

# Urban Borderlands Oral History Project

in conjunction with

the Somerville Community Corporation Community Corridor project

## BRAZILIAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SOMERVILLE, MA

Katie Christiansen

Fall 2010 Final Project

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction and Methodology.....	3
II.	Brazilian Immigration in Massachusetts.....	5
III.	Narrators	
	Gilberto Ricci, Art Shirt Company.....	10
	Edson Lino, International Optical.....	14
	Luiz Carlos Borges, Wagner Jewelers.....	19
	Francisco de Sá, Amazonia Insurance.....	24
IV.	Themes	
	Social and Human Capital Among Brazilian Entrepreneurs.....	29
	Networking in the Brazilian Community: Language as Cohesive Agent.....	33
V.	Impact of the Green Line	
	Advantages.....	36
	Disadvantages.....	38
VI.	Reflections, Conclusions and Moving Forward.....	40
VII.	Photos.....	43
VIII.	Appendix of Brazilian Businesses & Resources.....	44
IX.	Bibliography.....	45

## I. INTRODUCTION

I've been entranced by Latin American culture since I was a child, even before I began my Latin American Studies major here at Tufts. Having grown up in a town some fifteen miles outside of New York City, I've spent the majority of my life surrounded by Guatemalans, Mexicans, Hondurans, Puerto Ricans and people from a host of other South and Central American nations. Upon moving to Boston in 2007, however, I was introduced to an entirely new Latin American community, that comprised of Brazilians.

Massachusetts has a rich population of Brazilians, many of whom are concentrated right here in Somerville, Everett and Allston/Brighton. It wasn't until I began taking Portuguese in the fall of 2009 that I was truly introduced to the scope of the lusophone population. Shortly thereafter, things I never noticed before became more apparent: the signs I never really understood in Magoun and Union Squares were, in fact, in Portuguese. Pão de queijo? Easily my new favorite snack.

I began to get the feeling that the Brazilian community is to Boston as the Mexican or Guatemalan community is to New York: vibrant, tightly knit, and proud of its heritage. The parallels fascinated me and I was determined to learn more. By continuing to take Portuguese and by enrolling in Urban Borderlands, I have been able to further my studies in the Brazilian community, specifically examining entrepreneurship and its effects on the local community.

Through this project, I hope to learn more about how Brazilians entrepreneurs not only chose Somerville to launch their businesses but how the city has played a role in their development and growth. Additionally, I will explore how the Brazilian population in Somerville serves as a network for business owners and how they use its various channels to expand revenue and patronage

### **Methodology**

This project is based on research compiled from September to December of 2010. I conducted four formal interviews and additional informal conversations with the same four narrators. I have known my first narrator for over a year, having used his services in the past. My second narrator was a referral from Lisa Gimbel of the Somerville Community Corporation; my final two narrators were referrals from the second. There was no need for translation as all spoke English proficiently. Each narrator has been in Somerville for over ten years and was able to provide a picture of the city's changes over the past decade. Because this research was conducted over only a few months, however, the scope is not as broad as I would have liked. As a result, my research is centered on educated Brazilians who came to the United States and were able to open their businesses with more social and financial capital than many other Brazilian immigrants in Somerville.

## II. BRAZILIAN IMMIGRATION IN MASSACHUSETTS

Immigration has long been a vital component in the vibrant fabric of Massachusetts' heritage. After all, when the state's original immigrants, the Pilgrims, first arrived in the New World, they came to Plymouth Rock, some 35 miles from Somerville.

Following the initial wave of English Puritans in the mid-1600s, Massachusetts saw an influx of immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Germany in the mid-1800s as economic conditions worsened across the Atlantic.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, has been marked by a much more ethnically and geographically diverse wave of immigration. Thousands have come from all over Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. According a 2009 survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, persons of Hispanic or Latino origin make up 8.8% of the state's population; by comparison, Asians comprise just 5.1%<sup>1</sup>.

The bulk of the Brazilian immigration wave in Massachusetts has occurred over the past 20 years with the first significant waves occurring in the 1980s. Brazil's political economy plays a large role in considering the context in which these emigrations occurred.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov>

Brazil's economy was a strong and flourishing one in the late 1960s and early 1970s, boosted by an ever-growing industrial sector that at one point expanded at a rate of 13 percent. The automobile industry led the economic boom and the production of vehicles soared to nearly one million per year (Winn 2006: 174). The financial viability of Brazil, whose real GDP was increasing at 10% a year, coupled with its relative political stability, attracted European and North American investors who pumped even more capital into the already blossoming economy.

But in order to stimulate exports and further the effects of the economic boom, the Brazilian currency of the cruzeiro was devalued, an effort whose short-term effects were favorable but which eventually moved Brazil into a critically depressed economic state in the 1980s<sup>2</sup> (Kondonassis et. al. 1991: 201). In 1986, the exchange rate reached 12,000 cruzeiros to the dollar while inflation reached a staggering 400%.

At this point in Brazilian history, two out of every three citizens was living in a major city and socioeconomic disparity was at its most uneven, so much so that, “the richest 10 percent received half the national income and the wealthiest 1 percent—1.3 million people—received more than the sixty-five million poorest” (Winn 2006: 195). This depressed socioeconomic climate coincides with the beginning waves of Brazilian immigration to Massachusetts, ostensibly a move fueled by the search for better jobs, economic stability, and a predictable future. After all, many Brazilians

---

were still living under the illusion of long-term financial growth when the reversal of the “Brazilian Miracle”, as dubbed by *The Economist*, occurred in the mid-1980s.

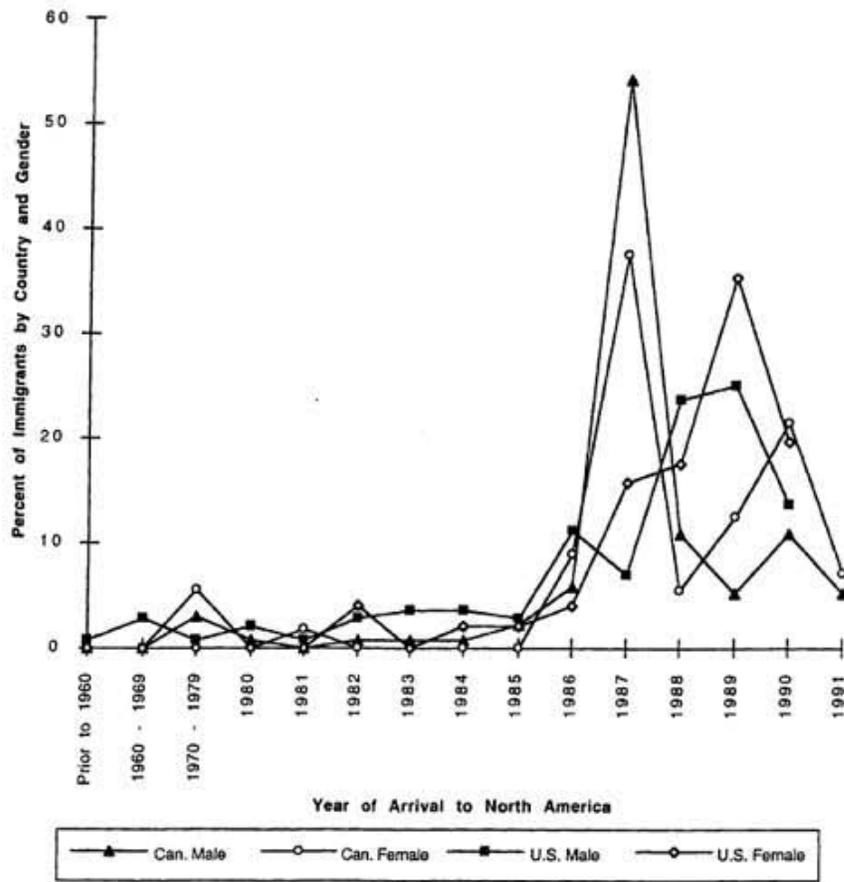
As the first Brazilians came to the United States they settled primarily in Boston, California, Florida and New York. Because the U.S. was in a period of relative economic growth under Reagan, it was a particularly attractive destination for those who had once enjoyed middle class status in Brazil but who had lost their economic standing with the implosion of the cruzeiro. It has been noted that, “the inability of Brazilian leaders to adequately cope with the macro level situation meant that many important micro level situations had to be made within the affected middle class households” (Goza 1994: 137). These educated Brazilians suddenly found themselves strapped with uncertain financial situations perpetuated by a government incapable of ameliorating the fiscal crisis.

While the economic crisis of the 1980s was a significant contributing factor to the influx of Brazilian immigrants to the United States, one must also consider the implementation of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The act revised restrictions on non-European immigrants, which in turn allowed for more Latin American influx into the U.S. Because of this, an initial wave of Brazilians entered the U.S. between 1965 and 1970. But the majority of immigrants came in the 1980s, motivated by the economic stability of the U.S.; the Immigration and Naturalization Act was a pre-established vehicle that helped to facilitate this movement. Indeed, the numbers reflect this: 40% of women that emigrated from Brazil in 1987 came to

the United States while some 30% of Brazilian men that immigrated came in 1989 (Goza 1994: 137) [fig. 1].

Today, there are roughly 343,000 Brazilians living in the United States. 77,000 live in Massachusetts, while roughly 7,000 live in the Boston area (“Imagine” 2007: 1). This means that 27% of Brazilians that immigrate to the U.S. come to the Bay State while Brazilian community makes of 8.4% of Massachusetts’ immigrant population (Ibid.). The most represented states of emigration are Minas Gerais, whose major city of Governador Valadares has long been a center of emigration; Goias, Paraná; and Santa Catarina.

These Brazilian immigrants are a critical part of the social and professional fabric, occupying important positions within the greater Boston community and contributing significantly to the local economy. They spend \$132 million annually and contribute \$157 million to the gross state product. Entrepreneurship as a subset of this economy is also impressive: Boston’s 150 Brazilian-owned small businesses contribute over \$40 million in annual sales. The Brazilian economic force is undeniable and without them, Massachusetts would undoubtedly lose its financial footing.



SOURCE: BGSU- "Brazilian Immigration to the U.S., 1990" and "Brazilian Immigration to Canada, 1991"

FIGURE 1. YEAR OF ARRIVAL IN CANADA AND UNITED STATES BY GENDER (PERCENT OF GROUP TOTAL)

*Figure 1 (International Migration Review)*

### **III. NARRATORS**

The following section recounts my first-hand interviews with four different business owners in the Somerville community. They are from various states in Brazil and represent a modest cross-section of the services offered by Brazilian immigrant entrepreneurs in the city.

#### **INTERVIEW #1: GILBERTO RICCI, ART SHIRT COMPANY**

##### **Biographical Information**

Gilberto was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and lived there until he moved to Allston, Massachusetts in 1990. Gil completed school in Rio and learned the screen-printing trade by apprenticing with his cousin on weekends. When school let out on Fridays, Gil noted that he would head directly to his aunt's house for the weekend where he learned the ins and outs of setting and washing screens as well as graphic design.

He continued, noting that he was "not the best student in school. My friends would come up to me and say, 'Gil, you're not going to make it. You're going to come knocking at the door of my company one day asking for a job". But Gil was determined to create an accomplished career for himself and elected to move to the U.S. in 1990. He spent several years working print shop jobs in the Allston/Brighton area and eventually accepted a job as a superintendent in a local apartment building. "It was a great gig," he said of the job. "It gave me a chance to save up

significant amounts of money... I had a free place to live and made sure that everything in the building was in working condition.”

After saving up enough, Gil decided to start his own screen-printing business in Somerville and in 1999, Art Shirt Company was born. The business is located in what used to be a cabinet maker’s workspace, just past the train tracks on Lowell Street about halfway between Medford Street and Highland Avenue. When I asked if he owned the space, Gil responded with a wry, “Not yet!”

Gil currently live in Medford with his children and is in his early forties.

### **Interview Summary**

Gil was an accessible and passionate narrator and shed light on how business networking occurs in Somerville and beyond.

He stressed that, “connections are everything. Without connections, you have nothing.” When I inquired as to the type of connections he meant, he explained that he uses a Brazilian mechanic, knows a Brazilian fisherman in Boston harbor that sells him top-quality lobster for less than standard market price, and calls a Brazilian chef when he needs an event catered. Gil established all of these connections by being a member of the Brazilian community in Somerville. “Somebody is always introducing you to somebody, and then you introduce them to somebody else.... It’s all about the connections,” Gil explained.

Gil then explained that one of the most integral parts of networking within the Somerville community is advertising. "I advertise anywhere I can," he said. "I started with the local yellow pages to see, where can I find people that want to use my business?" After narrowing his advertising to a more local level, Gil began to branch out and combined advertising with philanthropy.

"If there's a local basketball team that needs uniforms but doesn't have the money to pay for them, you go to them and say, I'll give you the uniform for half-price, and then you put your logo on the uniforms," Gil explained. "That way, you're doing something good for the community and you're getting your name out there. Everybody wins."

Gil also talked about his involvement in the community and how extends beyond just providing uniforms to underfunded sports teams. At a recent parent's event at his daughter's school, he brought 27 shirts and baseball caps, a screen, squeegees, and taught the class how to print their own apparel. He made sure to carry a stack of business cards with him, though, and noted that many of the other parents present inquired as to Art Shirt Co.'s services.

At the end of the interview, I asked Gil if there was anything else he'd like to add.

After thinking for a second, he said:

You know, I wish there were programs here to get kids involved, get them off the streets, programs that would teach them skills they can take with them after high school. You see these kids hanging out on the street corner, and one says to the other, 'Hey, you got fifty bucks?' The kids says no, of course, because he's not doing anything! Like if a kid has dreams of being a chef one day, he should be able to take an after-school class where he learns how to make a Madeira sauce or to cook lobster. That way when he graduates, and he wants to get a job at that fancy restaurant, he can because he has the skills. He can go after what he wants. If my cousin hadn't taught me about graphic design and screen-printing after school and on the weekends, I wouldn't be as successful as I am now.

## **INTERVIEW #2: EDSON LINO, INTERNATIONAL OPTICAL**

### **Biographical information**

Edson Lino was born and raised in Santa Catarina, Brazil. He completed an impressive education there, earning the degrees and credentials necessary to become a licensed and practicing optometrist. The optical profession, though, is an illustrious one in the Lino family; Edson's father and grandfather were both in the businesses as are five of his seven siblings. He was initially introduced to the lab portion of the field as a teenager working for his father. After working for a few years, however, he decided to travel to the United States where he met his wife, a then Wellesley College student. Edson has three daughters, all of whom attend John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Somerville.

### **Interview summary**

I began the interview by asking Edson to tell me a little bit about himself. He described his family's deep involvement in the optical profession as well as his education in Brazil. This part of the interview was largely biographical.

We then discussed his move from Brazil to the U.S. Edson and his wife moved to Brazil following her graduation, but the couple returned in 1991 to the Allston/Brighton area where he opened his first optical shop. In 1995 he moved to Union Square; his first location was in the current Subway sandwich shop where he

stayed for five years; in 2000 he purchased the building at 311 Somerville Avenue (which also houses Machu Picchu Restaurant).

Edson made sure to note that he owned this current building and was content with not having to pay rent. Prior to the arrival of Machu Picchu, however, Edson owned an Italian restaurant (Lino's) that occupied the space. After about five years of operation, though, "it was too much on my plate; a wife, three little kids... it was a lot!"

After this part of the interview, Edson described his transition into the American optometry field. While he was certified in Brazil, he was obligated to present his credentials to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Board of Optometry in order to obtain an optician's license. He did choose, however, to take additional courses in refraction and contact lens fitting in order to make his venture more attractive to potential clients. When asked if the transition was tricky, he replied that, "Here, they want you to go back to three more years of school to become an optometrist... it's a little tough. They don't give you all the credits right away." However, it seemed that Edson's credentials and his experience in the field carried him through the process with relatively little trouble.

After a client came into the shop and spoke in Portuguese with the receptionist, I asked Edson about the cultural makeup of his clientele. He noted that the majority of his clients (about 60-70%) are Brazilian and that he started the business with

Brazilians in mind. He advertised, “in every place I could possibly find in the Brazilian community.” He then expanded to the Hispanic and Haitian communities as well but made sure to emphasize the fact that some of his clients come from as far as Connecticut, New Hampshire and western Massachusetts. When I inquired as to this phenomenal he explained that, “they want to be helped by Brazilians”. He’s not the only Brazilian optical shop in the area, but he was the first. One of his brothers owns a shop in Everett; another owns one in Framingham while his niece just opened her own shop in Florida.

I returned to the question of advertising and Edson wasted no time in touting the benefits of advertising online. “If everybody wants to know something, they go to Google. If you go to Google, everybody is going to find you for sure. You have to pay for it [the link to International Optical] to show a little more, but every time they click I’ll be paying but I get the business.”

One of the questions that interested me the most is that of collaboration between Brazilian businesses in the area. I asked Edson what his take on this was and he immediately began to tell me a story about Carlos, the owner of Wagner Jewelers next door. The two are from the same city in Santa Catarina and owned businesses across the street from each other there; Edson made glasses for his son. Five years after moving to the Boston area, Edson noted that he was in Harvard Square and happened to see Carlos’ familiar face pass by. He was on his way to California and had happened to stop in the area. Carlos eventually leased the building at his

current location and a few years afterward, Edson bought his. The two remain close friends.

We then talked briefly about the changes Edson has noticed in the Union Square area since he first arrived fifteen years ago. His answers were straightforward—more new businesses, general aesthetic improvements—but he expressed his concern with the construction that marred Somerville Avenue for the last couple of years. His discontent with the parking situation was clear, but he said that things have gotten better. “Maybe it will be the next Harvard Square,” was his optimistic remark.

This proved to be a natural segue into discussion of the arrival of the Green Line. Edson seemed generally optimistic about its arrival but also seemed a little blasé about its imminence, citing previous failures of the plans to materialize. He did make an interesting point though: “Of course with more people and more businesses, it also brings other stuff like, maybe more shoplifters.” He finished on a decidedly upbeat note, however, noting that, “It’s definitely going to be good. It’ll be a good change; I bet more businesses will open in the area. I’m very excited about it. I hope it doesn’t take longer than they’re saying.”

Before Edson bought the building at 311 Somerville Ave, a used furniture store occupied the space. His lease was about to expire at the previous location around the corner, but he contacted the owners about purchasing the space and after the

husband of the couple passed away, he arranged a deal with the son. He has been here ever since and plans to stay for as long as possible.

## **INTERVIEW #3: LUIZ CARLOS BORGES, WAGNER JEWELERS**

### **Biographical Information**

Luiz Carlos Borges, who goes by Carlos, was born and raised in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina. He completed a high school education there before moving to California, where he opened his first jewelry store 21 years ago. Carlos has been in Somerville for the past sixteen years and currently lives in Medford with his wife and 16-year-old daughter. He also has a 26-year-old son.

### **Description of Business**

Before I even set foot in Wagner Jewelers, I was struck by the entry process: in order to open the door, you must first press a buzzer, which then prompts an employee to unlock it remotely. The door is not particularly thick or heavy in any way. Inside, the store is warm and inviting with several glass display cases offering a wide array of bracelets, necklaces, earrings and a significant collection of crosses. There appears to be a back room in which repairs are done. Signs in the windows are in Portuguese and summarize the store's services and products offered.

### **Interview Summary**

I began the interview as I did my others, asking Carlos to tell me a little bit about himself and why he chose to get involved in the jewelry business. As in my other interviews, this part of the conversation was largely biographical. He chronicled his journey from Brazil to Boston that took him through California, where he owner a

jewelry store for five years. After speaking with friends on the East Coast, Carlos sold his shop and transferred his West coast customers to another jewelry business.

Carlos came to downtown Boston and accepted a job as an employee at another jeweler, Barmakian Brothers. After one year, however, he decided that he wanted to work for himself and opened Wagner's Jewelers at its current location on Somerville Avenue.

He then backtracked a bit and discussed his involvement in the jewelry industry. He began at the age of 15 in his home state of Santa Catarina. "A friend invited me to start learning with them, and I just have to say thank you to them for the opportunity," he noted. "They taught me how to make good jewelry." But when he first arrived in California, Carlos dabbled in another industry for eight months before deciding that the jewelry industry was where he belonged.

We then began to discuss how he's seen Somerville change in the 16 years he has had a business here. He acknowledged that it is busier, there are more businesses and that "there are much more people walking in the streets." Before, he added, "the area was dirtier and not as nice-looking as it is today."

Our topic shifted slightly to that of the construction that plagued Union Square for several years. He echoed the concerns of other businesses owners I've spoken to in the area, primarily that of poor parking. Carlos explained that, "Now, they've

remarked the parking. There's less parking... people have to turn four or five times around the block before they find a spot. That's not good for my businesses." He expressed his discontent with the fact that Somerville does not offer public parking and wishes that they would add meters in front of his store. "That way," he explained, "people would stay for two hours and then move away. Because right now they leave their cars here all day and then go to other parts of the city."

But Somerville does have an immense appeal to Carlos, specifically because of the Brazilian client base it offers. He chose to open his jewelry store here because he knew the Brazilian population was thriving and growing. Carlos works primarily with 18-karat gold, which, he explained, is an important product to the Brazilian community; "It's like a central hub," he concluded.

When asked if he knows a lot of the business owners in the area, Carlos noted that he knows many more now than he did sixteen years ago when there were relatively few Brazilian-owned storefronts. Now, he says, there are much more than the three Brazilian businesses that were in the area upon his arrival. Those three businesses were a money wiring service and two Brazilian convenience stores.

Carlos believes that while other businesses are being opened by locals or by immigrants from other countries, the Brazilian community remains vibrant and powerful.

He does not own his building but has rented from the same landlord for the past sixteen years. “I love him, he’s been very good for us for all these years,” he said. “We never have any problems with him.” Carlos has tried to buy the building, but the landlord is not willing to sell. Before he moved in, the storefront was occupied by a business called Via Brasil, a money transferring service.

We then switched the conversation to the topic of advertising. Carlos does most of it on Brazilian cable television, local newspapers and in some local magazines.

Advertising doesn’t seem to be Carlos’ primary concern, but he did acknowledge that it is an important part of sustaining his business. Because the Brazilian cable channels are broadcast all over the country, Carlos gets calls from customers in Florida, California and Ohio who send him gold or jewelry that needs repairing.

Carlos is optimistic about the arrival of the Green Line, noting that it will increase foot traffic, an important factor for his business. Most of his clients are Brazilian—about 60%-- but he has a significant Haitian, Indian and local clientele as well. He is happy working in Somerville and lives in Medford with his family. His 16-year-old daughter attends Catholic school in Everett and his 26-year-old son has completed his education. Carlos opened a second location in Everett about 5 years ago and said that business was about the same there as it is in his Somerville location. When asked why he decided to open a second location, Carlos explained, “When they started the construction, I felt that my business was going very slow because the

people didn't come down the street any more and I felt kind of desperate. What was I going to do, just live from this? So I open another place in Everett to survive."

## **INTERVIEW #4: FRANCISCO DE SA, AMAZONIA INSURANCE**

### **Biography**

Francisco de Sá was born and raised in Brasília, the land-locked capital of Brazil. He attended the first three years of high school there and then completed his primary education as an exchange student in Iowa when he was 17. He then returned to Brasilia where he attended college for two years before taking a break and returning to Boston as a volunteer for Greenpeace for two years. After finishing his volunteer stint there, he returned to Brazil to finish college. Francisco completed this veritable geographical ping-pong by accepting a job at Prudential in Boston. He then transferred to John Hancock where he worked before starting his own agency in 1993. He lives in Weston with his wife, 18-year-old son, and twin 9-year-old boys.

### **Description of Business**

My initial impression was that Francisco is a very successful business owner who is in command of every aspect of his business. Amazonia Insurance is on Somerville Avenue a few blocks west of Union Square. The office is on a corner and a receptionist and several employees who deal mostly with personal claims occupy the main floor. Francisco's personal office is spacious with a large white board and windows that overlook the other employees, lending a feeling of openness to the business. As with many the other businesses I visited, the signs in the window described the services offered in both Portuguese and English.

## **Interview Summary**

We began the interview by discussing Francisco's background and he gave me a brief summary of his education and his many stints in the United States which, he explained, were for education and volunteer/work purposes. After obtaining his college degree and beginning a prestigious job at Prudential, Francisco knew that he was in the insurance business to stay. When I asked why he decided to start his own company, the answer was simple: "Make money."

I then asked Francisco about his client base, specifically focusing on the ethnic makeup. As predicted, the vast majority of his clients are Brazilian. "Not a lot of Brazilians speak English," he noted, "Insurance is mandatory. So I found a perfect niche. It came to me as economically feasible." Because he wanted to service the Brazilian community, Francisco chose Somerville as the location for Amazonia. He was the first Brazilian broker to own a Brazilian insurance firm and he has remained one of very few agencies in Massachusetts. He mentioned that, "There were a lot of Brazilians working for insurance agencies, but none of the Brazilians were the actual broker."

I was intrigued by the fact that Amazonia is one of the only Brazilian insurance agencies in Massachusetts and consequently asked Francisco if he needed to do any advertising. "I used to advertise on the Brazilian television, Red Global, at the beginning when I first started I advertised in the Brazilian newspapers," he said,

“Nowadays, I don’t advertise any more because I’m very well known.” He showed me a certificate that he received from participating in the first International Brazilian Fair held in Boston, adding that the event was great exposure for his business. But beyond events like these, he added, advertising is really just a waste of money.

Because he’s been so successful in his current location for the past 17 years, Francisco owns his office and no longer has a mortgage. He rented it from 1993 to 1996 before buying the unit outright. I asked him to tell me a bit about what Somerville was like when he first got here and he did not hesitate in telling me that it was nothing like it is today. “It was dirtier,” he said. “A lot dirtier. Somerville Avenue was a mess, it was like a dump. It was really bad.” While he wasn’t the only Brazilian business at the time, he explained that the general appearance wasn’t very aesthetically pleasing and not many people would frequent the less-than-appealing storefronts set up by his fellow Brazilians.

He also explained that the basic infrastructure that keeps Somerville Avenue looking as clean as it does today, such as trashcans, was a recent development within the last ten years. Francisco recounted how he and several other business owners and residents formed a coalition to petition the City of Somerville for public garbage receptacles. “We all got together and put pressure on the Mayor’s office,” he said. “They put the trashcans around here and things started to get cleaner. Now, they’ve done this beautiful job on Somerville Ave. so things are so much nicer now.” He said

that the City was receptive but that it took months of communication to get the trashcans.

I then transitioned to the question I was most eager to ask Francisco—what is your relationship like with other Brazilian business owners in the area? I was not disappointed with the answer. Because his passion lies with insuring businesses, Francisco has chosen to handle all of the business owner insurance and workers' compensation. His front office, he said, handles all of the auto and homeowner insurance. "I'm constantly visiting businesses and writing insurance," he explained. "Right here in [Union] Square I have a bunch." He showed me a list on his sizeable whiteboard of businesses he's currently working with, establishments such as Café Belô and Lein's Auto. "Worker's comp and liability... that's my favorite!" he said with a chuckle.

When I brought up the subject of the Green Line, Francisco immediately interrupted me with a wry, "Is it really?! Tell me. I've been hearing that since I first came here." I showed him the map we received in class and that seemed to convince him that plans are actually in motion. I asked what he thought the Green Line in Union Square would change about his business, he seemed very confident that it would change much. He noted that:

For [Amazonia] it wouldn't change anything. I mean I do get foot traffic, but it's insurance. People come here with a purpose. It's not like a coffee shop or something where you go window-shopping and you end up buying stuff. It doesn't matter the amount of people that

would walk by here. They would probably have a little more exposure. But, again, the Green Line is mostly [used by] people that walk. I like people that drive!

Francisco continued in this vein of conversation and said that most of his clients are Brazilian but that they come from “all over the place”. He sees many clients from Martha’s Vineyard, Cape Cod and Worcester and told me he was on his way to the new Café Belô franchise in Framingham after our interview. I mentioned that I was excited to hear of the new location since I spent a good deal of time horseback riding in Framingham, and Francisco opened up and became much more animated at the mention of horses.

“I had an Arabian, a black one, it was the most beautiful horse,” he told me excitedly. “My dad was a farmer so we always had horses, always, up until I was 17 and I started to be independent and come to America. But from 0 to 17 I was on a horse.” He then told me about his house in Weston and how he lives right next to an equine vet’s farm. We continued the equine conversation for several more minutes and Francisco only became more and more excited. When talking about his youth on horseback, though, he seemed wistful and rather nostalgic. But he’s been trying to get his twin sons to start riding and to get some “horsey experience”. I gave him the information of the farm I ride at and we chatted some more about how he too can get back into riding, an activity he clearly misses.

## V. THEMES

### **Social and human capital among entrepreneurs**

One of the most salient themes that I took from my interviews was that of social and human capital as crucial tool in entrepreneurial advancement. In the context of this report, I will define social capital an individual's access to social networks and familial support system as well as their possession of interpersonal skills . I will refer to education and mastery of the English language as human capital.

As evidenced in my first interview with Gil Ricci, social capital was important but not crucial in his success as an entrepreneur in Somerville. Because he devoted himself to learning the screen-printing trade, Gil was able to leverage his graphic design education and related experience into a marketable résumé upon arriving in the United States. He knew very little English, but the work ethic and specific skill set he garnered in Rio allowed him to not only get a job, but a job in which he could exercise his knowledge of the industry, learn English, and advance within the hierarchy of the company.

Carlos Borges followed a similar trajectory into entrepreneurship in Somerville. Because he was so familiar with the jewelry industry, having spent several years learning the ins and outs in Santa Catarina, Carlos transitioned from an entry-level job at a large Boston jewelry firm into a successful small business owner. Coming from Brazil with a specific skill set, however, allowed him to enter into a niche

industry in the United States, one that afforded him both lateral and vertical movement in terms of employment hierarchy.

Edson Lino also came from Santa Catarina, in southern Brazil, but came to the United States in a different context and with a somewhat different caliber of human capital than Carlos, or Gil for that matter. Edson was able to complete college and graduate degrees in optometry in Brazil, a level of education impressive both there and in the United States. Unlike the previous two narrators, Edson came to the U.S. for travel—an indicator of his economic resources as a Brazilian citizen. But after meeting his wife in Boston as a tourist and then marrying her, he was able to naturalize into American society and was able to open up his optical shop not only because he had the financial means to do so, but because he possessed the knowledge, skills and, perhaps most importantly, the legal status to do so<sup>3</sup>. This confluence of social and human capital factors—education, wealth, ties to the United States in addition to the strong network of his immediate family he has here—make Edson a venerable figure in the Somerville businesses community, especially for the Brazilians who go out of their way to make an appointment with him.

My final narrator, Francisco de Sá, had perhaps the most social and human capital of all of my narrators. He was able to study abroad in the United States for high school and take time off from college to volunteer in Boston. It seems, then, that his financial situation was strong enough to allow for study abroad and postponement

---

<sup>3</sup> Each of my narrators has attained legal status.

of education; additionally, he noted that his parents were supportive of his decisions to travel and study abroad, indicating that his familial support afforded him yet another level of social capital.

These four narrators are all quite successful. Gil, Carlos and Edson all used highly specialized skills that they learned and practiced in Brazil to start their own businesses while Francisco took a more “corporate” route. It should be noted, though, that each of these business owners is white, middle-aged and male. While data on race within the Brazilian community in Somerville are sparse and inconclusive, it is not surprising that those who have a stronger mastery of the English language and have more education are more likely to have successful enterprises. But this is not a new phenomenon:

Facing limited employment opportunities, many immigrants view self-employment as a route to upward mobility. Business ownership allows them to use their human capital/class resources. Well-educated immigrants often own businesses in the United States. Researchers attribute this to two factors: (1) Education endows immigrants with skills and knowledge that give them advantages in organizing and operating a business, and (2) education is positively associated with class advantage in the home country (Sanders & Nee 1996: 232).

In addition to possessing the drive for self-employment, it is possible each narrator has used entrepreneurship as a channel through which to re-obtain the social and economic status they enjoyed in Brazil. They all certainly possess the human capital necessary to do so, and to open a business in a relatively unfamiliar community requires a great deal of not only institutional education, but entrepreneurial savvy and common sense.

As I mentioned earlier, each narrator is clearly of European descent and the product of an economically and socially stable upbringing. To contextualize, the Afro-Brazilian communities in Brazil have historically been socially repressed and economically stunted as a result of neo-Criollo racial hierarchies. Many of the *favelas* in cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are inhabited largely by poverty-stricken families of African descent, many of whom may not have the resources with which to emigrate out of the country (Telles 1995: 1). The relative stagnation of the Afro-Brazilian population in comparison to the social and economic mobility of their white counterparts explains why many of Somerville's Brazilian immigrants are of European descent. This, of course, is not to say that only white Brazilians are migratory; rather, they make up a majority because of the socioeconomic capital at their disposal.

Thus, it seems that successful Brazilian entrepreneurs in Somerville that own financially viable businesses are able to break into the local business sector if they are well-educated, have a strong skill set in their particular field, and have a strong command of the English language. While each entrepreneur came to Somerville already possessing a certain amount of social capital, it seems as though the majority was accumulated over time as they became cemented in the local community. Various social networks were created within the larger context of the Brazilian community here and as each narrator gained respect as a self-employed figurehead in the business community, even more networks were established that furthered visibility and recognition.

### **Networking in the Brazilian community: language as cohesive agent**

Brazilians only have one choice for ethnic identification on the U.S. Census:

Hispanic/Latino. They are often considered part of this demographic simply because they hail from the same continent as Spanish-speaking ethnic groups. But there is a great diversity throughout Central and South America that extends beyond boxes on a form; people of indigenous descent from Guatemala, for example, might not identify with white Argentines of European descent. Technically, they would both fall under the category of “Hispanic/Latino” but their ideological and cultural differences may be vast.

The situation is similar with Brazilians. While they share a continent and colonial history with nations such as Argentina and Peru, Brazilians are set apart by their use of the Portuguese language. It is an identifier, a distinguishing agent that gives such a geographically and culturally vast country a commonality around which to self-recognize. Ethnic groups that immigrate to the United States tend to band together around a common language; Brazilians are no exception.

The comfort and familiarity of surrounding oneself with other Portuguese-speakers is a point that each narrator emphasized, but it also became very clear that opening a business in a Portuguese-speaking area is a financially viable endeavor. In a video interview, Edson noted that:

The reason I open my store in Somerville is because of the Brazilian community. The Brazilians in the area here was huge, so I said, ‘That’s the

place I should be.' I'm being Brazilian; I think I should be along with them, and the language is going to be something very easy for them, and the access to the optical store with the language... it's going to be good.

The strong presence of the Portuguese language in Somerville is an attractive incentive for many Brazilians who immigrate here. For those whose grasp of the English language is weak or nonexistent, the lusophone community serves as both a reminder of home and a network through which to further professional and social skills as they apply to life in the United States (Halter 1995: viii). For Edson, language is not only a connection to Santa Catarina but a crucial part of his business. As he notes that 60 percent of his clientele are Brazilian, it is clear that most, if not all, use his services to take advantage of a common language which allows for ease of communication and, as such, insurance of better services performed.

Carlos Borges also noted that the Brazilian community plays an important part in his business—they make up 60 percent of his clientele as well—and gave insight as to just how tightly-knit but extensive the Brazilian network is:

Because I am Brazilian, the concentration of Brazilians people in this area on that time [when I moved] was better than in the other cities. That's why I go to here... I decided to work with 18-karat gold, Brazilian people, you know... Portuguese people. It's a good area for me, it's like a central.... For Brazilian and Portuguese-speaking people.

Like Edson, Carlos depends on the Brazilian community for much of his business.

The relationship between the success of his businesses and his fluency in Portuguese is evident, although he does do a significant amount of business with clients of other ethnicities. The advertising he does on the Brazilian television station in the U.S. even reaches the outer rings of the lusophone community:

I put it [advertising] in the TV and people call from Florida, California, Ohio. But these people they send the gold in the package, they send it to me, we fix it and then send it back.

Not only is Carlos' Somerville client base robust, but the fact that Brazilians from the far reaches of the country send their valuable possessions to him speaks to the level of self-value within their population.

Francisco de Sá's story also highlights the importance of the Brazilian community in successful entrepreneurship. While he's not the only one with a university education that I interviewed, his English is the best and interpersonal skills were the most confidently displayed. I would attribute this to his exposure to both the American education system and upper echelons of corporate America.

It was also clear to me that he has a vested interest in the Brazilian community, both in Somerville and Massachusetts. His involvement with the Mayor's office coupled with his passion for business insurance make him a recognizable force in the area and the success of Amazonia seems to reflect not only the quality of the services he provides, but the respect he elicits as a notable figure.

## V. IMPACT OF THE GREEN LINE

There is no doubt that the extension of the Green Line into Somerville in 2014 will have both positive and negative effects of local businesses and the city's residents. I will classify the advantages and disadvantages as they have become chronicled in my research below.

### **Advantages**

Perhaps the most obvious advantage of the arrival of the Green Line will be the anticipated increase in foot traffic and pedestrian volume in Somerville. This bodes well for storefront businesses, such as retailers, convenience stores, and niche goods purveyors like Carlos and Edson. These types of business owners rely on individuals who do much of their shopping on foot and often visit multiple stores on the same trip. While the clinical portion of Edson's business is usually a destination visit for his clients in that they plan ahead of time to make the trip to International Optical, the retail portion relies very much on clients who come either by bus, on foot, or in conjunction with other errands they must run in the area.

The Green Line will also make more residential areas or less patronized commercial areas of Somerville, like those represented by the proposed Gilman Square and Lowell St. stops, more accessible. Commute times will be reduced and ease of transport will increase. According to the Somerville Transportation Equity

Partnership:

*Studies show that the 12 miles from Swampscott to North Station can be covered in 26 minutes by commuter rail, while it can take 30 minutes to make the 2.5-mile commute*

by bus and subway from Union Square to North Station. Somerville's residents are the second most reliant on public transit to get to and from work, but we have only one T stop. And yet, we pay about as much to the MBTA as Newton does, which is well served by the Green Line, a commuter rail line with three stops, and an express bus service to downtown Boston ([www.somervillestep.org](http://www.somervillestep.org) 2010).

These statistics are stark and speak resoundingly to the need for increased public transportation in Somerville. The City has the highest population density in all of New England and the most immigrants per square mile at 6,000, ranking only second behind Chelsea (STEP 2010). There is a veritable hole where the MBTA diverges on either side of Somerville, leaving only its westernmost edge (Davis Square) with public rail transportation [fig. 2]. The Green Line will thus provide thousands of immigrants that must commute to work with more efficient, affordable and environmentally conscious transportation while those immigrants who own small businesses in Somerville will benefit from an influx of MBTA patrons.

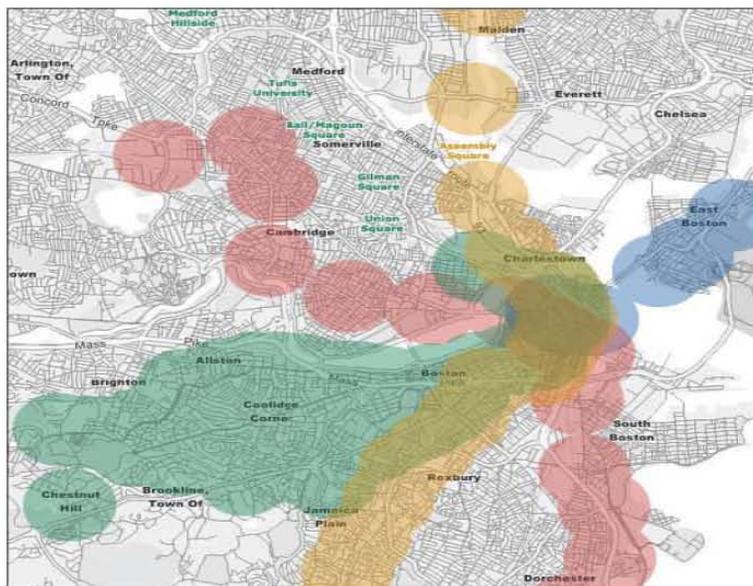


Figure 2, courtesy of STEP

## **Disadvantages**

The extension of the Green Line, however, will not be without its fair share of stumbling blocks. The first and perhaps most pressing is that of gentrification and its ensuing effects.

While both Francisco and Edson own the spaces their businesses occupy, Gil and Carlos both rent from landlords. Both emphasized strong and communicative relationships with their landlords, but one cannot help but wonder if the imminence of the Green Line and the increase in pedestrian business will tempt property owners to raise rents. Those businesses owners with long-term leases, like Gil and Carlos, will most likely be able to take the time following the arrival to adjust their finances accordingly. But other businesses that operate on short-term leases might find themselves faced with increased rent that their income might not be able to meet right away.

But the suffocating amounts of construction that will inevitably surround the extension was a concern that all four narrators in this project acknowledged. For Carlos, Edson, and Francisco, each of whom run businesses in Union Square, recent renovations on Somerville Avenue are a recent memory, and a painful one at that. Carlos, who has occupied the 301 Somerville Avenue location for the past 16 years, was forced to open another location in Everett in an attempt to offset the loss of business he experience during the construction. The main concern for Carlos was that parking eliminated during the building of the Union Square station would

prevent customers from coming into his shop not only to buy jewelry, but also for the repair and restoration services he offers. He also noted that he would prefer to see more two-hour meters. This way, he says, people that come from surrounding towns to take the bus or the new Green Line won't be tempted to leave their cars there all day, taking valuable parking spaces away from potential customers. During previous renovations, Somerville mayor Joseph Curatone encouraged local residents to:

...make a special effort to support the local merchants coping with the effects of this enormous, but very necessary project. We needed to do this work in order to provide the infrastructure for current and further development in Union Square and all along the Somerville Avenue corridor, but it's been challenging for the businesses within the construction zone. ([www.somervillema.gov](http://www.somervillema.gov) 2008)

Thus, while the City of Somerville is not blind to the plight of local merchants during major construction, it seems that they would need to implement even more measures to make sure that those businesses that were seriously affected by the previous project, such as International Optical and Wagner Jewelers, are supported and are able to maintain a feasible amount of businesses during the Green Line construction.

However, it does seem as though the same characteristics that make these four narrators such venerable figures in the entrepreneurial community—drive, education, confidence, and business savvy—will help to give voice to smaller, younger or lesser-know businesses that might not have the voice or resources to raise concerns in the face of the Green Line extension.

## **VI. Reflections, Conclusions & Moving Forward**

Overall, this project was an incredibly eye-opening and rewarding experience for me. My New York upbringing exposed me to many of Latin America's ethnic groups, but I never truly got a chance to familiarize myself with the Brazilian population. But after starting Portuguese classes here at Tufts, I knew that I had to avail myself of such a vibrant and rich Brazilian community that was quite literally outside my front door.

I left into each of my four interviews with confirmation of my expectations that the Brazilian population in the area is vibrant, extensive and, of course, strengthened by a common language. But each narrator's story highlighted just why and how the lusophone community is vital in starting, running, and maintaining a successful small business. For Gil, the word of mouth aspect of social networking among the immigrant group gave him the leg-up into entrepreneurship that he so yearned for. Edson chose to open International Optical in Somerville upon the recommendation of friends and family members who had already established themselves here, while Carlos followed a very similar trajectory. Finally, it was Francisco's familiarity with Boston and his recognition of the strength of the Portuguese language that led him to open his businesses in Union Square.

Admittedly, each of my narrators was white, male and of middle-class origins. They all came with strongly defined skill sets that helped them to succeed in the industries they chose, and all came with a significant amount of human capital. I

wandered into a few other Brazilian shops in Somerville just to peruse and make a few observations and noticed that not a single one I patronized was run by an Afro-Brazilian immigrant. It is difficult to establish just how many of the Brazilian immigrants are white compared to those of African descent, but the research I performed within my relatively small sample has led me to posit that white, educated males with a strong grasp of English are more likely to open and maintain niche businesses that provide services and products to targeted consumers.

Contextualizing these observations and conclusions with the arrival of the Green Line proved to be a bit difficult at first, but it has become more evident to me that it poses a threat to the entrepreneurs who hold short-term leases on their store space and whose profits might not be sufficient enough to handle a spike in rents in a short period of time, in addition to those whose businesses depend on foot traffic and window-shoppers. I feel that Carlos is a good example of this: while he has certainly been successful enough to keep Wagner Jewelers open on Somerville Avenue for several years, the last wave of construction almost pushed him out of business. It was not the increase in rent that undermined his financial stability per se but rather the asphyxiation of revenue and patronage that forced him to open a second, more economically viable location. Entrepreneurs like Francisco, Edson and Gil have more established clientele by the nature of the services they offer. In the insurance industry, for example, repeat clients are the norm and often look to find a broker they trust to handle their affairs. As a member of the medical profession, Edson has not only a client base but a patient base as well that keeps his stream of

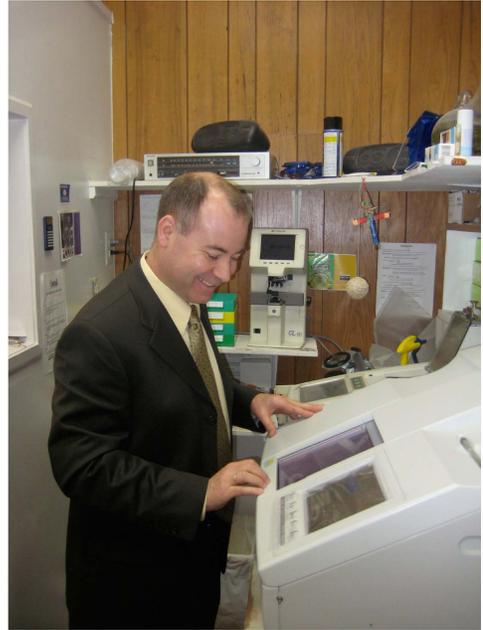
revenue a bit more stable than that of Carlos, whose patrons are more likely to come in for a one-time purchase or repair.

All in all, the entrepreneurs that I was fortunate enough to interview are all generally optimistic about the arrival of the Green Line. While all of the advantages and disadvantages might not be entirely apparent at this point, it seems as though the corridor will eventually pump vital tax dollars into Somerville's less patronized areas.

VII. Photos



Services offered (in Portuguese) by Wagner Jeweler



Edson Lino of International Optical with his state-of-the-art lens machine

Gil Ricci in his office at the Art Shirt Company



Amazonia Insurance on Bow Street



## VIII. APPENDIX

### **Narrator Information:**

Gilberto Ricci, owner of Art Shirt Company  
228 Lowell St  
Somerville, MA 02144  
(617) 625-2636  
[www.artshirtco.com](http://www.artshirtco.com)

Edson Lino, owner of International Optical  
311 Somerville Ave  
Somerville, MA 02143  
(617) 776-6300  
[interoptcl@aol.com](mailto:interoptcl@aol.com)  
[www.inter-optical.com](http://www.inter-optical.com)

Luiz Carlos Borges, owner of Wagner Jewelers  
301 Somerville Ave  
Somerville, MA 02143  
(617) 776-6300

Francisco de Sá, owner of Amazonia Insurance  
66 Bow Street  
Somerville, MA 02149  
(617) 625-1900

### **Useful resources for information on the Green Line arriving in Somerville:**

Somerville Community Corporation: [www.somervillecdc.org](http://www.somervillecdc.org)

City of Somerville: [www.somervillema.org](http://www.somervillema.org)

Somerville Transportation Equality Partnership: [www.somervillestep.org](http://www.somervillestep.org)

Official Green Line Extension Website: <http://greenlineextension.eot.state.ma.us>

Urban Borderlands class site: <http://sites.tufts.edu/urbanborderlands>

## IX. Bibliography

- "About Somerville: Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights." 2007. The City of Somerville. 18 December 2010  
<<http://www.somervillema.gov/About.cfm?page=35>>
- A.J. Kondonassis, et. el. *Major Issues in Global Development*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. Print.
- Becker, Daniel. "Developing Brazuca: Boston's Brazilians and the Cultural Negotiations of the Labor Market." Senior Thesis, Tufts University, 2007.
- Goza, Franklin. "Brazilian Immigration in North America." *International Migration Review* xxviii.1 (1994). Print.
- Halter, Marilyn. *New Migrants in the Marketplace: Boston's Ethnic Entrepreneurs*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995. Print.
- Imagine All the People: Brazilian Immigrants in Boston." The Boston Redevelopment Authority's Research Division for the Office of New Bostonians. May 2006.
- Jouët-Pastré, Clémence, and Leticia J. Braga. *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian Immigration to the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2008. Print.
- Sanders, Jimmy M., and Victor Nee. "Immigrant Self-Employment: The Family as Social Capital and the Value of Human Capital." *American Sociological Review* 61.2 (Apr. 1996): 231-49. Print.
- Siqueira, Ana Cristina O. "Entrepreneurship and Ethnicity: the Role of Human Capital and Family Social Capital." *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship* 12.1 (Mar. 2007). Print.
- "Somerville Ave Project 75% Complete and Six Months Ahead of Schedule." *City Of Somerville*. 7 Oct. 2008. Web. 20 Dec. 2010.  
<[http://www.somervillema.gov/newsDetail.cfm?instance\\_id=1331](http://www.somervillema.gov/newsDetail.cfm?instance_id=1331)>.
- "STEP: Background." *Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership (STEP)*. Web. 20 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.somervillestep.org/background/>>.
- Telles, Edward E. "Race, Class and Space in Brazilian Cities." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 19.3 (1995): 395-406. Print.

Winn, Peter. *Americas: the Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean*.  
Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2006. Print.