

Tents, Shacks, Camps and Stable Houses – Mobilities and Moralities in Transitory Sites

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Returning to Minaçu in January 2015, I was almost immediately told the news that the central administration (*secretaria*) of the Movement of People Affected by Dams (*Movimento de Atingidos por Barragens*: MAB) was going to transfer to a new location not very far away. On hearing about the move, I decided to track down the person identified as responsible, Sílvio – one of the movement’s coordinators who, according to local gossip, had garnered a lot of power over recent years, including taking over control of the movement’s distribution of basic food baskets. He straight away told me that they indeed needed to leave the present site since the place was a *cabaré danado*, ‘like a brother’, a ‘damned circus’. He contrasted this chaotic state of affairs with his plans for a new administrative centre better suited to running a ‘real office.’

I arrived in Minaçu, a town located in the far north of the Brazilian state of Goiás, in 2008 with the intention of producing a doctoral thesis on this social movement. The MAB had been formed some years earlier to defend the rights of miners whose livelihoods had been harmed by the construction of three hydroelectric dams on the Tocantins, the river along whose shores this population had previously lived and worked. Ultimately – and reflecting the vicissitudes inherent to any fieldwork – I wrote a thesis that explored other themes: while my initial plans had been to produce an anthropological study *of* a social movement, I actually ended up with a study *in* a social movement: that is, within the latter as a physical space, the *secretaria* or administrative office, which remained – and remains still today – the primary locus of my ethnographic investigation.

In the ethnographic texts that emerged from this research (Guedes 2013, 2014), I argued that the house from which MAB’s office was run for more than ten years provided an excellent departure point for conceptualizing some of the transformations that, over the first decade of this century, have marked this social movement, the life of those involved in its evolution, and Minaçu itself. Situated on one of the town’s busiest street corners, the building was previously occupied by a *cabaré* or strip club

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– the famous ‘Excalibur’ brothel – which, until around 2002 or 2003, catered for a clientele formed by miners and the workers who arrive to build the hydroelectric dams ‘affecting’ the former. I heard countless stories about this establishment, not least because many of those involved in the MAB had frequented the brothel in the past – the majority as clients, one or two of the women having worked there. Some of these men, simultaneously nostalgic and mischievous, recalled how they had sometimes been wealthy enough to *fechar cabarés*, or close the strip club/brothel, on occasion.

You want to know what closing the strip club means? It’s when you join up with some mates, four or five say, and each one puts a thousand reais, for example, into the kitty. And then for ten or eleven hours, all the women are there just for you – for us only. And in that house, for that day, nobody else comes in, it’s all ours! The door stays shut until the next day, until the evening, with just us inside.

However, by the time I arrived in Minaçu in 2008, the commotion, bustle and feverish activity of this recent era were a thing of the past. Indeed the transformations in the functions and meanings attributed to the building in question provided a good illustration of broader changes. What was once a strip club had turned into the head offices of a social movement: a place where poor people were (and still are) assisted, where they receive some kind of help – a basic food basket, a bag of milk powder... These products were distributed then by the MAB. The importance attached to these items by those receiving them was a clear sign of just how complicated the situation faced by these people was.

This background in mind, we can return to 2015. I have no idea whether Sílvio, the coordinator organizing the transfer of the administrative office, was alluding consciously or unconsciously to the brothel that had operated there in the past when he described the place as a *cabaré danado* or ‘damned circus.’ But this matters little. What *is* relevant is the kind of moral evaluation he made of various practices and relations common in that space over the last ten years, as well as the fact that the evaluation of the office in these terms had only recently become a matter of controversy.

At first glance, the conflict provoked by the administrative office’s change of location opposed those proud of the time when they ‘closed the strip club/brothel’ to those who, like Sílvio, think that all the strip clubs/brothels (and any other spaces ‘like’ them) should be shut down. The conflict that ensued tells us much about the wider transformations taking place in Minaçu: from the viewpoint of those residing there today, the town has become increasingly family-oriented, quiet (*sosegado*) and

stable (*estabilizado*). Lacking the space here for a detailed examination of the transformations associated with this process of *stabilization*, I shall use this context to explore how these notions of ‘quietness’ and ‘stability’ guide the ideas of my interlocutors concerning the question of the house in localities that, like Minaçu, are commonly thought of as ‘unstable’ and ‘restless.’

Minaçu, the Fevers, the World, the Road

Until the mid-twentieth century, the region where Minaçu is located today, in the far north of Goiás, was occupied by a few smallholders originally from Maranhão state. The urban nucleus that gave rise to the town formed in the 1960s when asbestos deposits were discovered. These attracted the interest of a mining company that began exploring the area with labour recruited from the Brazilian Northeast and the south of Goiás. In the 1970s, the discovery of an area rich in cassiterite along the shores of the Tocantins River, near to Minaçu, drew in miners from all corners of the country. The influx further increased some years later with the announcement of gold finds on the same river. Between the mid-1980s and the start of the 2000s, three hydroelectric dams were built on the outskirts of the town, effectively wiping out mining activity.

In mentioning these events, I also wish to emphasize how the town’s formation was strongly marked by economic and social processes and migratory flows that can be associated, at first sight, with the ‘commotion,’ ‘confusion’ and ‘dynamism’ characteristic of the ‘new zones’ described by Monbeig (1984). In terms of the processes and historicities responsible for its occupation and population, the area thus bears many similarities to the ‘frontier’ situations closely studied by the Brazilian social sciences of the 1970s and 80s (Cardoso de Oliveira 1978; Velho 1979, 1981; Martins 1997, 1998).

Somewhat in contrast to most of the latter examples, though, in Minaçu’s case we need to highlight the succession of different overlapping ‘fevers’ (Guedes 2013, 2014): the cassiterite fever, the gold fever, the dam fever. In each instance we encounter processes that, from the native point of view, have significant elements in common. Characterized by the particular ways through which they exacerbate *agitation* and *movement*, the times and spaces of the *fevers* are marked by various features present in relatively independent form as specific kinds of productive activity. In an earlier work

(Guedes 2014: 64), I evoked the following aspects of this phenomenon: “a) a predominantly male population, caused by the arrival of outsiders attracted by the opportunities enabled by the *fever*, including the possibility of making relatively quick money; b) the huge number of *cabarés* (strip clubs), brothels and gambling houses opened to cater for this public (many of these businesses also being ‘mobile,’ ‘circulating’ through different areas); c) the rapid multiplication of a rich spectrum of small and medium-sized businesses and services, both formal and informal, ‘local’ or ‘outside,’ offering goods and services to this affluent population or to support the productive activity responsible for setting off the *fever*; d) a peculiar pattern of ‘urbanization’ in which temporary buildings, encampments and accommodations overlap the previously existing ‘provisional’ nature of ‘popular’ spaces and ways of life (that very often appear more stable merely in comparison to this pattern); and e) a reorganization of the wider regional economic flows as an outcome of the relatively brusque changes in the kinds of goods traded, the patterns of supply and demand, and the price structures.”

Also on this point, I previously showed (Guedes 2014) how the inhabitants sought to comprehend the *movements* that permeated and also constituted the locality by comparing these with the situations found in neighbouring towns.

The comparisons with Uruaçu – the oldest municipality in the north of Goiás [...] – are suggestive of the particular circumstances that explain why particular localities and persons are more ‘affectable’ by *movements* than others. Uruaçu is considered a more *stabilized* town, though, not only because of the presence of ‘farms’ that have been there for decades, but also because ‘well-established folk’ live there. Uruaçu, after all, is not like Minaçu, the latter being a place full of *andarinos*, ‘outsiders’ and ‘single girls’ (in the joke that does the rounds in the town, these young women need a *poloque* on their neck – one of those bells used on cattle to prevent them from becoming *lost*).

Essential to this argument is the idea that my interlocutors perceive themselves to be affected by the same processes that mobilize and transform other ‘entities’ – the most relevant example here being the town of Minaçu itself. Hence the various economic fevers that *moved* this locality from the 1970s onwards – the cassiterite fever, the gold fever, the dam construction fever – are matched by the emergence of *passions* that *move* people themselves, making them excitable, perturbed and ‘feverish.’ On the other hand, a *still* town is correlated with *still* lives, things and people. Rather than presuming a metamorphic transposition of meanings ‘originally’ from one domain of social life to another, it seems to me more interesting to emphasize how we are dealing with processes encountered at different levels

or scales, affecting and transforming things that at first sight appear heterogenic, like people and towns.

The consequences of this fact in terms of understanding the sociospatial dynamics of the universe under study are far from trivial. At this point I simply emphasize how Minaçu fails to fit the image of those places that ‘produce’ migrants or those that ‘receive’ them – a distinction, it should be noted, is unproblematically assumed by virtually the entire literature on ‘migrations’ or ‘transnational communities’ (e.g. Ferguson 1990; Hage 2002; Cligget 2003; Cohen 2011). Here, though, we need to consider how the town’s *movements* are interwoven with those of the people who pass through the urban space or live there for varying lengths of time. While during the *fevers* the town can be apprehended as a ‘pole of attraction’ for outsiders, at other times it was a place that everyone wanted to leave. In this sense, the very distinction between who is ‘from there’ and who is ‘from outside’ is of little import (Carvalho Franco 1997: 32), suggesting the extent to which the combination of ‘spatial mobility,’ ‘transitory relations’ and ‘plasticity of activities’ – what Vieira (2001: 141) calls a ‘culture of wandering’ – is disseminated through Brazil’s Mid-North.

For my interlocutors, this ‘culture of wandering’ is expressed primarily through what I have called an ‘idiom of the *trecho*’ (Guedes 2013). This refers to the set of categories and expressions that enable people to evoke their experiences of *trying their luck* or *earning a living* in the spaces and paths visited on the *trecho* or road: that is, far from their homeland, their *home* and/or their *family*. The *trecho* emerges, therefore, as a specific actualization of the *world* – the latter also acting as a counterpoint to the domestic and the familial (as we shall see below) and appearing either as a “symbolic space of a freedom that presents itself to everyone a way of making use of resources in more distant locations” (Scott 2009: 266) or as a universe marked by “the uncertain, the unknown and the dangerous” (Woortman 2009: 218).

Furthermore the dynamics that I associated above with the *fevers* make explicit vectors and fevers that we could qualify, via the category of *world* ([*mundo*]), as *mundane* (which undoubtedly helps us trace the affinities between *fevers* and the *trecho*). Without being able to explore the multiple implications of these interconnections, here I shall focus on how the *world*, the *trecho* and the *fevers*

are associated with *descontroles* or losses of control (cf. Dainese 2013), perceived as threats to the *house* and the *family*.

Lodgings, Camps, Refuges, Little Rooms

After three years of difficulties and ‘short tempers’ in the lodgings of the Federal University of Goiás, sharing a small room with two other fellow students (and frequent visitors), Anderson had no doubts that he found it easier than most of his peers to live communally, ‘sharing things.’ His experience as an activist in a social movement had prepared him for this situation: the nights spent in tents or under black tarpaulins in landless worker or dam protester camps, in sports halls or classrooms, had taught him how to deal with the conflicts that inevitably surface when various people share tiny spaces and scant resources. These experiences had also taught him how to find small and vital moments of comfort – for instance, by making maximum use of the few minutes of privacy and solitude provided by a bathroom with a lock.

Regina, his mother, was also a member of the Minaçu Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB) and their discussions concerning their own distinct forms of activism (Guedes 2015) reveal how the hardships of life in the social movement were experienced by them within the context of wider events. The movements and instabilities associated with activism are interwoven, therefore, with the vicissitudes of life emblematic of those forced to confront the *trecho*. Though perturbed by the perpetual clouds of marijuana smoke, Anderson’s mother had stayed in that same university lodgings mentioned above without complaint whenever she needed to travel to the state capital to receive health treatments. She too is familiar with these confused, tight and precarious spaces like the university student accommodation. And just like her son, she also stayed in an MAB camp. But in her story, the days, weeks and months spent in encampments, *fighting* for her *rights* as a *dam victim*, also evoked other experiences: the ‘lashing rain’ and mud, or the eye-stinging dust; the heat below the tarpaulin (Sigaud 2000) and zinc roofing, or the cool shade provided by the babassu palm thatch; the *barraca* (tent), *barraco* (shack) and *barracão* (shed): everything that she encountered in these MAB camps she had already known, and known well, in the past. The *encampments* and the hardships associated with them were also a constant fact of life during the decades spent involved in mining activity.

Here it is worth examining the native category *de-morar-se: demorar*, to delay, to take time, to linger, is less (and more) than *morar*, to live or dwell. It means to tarry a while here or there – “when I *lingered* in Minaçu for the first time...” This expression matters precisely because it suggests the importance in my interlocutors’ lives of what we could call “provisional forms of existence” (Mello & Souza 1998), evoking spaces of ‘dwelling’ less definitive than a *house* (or, as we shall see, evoking what is less than ‘definitive’ about the latter).

On returning to Minaçu in 2015, I was also told that “there are people at the movement’s camp.” For more than ten years, the MAB has occupied a terrain situated next to the Cana Brava Hydroelectric Dam, along the edge of the highway, with the intention of showing that there are people still waiting to receive compensation for the losses caused by the construction project. When negotiations were resumed with the company at the end of 2013, some 40 or 50 families – still not recognized by the company as entitled to compensation, and led by one of the movement’s coordinators – promptly occupied this space. They have been there now for more than a year: those living in the camp rotate from time to time so that not all of them have to abandon their jobs and their houses are not shut and left unattended for too long, or so that a particular family affair can be resolved. Quickly and efficiently, they prepared the networks and mechanisms of *help* and/or *social action* that allow these encampments to be maintained over time (ensuring their supply of food and water, for example). This in itself reveals the familiarity of these people with this kind of situation.

For other interlocutors, such encampments echo not only what they experienced in the mining settlements of northern Goiás or eastern Amazonia, but also their experiences in landless workers’ camps (likewise situated in ‘urban’ areas, we should recall). I myself stayed in the latter kind of place, accompanying an acquaintance from Minaçu who had come to Goiânia and needed a place to sleep at night. This shows us how the occupation of such spaces transcends the ritualized waiting through which a plot of land is requested from government agencies (Sigaud 2000; Loera 2009; Rosa 2009) – we are also talking about a ‘housing solution’ for those who have recently arrived in a large town or city, just as provisional and precarious as many other types of dwelling. It also reveals their importance as a kind of ‘point of support’ or ‘hostel’ for travellers, operating like the university

lodgings in which Anderson's mother sometimes stays (along with various other relatives and friends, myself included).

However, the MAB office in Minaçu also occasionally performs this role of sheltering residents from the rural zones who, visiting the town for medical consultations, need a roof to stay under for a few days. In this respect the offices can be compared to the 'refuges' [casas de apoio] run by local councils and politicians in northern Goiás, intended as temporary accommodation for people needing medical treatment far from where they 'live' (either travelling from rural areas to towns like Minaçu, or from towns like the latter to larger urban centres). In MAB administrative office, the architecture of the building that had once housed a brothel proved well-suited to performing these functions, since the booths in which the women received their clients could be readily transformed into *little rooms* suitable for single men 'temporarily' staying in the town's urban area.

More generally, these *little rooms* were a striking and frequent element in the Minaçu landscape until fairly recently, most of the time forming rows in buildings that varied considerably in size – some containing 4 or 5 such rooms, others dozens. They were initially used by people attracted to the region by the cassiterite and gold deposits; later by workers for the companies subcontracted by the main dam construction firms who had no family in Minaçu and were not housed in the accommodations run by these firms; or by single men (and to a lesser extent women) who came to *try their luck* with some kind of work during the *fevers* that spread through the town.

Far from being just a local invention, they evoke a type of dwelling found in countless other variations in many different parts of the country. At one extreme, they could be associated with the *quitinetes* (studio apartments) located in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, intended for use by "people recruited to work in the large road and civil engineering projects" (Cavalcanti 2013: 18) during preparations for the 2016 Olympic Games; at the other extreme, they are comparable to the *senzalas* (quarters), lodgings and dormitories of the sugar mills in the Brazilian Northeast (Menezes 2002), referred to as *ranchos*, or shacks. A shack, Palmeira reminds us (1977: 206) is not a dwelling of "good quality; it is precarious, something non-definitive."

Returning to our main topic, some people have occupied these *little rooms* in the MAB offices in not so temporary fashion. Ever since the building was occupied by the movement in 2005, the *little*

rooms found there have been used by some of their coordinators, including Rui. Once a powerful man, the owner of various barges and dredgers used to extract gold, Rui's financial situation worsened drastically when the construction of the Cana Brava Dam made this activity impossible. His marriage came to an end around the same time, and he became more and more involved with the MAB, hoping to obtain some kind of compensation for his losses. Rui began to live in one of these *little rooms* in the MAB head office. This was by no means a comfortable solution: he found himself living in a space similar to those occupied by his former employees during the mining era. Proud of his status as a boss, he was now living in the administrative offices with men who, 'single' like himself, would have treated him with far more deference and respect in other circumstances. However, two or three years ago, Rui, along with others affected by the dam, reached a deal with the company responsible for its construction. He received a sizeable amount of money, and promptly moved out of the offices and into a rented house. A short while later he 'married' a woman (now 65 years old in 2015) and became a father – that is, he recognized a child as his – for the fifth time. The *little room* in which he had been residing was occupied by a man who had previously lived in the encampment next to the hydroelectric dam. In another *little room*, one of the movement's longest-serving coordinators lives still today with his daughter. The presence of the latter was justified by the fact that, after a mental breakdown, she became *rodada*, homeless – without a place in the world, living in the streets like an indigent.

We return then to the point where we started, since it was this situation at the MAB office, filled with these *little rooms* and their occupants, which was denounced as being “like a *cabaré*” by the coordinator who wanted to move its location. To comprehend what precisely is involved in these accusations, however, we need to examine what being *out of control* means.

In control and out of control

Re-encountering Japão in the MAB administrative office after more than five years, I could not fail to notice the change in his appearance, which he too was keen to emphasize. Well-dressed and smiling, he assured me that he is now more *controlled*. His water purifier business had taken off, and he had finally managed to obtain his invalidity pension, the result of damage to his spine caused by the heavy manual labour on the construction sites for the Cana Brava Dam. Much better off now, it is no

coincidence that Japão is now living in a house rather than the little room he used to rent close to the MAB offices. If Japão saw himself as more controlled, this was because he had survived the *quebradeira* (broken) phase, when his financial situation had been so bad, he had been forced to sell what should never have been sold (Godelier 2001: 17; Guedes 2014), a gold chain that was particularly dear to him. His current situation also contrasts with the period during which he had squandered all the money made from mining ‘potlatch-style’ (Mauss 1974), by “closing the strip club,” for example. Here we are dealing, then, with the capacity to ‘control’ or soften these highs and lows (intrinsically linked to the *fevers* or their inverse, the *still* periods), with these paroxysmal extremes giving way to a certain moderation or temperance.

In the mining period, these ‘dissipative’ forms of consumption were contrasted with the practices of those who, not by chance identified as *controlled*, became renowned for their capacity to economize and save: while people like Japão “blew everything partying,” the latter “held their money tight.” And it was precisely this capacity to “hold their money tight” that led these *controlled* people to become the richest of Minaçu, later transforming into *agiotas* (money lenders) who used their own *control* and the *lack of control* of others to accumulate wealth. The most notorious and powerful of them, incidentally, not only owns the house where the MAB is currently located (‘loaned’ by this man to the movement for free) but also the building where Sílvio intends to transfer the office (where he will charge rent).²

But let’s return to the question of being *out of control* and attempt to situate the practices associated with this state in a broader context. After all, the effervescences and agitations – in native terms, the *movements* – that contextualize or produce these practices are not restricted to mining. They are also experienced by those who have lived on the *trecho* or road. I have shown elsewhere (Guedes 2012; 2013a; 2014) how the end of mining stimulated Minaçu’s young men to look for work elsewhere – in dam construction projects in Amazonia, or in the mining areas of Bahia and Tocantins,

² *Agiotagem* (money lending) is thus connected to complex modalities of patronage (Boissevain 1966, Foster 1967, Wolf 2003, Velho 2007), “help for the people” (Guedes 2012) and/or *social action*, which are also frequently in tense relationship since they bring different economic moralities face-to-face. Broadly speaking, we could say that this involves the clashes and overlaps between different kinds of ‘generosity’ (the kind displayed by the powerful man who helps his protégées, as Rui used to do; the kind shown by Japão when he used to squander his wealth in ‘potlatch-like’ practices, among peers; and even the generosity of the *agiotas* – like the owner of the head office – who always ‘open their hands’ in calculated and careful fashion).

for example. I looked to show how the professional experience gained far from home is valued as a space of young sociability in stark contrast to the obligations associated with the family universe. Tensions frequently arise, therefore, from the temptations of the “life on the *trecho*”³ that entice men to squander their earnings on *mundane* sprees and luxuries – money that their wives try to channel towards domestic expenses. This is also where we encounter the ‘question of the *barraginhos*’ or ‘little dam workers’: in other words, the children fathered by the dam construction workers (the *barrageiros*) when employed far from home. After the construction work ends, these children are abandoned and raised as the offspring of ‘single’ mothers. Hence the contemporary experiences of these young men working on the *trecho* for construction companies are very similar to those previously lived by their fathers or older brothers during the mining era. This reminds us of how, in contrast to *stabilized* towns like Uruaçu, the inhabitants of Minaçu describe it as a town full of ‘wanderers’ and ‘single women.’ It is the very absence of *stability* of Minaçu, on the other hand, which turns its residents (*moradores*, or *de-moradores*, lingerers) into ‘wanderers’ who produce ‘single women’ elsewhere. Whether in Minaçu itself or far from the town, the issue is precisely the frequency with which these vectors and movements in the life of my interlocutors have simulated them to experience *losses of control*, in the past and still in the present.

The danger posed by these *losses of control* to marriages becomes even clearer when we note that the term refers to the very serious fights between members of a couple, or the violent and excessive behaviour of one of them (“it was during this time that I *lost control* with my wife...”). Here it becomes clear how the question of *control* – in the words of Dainese (2013, 2015), the author who best examined this category in the contexts of Brazil’s *sertão* or interior regions – primarily evokes an “economy of containment and avoidance.” This ‘containment’ is produced, therefore, by a person’s capacity to remain separate from the *world*, ‘avoiding’ its *movement*, agitation or *bagunça* (mess) and the things associated with it. Here alcohol plays a key role.

³ As I signalled above, the *trecho* (road) appears, to those who move away from their home and their family, as the “symbolic space of a freedom that presents itself to everyone as a way of accessing resources in more distant localities” (Scott 2009: 266).

As an examination of the anthropological literature on the Brazilian ‘popular classes’ quickly shows, this point is not entirely novel.⁴ The ‘youth sociability’ mentioned earlier may refer precisely to this moment of the life cycle when the “project of *obligation*” (Duarte 1986) has yet to impose itself, *controlling* the dissipative and festive impulses of these young men. Indeed, my interlocutors often describe their adventures and eccentric behaviours during the *fevers* or on the *trecho* as experiences typical of youth, leading them to tolerate the excesses of their own sons in the belief that “the *trecho* teaches” (Rumnstain 2009) and that these experiences are fundamental to shaping the person (Woortmann 2009; Guedes 2012). Ideally and ritually, the experiences anticipate and prepare for the moment when the individual *quietens down* a little, marrying and/or settling in a house (see the phrase *quem casa quer casa* [those who marry want a house] cited by Woortman 1982: 120; Carsten 2004: 43).

As a point of comparison, we can turn to Bahia’s Recôncavo region – described by Pina Cabral (2014: 37) – as a universe likewise characterized by the “difficulty of encountering the means for constructing stable domestic contexts” and where the “life of young men is shaped by an impetus towards mobility in search of solutions for socio-professional advancement that are incompatible with residential stability” (ibid: 39). The end result, Pina Cabral argues, is that “making a home” only makes sense during the “second moment in the adult life of the spouses” (ibid: 40). These lives marked by acute instabilities and mobilities thus need more time to create the conditions that assure the minimal stability required to maintain a home and/or a marriage. However, Pina Cabral’s description suggests that once this ‘state’ is attained, it tends to maintain or perpetuate itself. This does not seem to be the rule in the case of Minaçu’s population. I evoke this author, therefore, to explicate my own argument, underlining that the tension between ‘stabilities’ and ‘instabilities’ examined here can be more clearly apprehended if we detach ourselves from the linearities and temporalities suggested by life cycles, with their succession of ‘stages’ or ‘phases’ that are (to a greater or lesser

⁴ Dias Duarte (1986: 177) stresses, for example, that “the heavily discussed question of the matrifocality of the working classes, based on the empirical evidence of a huge number of households that manage to survive without the permanent presence of one man, and frequently over a succession of different men, could be better grasped perhaps from the angle of this male ambiguity, which translates into an effective and frequent ambivalence, above all in the period of late adolescence, a crucial turning point in male trajectories vis-à-vis the project of *obligation*.”

extent) irreversible. Moreover – as I imagine is becoming apparent to the reader – the tensions in question relate to something more than the ‘lives’ of the people under discussion. I return to this later.

Stabilization and single women

When speaking about the *stabilization* of Minaçu, my interlocutors thus suggest that the town is becoming a *quieter* and more *family-oriented* place, distancing itself from the *movements, losses of control* and turbulences that typified its past. This past, let us remember, was comparable to the reality of that ‘frontier’ life, which, in Martins’s description (1998: 688-690), involves “domestic ways of life constructed on the basis of the provisional, the insecure and the unstable,” where even the houses give “the impression that people may up and leave at any moment.”

This *stabilization* is expressed through the recent boom in civil construction in Minaçu, with new neighbourhoods appearing and houses being built, reformed and transformed all over the town. In sum, we are faced with a set of processes through which “towns made of tents, lining the highway” (Guedes 2013b: 332) – or the *corrutelas, beiradões* and *trizidelas* bordering the constructions sites and mining areas (Ab’Saber 1996) – are replaced by urbanized districts populated with brick houses. Seen from a comparative perspective, certain areas associated with the precariousness of frontier life (Martins 1998), or conceived as ‘pioneering’ (Heredia et al. 2010) can be seen to ‘evolve’ (Borges 2003), ‘consolidate’ (Cavalcanti 2007) or ‘mature,’ leaving behind the status of “frontiers of urban occupation” (Woortman 1982: 130-1).

True specialists in mapping the *movements* of ‘economic mobility’ (Guedes 2014), my interlocutors themselves associate this boom with more wide-ranging processes: the rising value of the minimum wage and the growing formalization of labour relations; the low rate of unemployment in Brazil, especially in inland areas marked by large-scale investments in infrastructural projects and the production of energy and minerals; the expansion of social programs targeted at the most vulnerable groups; and the credit lines (especially for housing) made available to the popular classes, associated with an increased ‘bankerization’ and/or ‘financial inclusion’ of these groups (Singer 2013). Not coincidentally, the residents of Minaçu take pride today in being able to use the banking services provided by a Caixa Econômica Federal branch that opened in the town some two or three years ago.

These processes acquire considerable significance insofar as they relate to the fact that Minaçu has been the base for the construction of three hydroelectric dams: the town acquired a strategic position in the “migratory circuit of the major construction projects” (Lins Ribeiro 1988, 1989) – especially due to the large influx of workers professionally qualified to build these dams. Most of the work was completed by 2002. Some time later, during the ‘development boom’ of the second Lula government, the town expanded its reach within this labour circuit, becoming included on the more ‘traditional’ routes linked not only to Eastern Amazonia and the Northeastern sertão, but also to the major construction projects in the country’s Southeast. Reflecting this change, it is only in recent years that some of my acquaintances – experienced and well-travelled migrant construction workers, or *peões do trecho*, several of them having worked as far away as Africa with Brazilian contractors – have ‘finally’ been able to discover the ‘fascinating’ Rio de Janeiro, most of them working on the construction of Rio de Janeiro’s Petrochemical Complex. Much of the income earned by these workers on the *trecho* has been invested in their own houses – revealing how the ‘small’ building projects through which these workers have been constructing and reforming their houses are closely connected to the ‘major’ investment projects.

This *stabilization* of the town is linked to the fact that many of my interlocutors have also been *stabilizing* and *controlling* themselves⁵ – albeit during that “second moment of adult life” described by Pina Cabral (2014). This has also affected the way in which I conducted my fieldwork, since my best friend in the field – Aparecida, now close to fifty years old – has become married. The wooden shack where she lived was pulled down and in its place she and her husband – 10 or 15 years older than her, and coming from a rural area – built a brick house by pooling their resources and efforts. In these new circumstances, Aparecida is no longer able to spend the entire day by my side – both of us wandering through the town’s streets, accompanying each other doing the ‘things’ that the other had to resolve, even travelling together to the rural area and the state capital (where I stayed with her in the refuges while she received medical treatment). She was no longer a ‘single woman’ and could not spend so much time alone by my side. The intimacy that I had once enjoyed at her house also came to an end –

⁵ I lack the space here to discuss the complex ways in which this connection unfolds. I merely call the reader’s attention to the observations made earlier about how certain *movements* affect the town and its inhabitants in the same way (feverish town, feverish people; still town, still people; stabilized town, stabilized people).

in the new dwelling, Aparecida, her husband and I chatted in the living room, where I found myself being treated as a ‘visitor’ once again, as I had been when I first met her. The fact that I, a single man, had previously spent nights in the house of a ‘single woman’ – without any relationship other than friendship developing between us – did lead to some idle gossip among Aparecida’s neighbours and acquaintances. But this was never close to becoming a scandal, nor bothered either of us. Minaçu, I repeat, is a town that in many ways is inhabited by ‘single women.’

From a certain point of view, the ‘single woman’ is indeed a euphemism for prostitute – I come back to this point later. But the references to this term also relate to some of the elements involved in the constitution of families in these contexts shaped by intense mobility. At a comparative level, we can evoke, for example, the “large percent of absent men” who Richards (1939: 405) mentions among the Bemba, with these male adults moving away – like the young men of Minaçu today – to work in mining areas. Another phenomenon worth citing here is the frequency with which ‘marriages’ are made and unmade (and remade and unmade again) in places with little *stability* like Minaçu; or again the previously mentioned issue of the *barraginhos*, the ‘dam worker children,’ produced in the ‘matrilocal families’ created after the conclusion of these large-scale infrastructural works, when “many men abandoned the families they had recently formed” (Lins Ribeiro 1988: 155).

The construction of the house and the world

To examine this question, it seems reasonable here to think (again) of the house ‘structurally’ (cf. Carsten 2004: 49), approaching it as a ‘moral entity’ or a ‘sphere of social action’ that can be apprehended “in contrast or opposition to other spaces and domains” (Da Matta 1991: 17-18). In the context analysed here, these ‘other spaces,’ are the *world* and the *trecho*.

As I suggested earlier, “the uncertain, the unknown and the dangerous” (Woortmann 2009: 218) characterizing the *world* are experienced above all when people are far from their house and family, far from home – on the *trecho*. Hence the *trecho* is the locus par excellence of contact with the world, where the latter can be apprehended in all its exuberance. It is unnecessary to leave town or set foot on the road, though, to encounter the world: it can be experienced even at home, as happened to the daughter of my friend Regina. The latter remarked:

Scarcely out of childhood, this girl learnt to live with the world. Who told her to get pregnant so young? But since it happened, she had to adapt. She learnt from a young age, but she had no choice: she lost her way, she ended up with a child, and was forced to catch up [*correr atrás*], discovering how life is hard. Ah, but the world teaches: I've no doubt about it!

We could say, then, that it is in the *world* – far from home, on the road – that the *world* – thought of as an expression of the life, reality and hardships that define it – is revealed in all its plenitude (cf. Rumnstain 2008).

Knowing or confronting the *world*, 'facing reality' or 'confronting life,' means becoming aware of what is contingent and provisional about the home and the family. And it is in this sense that the security and predictability related to the house appear as the result, precisely, of efforts to delimit spaces that offer some protection and comfort in this world through the domestication of the latter's forces. This creation of an 'enclave' where the danger and inconstancy of the *world* have at least been minimally tamed in support of a certain stability and predictability is created especially in the practices of *construction*.

In Goiânia, the capital of Goiás state, I happened to bump into Anyele, a young woman who I had met some time previously in Minaçu. I asked her about her life and her plans to return to the town. She assured me that she would not be stepping foot there so soon. "I'll go back only when I can build!" – in other words, she intends to return only when she has the personal and financial conditions to construct her own house. Construction in this case is directly linked to the projects guided by the search for the *quiet life* or *tranquillity* to be enjoyed 'after' experiencing the turbulences and movements of living in the *world*. It was in relation to this kind of project that Anyele told me about life there in the capital, *correndo o trecho* [out on the road]: she is indeed working in Goiânia, but remains willing to earn a living in Europe as a cleaner or dancer before returning to Minaçu some time in the more distant future.

When it comes to projects and dreams like those of Anyele, the *world* or the *trecho* are diachronically opposed to *quietness* and *tranquillity*, the latter succeeding the former in accordance with the stages of the life cycle evoked by Pina Cabral (2014) above. But if the *house* is present in conspicuous fashion there, this is also because it enables or induces the diachrony of these projects through an operation that synchronically reproduces the same opposition: for example, through the

wall built as part of the construction, which enables the confusion of the ‘outside’ world to be separated from the quiet and tranquillity ‘inside’ the house. Entering the house, whichever it may be, means to *quieten down*; leaving the ‘agitation’ and ‘rushing about’ outside...⁶

The future *construction* of Anyele’s house provides a counterpoint, therefore, to the kind of ‘housing solutions’ that she encounters on the *trecho* (when I met her in Goiânia, she was residing – temporarily, of course – in the house of a former employer). But as I have already argued, this model centred on diachrony and the life cycle is – in the view of my interlocutors themselves – incomplete or inadequate. The model may well be usefully applied to *stabilized* places like the town of Uruaçu, but it cannot fully explain how things function in Minaçu, or what happens with the people from this town.

To discuss this point, we can return to Regina’s story. Some years ago, with the *help* of relatives, she had managed to get her name included “by the mayor” in a popular housing program in Minaçu. Comparing herself to many of our fellow acquaintances in the MAB, she realized how relatively fortunate she is, frequently commenting on the difficulties faced by those “without a house” and how they have no means of “protecting themselves from the sun and rain.” This formula is only superficially trivial, I think, especially when we take into account the extreme importance of the meanings of the harsh weather in the narratives of the wanderings and misfortunes of my interlocutors (Guedes 2013, 2015). In an encampment of miners or dam protesters, the black tarpaulins and palm thatch are precisely what allow people to protect themselves “from the sun and rain.” In the context of this discussion, the ‘function,’ ‘objective’ or ‘sense’ of these gestures that erect these *barracas* (tents) or *barracos* (shacks) is more or less clear: it involves precisely a separation or protection from the turbulent and tempestuous forces of the *world*, here perfectly expressed by these natural phenomena – experienced, moreover, by people who are constantly moving or living in a precarious situation. What seems most relevant to me, though, is something else: namely, the necessity, in these contexts marked by transience and mobility, of reiterating on a daily basis the gestures responsible for erecting something – repeating them in another camp site, or caring for and repairing materials and

⁶ Perhaps this also explains the productivity of those analyses centred on houses as “places of departure and arrival, absence or presence, of everyday or exceptional comings and goings” (Comerford 2014: 117; cf. Carneiro 2010; Dainese 2012), focusing on what we could call, literally, ‘rites of passage’: that is, the *movements* through which communications, transactions and contaminations between the *house* and the *world* are continuous and morally taken into consideration.

assemblages that are readily perishable and liable to damage. Could we suggest, therefore, that rather than the *barracos* and *barracas* being incomplete or imperfect houses, it is the latter that appear as slightly more stable or solid *barracos* or *barracas*?

In highlighting these points, my aim is to show how these projects where the *house* diachronically succeeds the *world* are themselves relativized by the synchronic opposition between the *house* and the *world* – or better still, by the hierarchical nature assumed by this relation in this context. It is the relative ‘weakness’ of these efforts involved in constructing the house compared to the ‘strength’ of the *world* that seems to be in play here, as well as the simple fact that the world encompasses the house, in Dumont’s sense (1992) – that’s why those gestures that erect buildings (as/or tents) must be repeated so often, or almost on a daily basis. From this point of view, *morar* (residing) and *de-morar* (tarrying a while) are not so different.

The very *stabilization* that the town has recently experienced should be comprehended in light of these ideas and the general distrust of whatever appears or claims to be definitive, durable or irreversible. Few factors performed such a crucial role in shaping the expectations of the town’s residents as hearing the news that a new mining company was due to arrive, bringing income, employment and *stability* to the town. Even so, some people question whether these kinds of investments are not just another *fever* (bringing *mess* back to the town) or whether the mining company will leave if the market price of the metals being mined drops... The coming back of unstable, *mundane* and agitated times is always a possibility to be kept in mind.

Distances and proximities between the house and the strip club

Not very far from Minaçu, in a farming region bordering the state of Mato Grosso similarly populated by ‘wanderers’ and ‘single women,’ Esterci (1985: 229) initially evokes a “definitive dichotomy between family life, fully observing rules, and prostitution, as a space where these rules are broken, socially and spatially segregated.” She quickly relativizes this claim, however, along with what is supposedly ‘definitive’ about it, since “soon we encounter situations and relations linking the space of prostitution to the family.” This sort of relativization, where initial boundaries become blurred in favour of transitions and communications, is a common enough analytic procedure. What

interests us here is the relative strength of these ‘dichotomies’ and ‘linkages’ (to stick with Esterci’s terms): just how distant are these establishments? How rigid is the boundary separating the strip club from the house? How high or solid is the wall performing this function? Evoking once again the case of my two closest friends in the field, Aparecida and Regina, we can be certain that there have been many examples over the course of their lives of doors and windows enabling these spaces to communicate and contaminate each other. Aparecida’s mother was the owner of a strip club, located in the same building in which they lived. Regina herself had *tocou* (ran) one and her son Anderson would often stress how, ever since a child, he had always felt comfortable circulating “among the whores and transvestites,” having been raised among them.

It is not enough, therefore, to take into account the relations, transactions or transitions relating the *house* to the *world* – the instabilities and hardships associated with the latter being conspicuously manifested in the *lack of control* characteristic of the strip clubs. We also need to emphasize the intense, frequent and problematic proximity between these domains – or, punning slightly, the ‘promiscuity’ between them.

We return to the point from which we started. It could be suggested, then, that, in attempting to change the location of MAB’s head office, Silvio is looking to distance the social movement from the *world*, the *out of control*, and the *mundane*. He thus acts like one of those people who *builds* a wall around his house: striving to ensure that the limits placed around certain spaces – in the face of the *world* or against it – remain clear and firm, respected and respectable. At least for a while. The fact that he spends time and effort on the head offices that other people would spend only on their houses, can perhaps be explained by the fact that he is a (Christian) *believer*. Lacking the space or conditions here to incorporate this religious dimension into the discussion, I merely emphasize that the obvious and evident aversion of Evangelicals to the kind of *losses of control* that excited the miners cannot obscure the fact that both seem to share the same view of the *world*. In other words, there are notable similarities in the elements that define this category for both groups, even though these elements may be morally valued in diametrically opposite ways. From an Evangelical point of view, someone is usually described as being “in the *world*” – and thus far from God’s salvation or life with Him – when he or she is “enjoying its pleasures and sins” (Birman 2009: 333). However this convergence is

unsurprising if we recall how this conception of the *world* of the miners – marked by the ideas of tumult, instability and transience (of the *world* itself and those who populate it) – expresses long-lasting Christian theological conceptions (Vieira 2001), actualized in this context through the messianic ‘Biblical culture’ (Velho 2007) that is associated with ‘rustic Catholicism’ (Queiroz 2005). In this sense, some care needs to be taken with the term ‘promiscuity’ that I chose to designate this ‘proximity’ between the *house* and the *world*: this term could lead us to see the relations between these terms through the same kind of ‘over-codification’ or ‘rigid/molar segmentarity’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1997) typical of Evangelical discourse (though not only it, of course) with its polarities, strong tones and peremptory exclusions.

Indeed, it is not that rare for the *little rooms* in the MAB administrative offices to be used for casual sexual encounters between ‘single’ people. The majority of those frequenting the office undoubtedly disapprove of these practices. Even so, the forms of ‘disapproval’ vary substantially. Sílvia, for instance, seeks to eradicate them entirely, turning the head office into a space without any connotations of a strip club. Here, though, I have omitted an exploration of how the increase in his power (and that of the Evangelicals in general) is associated with the town’s *stabilization*. Sílvia and his projects are only of interest to us here, therefore, as a counterpoint allowing me to make explicit what we could call, very roughly, the “arts of living together in a precarious state.” And so we can recollect the difficulties experienced by my interlocutors in their ‘provisional’ dwellings – the need to ‘share things’ and tiny spaces in some kind of lodging or other, their patience in tolerating certain ‘proximities’ or ‘presences.’ What for some people appears to be ‘permissiveness’ or ‘impure’ and ‘profane’ mixtures – a *head office* that is also a *house*, and that remains a *strip club* in terms of some of its practices – may in fact be result of this *savoir faire*, capable of permitting the coexistence, albeit tense and provisional, of a brothel and a family house (remembering what happened with Regina and Aparecida); or of this ability to keep things separate, without thereby necessarily erecting a wall – whether in a house with just one room, in the *barraca* (tent) and the *barraco* (shack), in the *little room*, in the truck cabin, we can think of the role performed by sheets and curtains in creating subdivisions and ‘substituting’ for doors, windows or walls.

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