florianópolis, are wanted by hundreds of entrepreneurs seeking mentorship support. For example, 347 startups submitted their projects to the local accelerator, Darwin Startups in 2020.⁷ Only seven of them were chosen to be accelerated and thus attain, among other benefits, capital and online services, legal support, and of course, relationship networking related to other entrepreneurs, potential investors and the local startup ecosystem. Florianópolis did not have the current structure in 2013. Coaching entrepreneurs did not seem to be a structured business, as it was mainly based on social relationships and a give-back culture. Therefore, the time frame is crucial, not only to note the rapid development of the local tech industry, but also to avoid the *ethnographic present*.

As far as I remember, when I first came across a startup, it seemed to be “the work of the future”: *cool office spaces, flexible working hours, jobs with purpose and meaning* (Flécher 2019). Also, tech companies started to illustrate the covers of business magazines with their products that literally promised to *change the world* and to make young entrepreneurs rich in a blink of an eye. At that point, those ideas seemed rather attractive to me: a fresh graduate, a middle class white female, a *millennial* who was born in the early 90s and was looking forward to *making things happen*. I had been raised under the values of *flexible capitalism* and, for this reason, had been inclined to *risky* but fast investment opportunities. I was a malleable self, open to new experiences and willing to *take risks* (Sennett 2015).

(Un)fortunately, our company never made it through the construction of the *minimum viable product* (MVP);⁸ eight months later, I left the project

6 Business Accelerator 1 closed in 2014 for reasons unknown by me.

7 Darwin Startups is based in Florianópolis and it has been elected one of Brazil’s top accelerators (Darwin Startups 2019).

8 A *minimum viable product* is a development technique in which a new product is developed with sufficient features to satisfy first customers. Collecting feedback to test customer acceptance is essential to guide future development or to completely reject

even though we had joined Accelerator 1 and had raised some *seed money*.⁹ In those eight months, I went from optimistic to fearful and lost. The relationship with Accelerator 1 mentors did not develop as I expected. Looking back, I attribute this to a gender difference. I was a young girl trying to run a business in a male-dominated field (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio 2005), and my voice was often not heard. At the time, however, I did not recognize gender discrimination and thought it was a problem I had to deal with on my own. In addition, I was struggling financially because I needed a job to pay the bills, and Startup 1 was still too young to generate any revenue.

Even though we had received seed funding, most of it was intended to cover the costs of software development and, in our case, the costs of the Accelerator 1 – which included office space, cloud storage, mentorship, and other facilities. However, since BP1 and I, the co-founders of the project, had no money of our own to invest or make a living, we had to carry on with multiple jobs and the entrepreneurial demands in order to build Startup 1. While struggling to handle the bills, decent paying opportunities felt much more interesting to me than the dream-of-success promise.

Moreover, after joining Accelerator 1, the autonomy I looked forward to acquiring as an entrepreneur started to disappear. Before starting to serve on the project, everyone claimed for guarantees of participation in the *potential multi-millionaire* Startup 1. In order to facilitate the development of our startup processes, Accelerator 1 required almost 40 % of the company potential equity capital. In exchange for seed money, the investor would also need 20 % equity. Since the funds were low, the software development team would be partially paid in cash and partially in *stock vesting*,¹⁰ which meant they would also have 10 % equity. In addition, one of the mentors himself also required 10 % equity for his mentorship advice. Thus, once we got hold of the contract, BP1 and I could each have 10 % equity of our own project. Somehow, we were all trying to secure our participation in the “immaterial” gamble of “the global expansion of highly

the MVP idea (Becker 2020).

9 *Seed money* or *seed capital* is the money raised to begin developing an idea for a business in exchange for equity. After securing seed financing, startups may approach venture capitalists to obtain additional financing (Kopp 2022).

10 Startup companies often offer grants of common stock to employees, service providers, vendors, board members, or other parties as part of their compensation (Wohlner 2022).

speculative market ‘investment’” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 7).

With so many *business partners* on the scene, I started to feel like a pawn to be moved around and with only 10 % of an idea that I was not sure it would even work. I remember spending months negotiating with Accelerator 1 before we even started.¹¹ I did not have any business experience, but I did not need to know much to realize that it was certainly not a good deal. In short, I could say that my first attempt to start a business failed before it even began. The lack of money or experience, as well as the difficulties in dealing with the requirements of Accelerator 1, made me abandon the project. Additionally, I had also received an unusual proposal from another investor for me to travel to Silicon Valley, California and become the host of a WebTV series on startups.

Experiencing Silicon Valley

If my first entrepreneurial attempt seems a common failure story,¹² the second enterprise is quite unusual. Although many Brazilian entrepreneurs dream of going to Silicon Valley – and most of the founders of the largest Brazilian tech companies actually go to the *Valley* at least once – it is not common for young entrepreneurs to do so.¹³

What was supposed to be a three-week immersion in Silicon Valley turned out to be a small WebTV series show. My new investor and Business Partner (BP2) was a businesswoman from the Valley who was willing to invest on a new project. By the time we met (on the same Startup Weekend where I met my former BP1), she had just ended two sabbatical years in Brazil (following bits of the new startup scene) and was about to return to San Francisco, California.

At the beginning, BP2 had volunteered herself to be my mentor. Mentoring is often taken as a sort of *give-back* by experienced entrepreneurs to new generations. It can include all sorts of advice – from how to sell your idea to investors to how to connect and build promising connecti-

11 I would like to point out that not all business accelerators operate like that. Sometimes accelerators do not require equity participation. And if they do, the equity percentage tends to remain around 10 % or 15 % of the company.

12 According to Brazil’s Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE, the survival rate of new businesses was 71.9 % after 1 year of operation (2014), 61.0 % after 2 years (2015), and 51.5 % after 3 years (2016).

13 Or, at least, not common for underprivileged entrepreneurs to do so.

ons. It is a form of human capital transfer, mostly perceived by some people as a *gift* but also a form of *human capital investment*. BP2 was coaching me on how to *pitch* our idea to investors when the team, gathered to lead the Startup 1, started to crumble. In general, *failure* is taken as something good for those who live in Silicon Valley. A story of failure is often seen as an indicator of experience and learning. Somehow failure is reorganized as an unsuccessful attempt of risk-taking. And since risk-taking is valued as an entrepreneurial characteristic, the search for improvement of the *entrepreneurial self* (Dardot and Laval 2016) is assured and the risk of failure is reincorporated as valuable knowledge.

Noticing that several young entrepreneurs in Brazil like me were willing to build new startup ideas but lacked knowledge or experience, BP2 decided to create an educational web show on how to build a startup, collecting both stories of success and failures. So, for a few months in the Valley, I worked on visiting different business accelerators as well as both small and large technology companies; furthermore, I was also interviewing investors and entrepreneurs from all over the world. The main goal of the show was to get insightful advice from people who live, work, and go to Silicon Valley to learn the secrets of successful tech companies and also help new generations of entrepreneurs succeed. It was a blast! Suddenly I was in the “center of the world” – as I thought at the time.

Most of the entrepreneurs I could interview thought they were building something *big*. Some considered themselves *dreamers* and *fighters*: dreamers because they thought what they were doing was something that could *change the world* (Melia 2018), and fighters because they saw one another trying to find solutions to people’s needs. *Following your dreams, enjoying the process, and trying to reach for the stars* were expressions often used by those who listed the reasons for building up a startup. Such discourse was exhilarating, and soon I also thought of building something *great and important* – even if I felt lost most of the time. The path was not as clear as I thought, as I learned *how to do business* through the process.

Synchronicity and *serendipity*¹⁴ were also words often said and heard in the Valley. People went there to meet other people, to get a sense of what it meant to be in the center of the tech world, to be accelerated by compa-

14 According to Oxford’s dictionary, serendipity can be defined as “the fact of something interesting or pleasant happening by chance” (OLD 2022). In Silicon Valley, it could mean *magical coincidences* that help businesses happen.

nies such as 500 Startups¹⁵ and, eventually, to capture the attention of investors and local markets. This is the way I learned how important it is for tech entrepreneurs to build an ecosystem of social relations and become part of it. *Networking* is precisely what concerns entrepreneurs willing to attract investors. When I interviewed investors, I inquired about which success indicators they were looking for in startups. They answered: *a well-connected and experienced entrepreneur* (i.e. human capital) *at the head of a strong team* (more human capital), trying to solve *a lucrative market problem* (potential profit).

Besides conducting interviews with local accelerators and investors, I also participated in several technological events to meet entrepreneurs who were visiting Silicon Valley. September was the highest season. It was the month when the technology news company, TechCrunch, held their conference, the TechCrunch Disrupt (TechCrunch 2019). By 2019, the event hosted more than 10,000 attendees in San Francisco, and several meetings took place simultaneously in the city alongside the main event. Many investors from all over the world would come to the event to detect new startups, while several entrepreneurs would come to launch their companies.

Several Brazilian entrepreneurs would also be there. Since 2013, the Brazilian Startup SC mentorship program had been selecting the most successful startups in its program to join an *international mission*.¹⁶ The mission includes participation in TechCrunch Disrupt, a visit to Silicon Valley startups, and a comparative assessment of the U.S. ecosystem. The fact that a Brazilian business community would go annually to Silicon Valley allowed me to meet some of them and conduct interviews for the Web TV series.

During the years of 2013 and 2014, I would come and go from Brazil to Silicon Valley. When I was in the Valley, I attended several meetings and interviewed various people from the tech world; when in Brazil, I used to edit and promote the videos I had recorded. Since this first attempt at

15 The incubator 500 Startups, nowadays known as 500 Global, “is a venture capital firm that invests early in founders building fast-growing technology companies” (500 2022).

16 Startup SC is a mentoring program lead by the Brazilian’s Support Service to Small Companies (*Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas*), commonly known as SEBRAE. Between 2013 and 2020, the program mentored 270 startups. Each training program lasts four months and hosts from 30 to 50 startups at a time. Once the training program has been completed, the top ten companies are invited to join the *international mission* which includes spending two weeks in Silicon Valley (Startup SC 2019).

recording was a *minimal viable product* of a specialized news media show, I had to work on every front of the company. Meanwhile, my BP2, who sponsored my travels and my accommodation (at her house), had connected me to the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley. I was responsible for scheduling, conducting, and hosting the interviews on camera, as well as editing and promoting the videos on our website and on social media. As Lira (2020) shows, building a startup can be draining since the accumulation of multiple operational functions is quite common.

I was often overwhelmed, but working long hours did not seem to be a problem to me at that time. However, I started feeling trapped while working at the Startup 2 project. Since I was living in the same house as my BP2, it became harder and harder to set boundaries between personal and professional life and distinguish work from the rest of my journey. Furthermore, we needed more funds to hire more people to grow the show since a media company does not scale through software computing as a tech startup does. It meant that we needed a second round of investments. Even though we presented our project to a couple of investors, we did not succeed in obtaining new funds. My BP2 was clearly unhappy about it, and I began to hear unpleasant accusations around the house regarding my work performance, my presence, and living expenses. As a Latino woman living in the United States, I felt like the stranger I was. Without a permanent home or further investment, I realized the project was going nowhere. What was a hobby for my BP2 was, in turn, an attempt to build a career for me. Tired of not having any money, I decided it was time to return to Brazil and start over.

Working on a local startup

After spending about a year in Silicon Valley meeting entrepreneurs and investors from Brazil and beyond, I admit it was not a problem to find a job at a startup when I returned to Florianópolis. The startup local market had expanded, and some of the startups mentored by Startup SC program had received funds and grown enough to have their own offices and expand their teams.

Marcelo Gomes (2021) defines 2015 as the milestone in the technology sector of Florianópolis. It was the year when the new innovation complex laboratory of ACATE (Santa Catarina Technology Association) was inaugurated and attracted coworking spaces, companies, and partners to

the ecosystem. RD Station,¹⁷ the greatest startup success story, was consolidated as one of the main Brazilian promising technology companies, thus attracting talented employees from all over the country to the magical island of Floripa.

In contrast to São Paulo, the Brazilian financial capital, the small city of Floripa with its nearly 500 thousand inhabitants, largely known for its tourist attractions, started to consolidate itself as one of the leading innovation centers of the country. According to local players, Floripa has everything a technology innovation ecosystem needs. It has public and private universities to attract and produce talents; public and private funds to finance an innovation ecosystem; the necessary infrastructure to host, guide and accelerate different companies; and successful leaders willing to set an example. Above all, it also has a well-connected community (Leipnitz and Lóssio 2021).

Also, it is worth mentioning that startups started a series of new job positions in the market that did not exist before. Not everyone knew what a *customer success* or a *sales development representative* was responsible for. Plus, many Brazilians were incorporating new English expressions in their daily routines, creating a startup vocabulary: *leads*, *prospects*, *predictable revenue*, *customer acquisition*, *cost acquisition*, *churn rate*, *ROI*, *OKRs*, *KPIs*, *agile*, *sprint*, and so on.¹⁸

In summary, that was the picture of the local scenario when I joined one of the 901 startups in Florianópolis (ACATE 2016) to work on their marketing team.¹⁹ I was the first female employee of an 18-person startup.²⁰ The company was growing rapidly given that recent investments and job functions were being designed internally. My mission was to establish and develop *new marketing strategies*, and that meant I had to do anything related to marketing.

17 RD Station is a digital marketing company that has been operating in Florianópolis since 2011. In 2021, the company was acquired by Latin America's largest technology company, ToTVs, for 2 billion *reals* (Resultados 2021).

18 Although we speak Portuguese in Brazil, many startup entrepreneurs adopt English terms on their daily routines.

19 Nowadays, ACATE estimates there are 4.000 startups in Florianópolis (ACATE 2020).

20 According to ACATE's Tech Report (2016) in 2015, 23.4 % of Florianópolis entrepreneurs were female and 39.6 % of all tech sector collaborators were female. In the year of 2019, 24.8 % of all entrepreneurs were female and 49,9 % of all collaborators were female (ACATE 2020).

Once again, I was experiencing the accumulation of managerial and multiple operational functions (Lira 2020), but I also saw it as an opportunity to become a *leader*. Meanwhile, my responsibilities were designed and acquired as I progressed. Even though my tasks were not clear at the beginning, soon I was supposed to hire other people to the marketing team and, three months later, my work as a marketing manager developed itself organically. It required planning new prospecting strategies, preparing marketing budgets, collaborating with press offices, responding to the main metrics of the company, participating in the meetings of the board of directors, and calculating the *return on investment* (ROI) of every marketing action. At the beginning, I felt my job was valuable. It was an "opportunity" to reach a senior position, such as Head of Marketing, in a short period of time.

However, contrary to what I had learned during my undergraduate studies in the field of advertising, the numbers were of utmost importance, not creativity. Soon enough, I had to prove that every *real* invested in marketing returned as customers. Brown's definition of neoliberalism as a "governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life" (2015: 176) is particularly useful to make us reflect upon why every work activity in the world of startups, for example, is formulated based on capital investment.

I was responsible for managing a team capable of generating *traffic* to the company website in order to capture new *leads* so that the sales team could have *prospects* to close sales. If the desired metrics did not correspond to reality, as they usually did not, something or someone had to change. Unattained metrics meant loss of capital investment. Therefore, they had to be monitored monthly. What was once a *meaningful* job for me became a stressful one. Monitoring metrics made me nervous, and the monthly metrics meetings became a moment of huge anxiety.

The work environment of some startups might give the impression that their employees have been loose from the Taylorism clock, since the presence of flexible working hours is a milestone of the new labor system. However, as I experienced, the spreadsheet metrics turned out to be the new tool for monitoring productivity. Even though I enjoyed planning new marketing strategies at the time, I felt like I had a *bullshit job*.²¹ My

21 In spite of me feeling I had a *bullshit job*, I strongly believe most founders and startup workers will say their jobs matter and that they are, in fact, promoting a *counter movement* that intends to eliminate *bullshit jobs* from the world.

main task was about filling up spreadsheet metrics that were often impossible to attain. According to David Graeber, a *bullshit job* is

a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case. (2018: 24)

I remember I hated calculating ROI and having to respond to the aggressive metrics of growth. It seemed like all communication efforts were useless, especially if I could not *prove* how much money each action had generated to the company. I was constantly asked to prove that the company was making more money than it was spending on the marketing team. Otherwise, why should they *invest* in all those people?

The demands increased day by day but the salary didn't – actually, it was barely enough to pay the bills. We were allowed *flexible working hours*, but those who had to stay late to meet the required deadlines would not be paid for any extra hours. Once again, it was difficult to separate personal life from work. With no other social groups or communities to engage with, the company turned out to be my main social relation community.

The problem, as Sennett (2015) reveals, is that these kinds of connections can be extremely fragile. *Teamwork* can be a weak form of community in which all of its members supposedly share a common ground. The thing is that, despite the highly emotional intensity of those involved in a startup team, only time would make people ready to endure challenging situations together in an environment driven by constant changes. However, time was something we did not have. Controversially, founders invited us to be part of the Startup 2 community and insisted that we had to envision the potential growth of the company. According to them, the more the company grew, the more opportunities *the first assembled team* would meet to grow along. Therefore, *collaborators* had to keep in mind that their development depended upon the startup development.

Six months after joining the company (which by then had grown to approximately 30 people), the founders (a CEO²² and a CPO²³) announced a merger. Acquisitions are quite commonplace in the startup market. The Startup 2, the one where I was working, acquired the competitor;

22 Chief Executive Officer.

23 Chief Product Officer.

their founders (a CTO²⁴ and a CMO²⁵) joined our team. Since there was more than one person for each role in the company, where would they allocate me and the previous CTO? Well, the previous CTO was dismissed so that the newly acquired CTO could rapidly replace him, and I was discredited. I was told that I had never been a manager and that my paycheck made it clear that I was a marketing analyst. At that moment, it did not matter what I had done or what I was doing; they declared that the marketing manager position no longer belonged to me but to someone else. The promise for the startup to grow was definitely coming true, but suddenly some of *the most long-term team members* were not invited on board.

Things were not laid out in the open, and after the merger and the first dismissal of the CTO, I had the feeling that I could be the next one. Massive layoffs took place. In a week, for example, seven people were dismissed, including one from the marketing team – who I had to dismiss myself. Considering that the company had little more than 30 people at that moment and that 7 people had just left, this situation created an enormous feeling of insecurity. The fragility of the so-called new *community* (Sennett 2015) was clear.

That was when I started reconsidering anthropology, a path I had been thinking about since I completed my bachelor degree. I thought that maybe the world of startups was not for me due its inner contradictions. After nine months of intense work and several episodes of anxiety and chauvinism, I therefore resigned, and the startup was acquired and dismantled by a major player the following year. The founders had finally *made an exit*:²⁶ some of the collaborators were absorbed while others were discharged and the company *return on investment* was complete.

Autoethnography, a challenging analysis

I could say now that the “startup chapter” of my life has ended. However, I have not told you everything. There are smaller, and probably more important, fragments that seem to conflict with the main narrative from each “short-term startup phase” of my life.

24 Chief Technology Officer.

25 Chief Marketing Officer.

26 An *exit* occurs when an investor sells its stake in a company. In this case, the founders of the startup sold their shares to a major player in the market for millions of Brazilian *reals*.

If I consider violence as a broader subject (Das 2007), I might recognize structural violent episodes that can still evoke uncomfortable memories. It does not mean that startups promote a violent environment *per se*, but that, despite their *disruptive narratives*, startups are built upon patriarchal schemes that continue to reproduce gender, class, and race segregation. It is even clearer when we realize that the most successful entrepreneurs are still upper class-white-men who usually receive funds from several of their fellows.

As Attila Bruni, Silvia Gherardi and Barbara Poggio remind us, “entrepreneurship is located in the symbolic universe of the male” (2005: 2). Therefore, even though entrepreneurship intends to be gender neutral, it renders maleness invisible.²⁷ Such contextuality imposes on female entrepreneurs the ability to cross the boundaries of the symbolic male and female universes. However, the act of crossing such boundaries is not free from friction. As a “young female entrepreneur”, I have been publicly humiliated by mentors who insisted on telling me that I was “belligerent” for asking too many questions. I have been advised to “sit quietly” when trying to build my own startup. I was harassed by potential investors who insisted on taking me on “boat trips” to “talk business”. When looking for the experienced businesswomen advice on this matter, I was told to enjoy my youth “while it lasts”. Therefore, I hope readers could have also perceived how gender does play a role in the technology world, despite the “invisible maleness” it tends to promote. I believe that discussing the *gender gap* and technology company initiatives to promote diversity within its working class is something that deserves further analysis not only in terms of “how to solve the gender gap” (as *startups* put it), but in terms of thinking how gender relations are built and experienced in the field.

Besides, I was also overworked and underpaid in every single startup I have joined. I was discredited for my position as a manager and have experienced all this surrounded by people who honestly believe that the startups are *disrupting* the world. That helped me perceive that the *startup mindset*, focused on *learning in* and *making it happen*, may be progressive but it certainly drinks from the *neoliberal progressive policy* that reduces equality to meritocracy. As Nancy Fraser (2020) reminds us, the *progressive neoliberal policy* never intended to abolish social hierarchy but instead “diversify” it. Yet the only ones that can benefit from such a policy are those who alre-

27 From my experience, it was possible to perceive that not only maleness was made invisible, but also class and race differences.

ady have access to the necessary financial and human capital.

Although my narrative does not represent the totality of the world of startups, its fragments may allow us to perceive some of the contradictions between the "flexible" work environment and the *cynicism* (Pfeilstetter 2017) necessary to inhabit it. For years, I had been voiceless to tell these stories. Maybe I was out of luck, but the truth is that it took time for me to absorb and understand all my experiences in order to tell them the way I am doing now. The events I have just described are now being conceptualized in terms that I could not conceive by the time they occurred (Hacking 2013). Therefore, it is only through this autoethnographic essay that I am finally able to look back at past experiences and connect them to a wider social and economic context and, hopefully, produce some knowledge.

Beyond the story of events, I hope this essay has been able to introduce startups and the Florianópolis Startup Ecosystem as a fruitful anthropological research field. Considering that the technological ecosystem is expanding globally, I believe there is still a lot to explore and understand about the working relationships in this area. Let us hope we can have more research on how entrepreneurs are being shaped and how the working class experiences life and work among the startup culture – particularly how it deals with contemporary workload conflicts and their constraints.

Furthermore, I hope readers are able to perceive through the narrative presented here how the working environment of *cool office spaces and flexible working hours* can easily reveal itself as unstable and potentially stressful for workers. In addition to demonstrating how these fast-paced environments can constantly promote the *entrepreneurial self* (Dardot and Laval 2016) among entrepreneurs, it is crucial to notice that this ideology also applies to the startup working class that has to evolve and adapt according to the different stages of the startup where they are employed.

Finally, startups are nonetheless indeed changing the world, though they might be doing it in ways we have not imagined at the beginning. Through this essay, I hope I managed to avoid the *single story* (Adichie 2009) that promotes the idea that every startup is gloriously revolutionary, free from all kinds of imprisonment, frictions or constraints. Through this self-narrative, I hope to have shown the reader how a series of disappointments transformed my vision about the world of startups: from cool office spaces and disruptive ideas to cynical and stressful working environments.

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