




# Constructing a city, building a life: Brazilian construction workers' continuous mobility as a permanent life strategy

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an ethnographic analysis of domestic labor mobility among Brazilian construction workers in the context of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. We start from the premise that mobile laborers are crucial for the physical development and expansion of cities. However, the importance of domestic migrants in this process is insufficiently addressed in mobility studies. Building on existing research on domestic population movements in Brazil, we argue that the current generation of mobile construction workers draws on the intangible and material infrastructure generated by previous generations of migrants to enable novel kinds of (permanent) labor mobilities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 December 2017  
Accepted 29 March 2018

## KEYWORDS

Mega-events; Olympics; Brazil; construction; labor mobility; internal migration; anthropology

## Introduction

The last 150 years have been characterized by great changes in the distribution of urban populations worldwide. According to Pacione (2009, 68), there are three main ways in which urban patterns worldwide are changing: (1) urbanization (an increase in the proportion of the total population in urban areas); (2) urban growth (an increase in the population of towns and cities as opposed to villages); and (3) urbanism ('the extension of the social and behavioral characteristics of urban living across society as a whole'). Two major processes cause urbanization and urban growth: natural increase in the population and net immigration to urban areas. Not erroneously, then, in relation to the contribution of migrants to changes in the urban environment, migration scholarship tends to focus almost solely on the impact of 'flows' of people towards cities (Buckley 2014).

Some scholars, however, have explored a different connection between migration towards cities and the changes this process has brought about in the urban environment: they focus on the contribution of migrant workers to the physical 'construction' of cities. Erlich and Grabelsky (2005), for instance, argue that the thousands of Mexicans who have joined migrants from Central and Latin America and Eastern Europe on construction projects across the USA should be perceived as another expression of ongoing processes of scaling. Traditional forms of international competition (e.g. outsourcing and overseas production) cannot be applied to the construction sector: the construction of buildings is, after all, physically tied to a specific place. The authors argue the increased labor demand for foreign workers in construction from the 1990s onwards is a result of the unwillingness among national workers to enter or remain in the line of work due to the extreme low wages in the sector.

In relation to the Portuguese construction sector, Malheiros (1998) notices how a boom in construction, with different 'mega-construction projects' being planned and executed in the Greater

Metropolitan Area of Lisbon during the 1990s, greatly increased the demand for construction workers. Most of these workers were subcontracted instead of permanently employed as a way of dealing with these temporary fluctuations in labor demand (Salazar 2017). Due to strategies aimed at reducing costs and responsibilities for construction companies and subcontractors, clandestine and precarious work in Portugal increased in the 1980s. Immigrants often had their insertion in the clandestine labor market of construction facilitated, among others by the fact that subcontractors made use of direct or indirect recruitment networks, usually of Cape Verdean or Guinean origin. Moreover, immigrants are also generally expected to be more flexible: this is particularly important because construction demands a flexible labor force both spatially (projects are spread across large areas) and temporally (it is strongly dependent on the demand for new infrastructure) (Malheiros 1998, 178–180).

Buckley (2014, 344) stresses that the ‘production of the urban landscape’ is frequently carried out by insecure wage labor, generally provided by migrant construction workers. She highlights the contribution of migrant construction work to the physical expansion of contemporary cities in the form of subsistence-based and illegal building. This particular aspect bears resemblance to the idea of ‘arrival cities’, propagated by Saunders (2011) in his book *Arrival City*,<sup>1</sup> in which he gives concrete examples of the role migrants worldwide play in the physical expansion of the urban environment. On the Turkish *gecekondü* (simple houses built by recently arrived domestic migrants in the outskirts of Istanbul), Saunders (2011, 163–165) writes:

In the 1950s when they [rudimentary houses] started to appear amid Turkey’s industrial boom, these buildings, and the communities they formed, were given a name that was uttered with distaste by the better-off residents of central Istanbul. It combined the word for ‘night’ (*gece*) with the word for ‘arrived’ or ‘settled’ (*kondü*). The *gecekondü* [...] became, for many years, the menace on the frontier... As the 1960s wore on, that initial shock evolved into a begrudging, if fearful, acceptance. *Gecekondü* residents happened to be much-needed labourers.

Under different names, each emphasizing in a different way the history of arrival neighborhoods over the past decades, Turkey saw the emergence of *gecekondü*, Brazil saw *favelas* expand, and slums grew across Africa and Asia. The role of migrant laborers in these processes of urban expansion is undeniable: they make it physically possible both by formally providing the required labor and by informally constructing and consolidating communities to meet their own needs.

The objective of this article is to illustrate the importance of this *mobile* labor to the physical construction and expansion of cities. This is done by looking at the case of Brazilian construction workers in the context of the 2016 Rio Olympics. More specifically, we analyze how the current generation of workers relies on intangible as well as material infrastructures created by previous generations of migrants to enable novel kinds of (permanent) labor mobility. In doing so, we wish to put domestic labor movements higher on the mobilities research agenda, given that existing research has concentrated mainly on the study of cross-border and transnational migratory movements. Secondly, we want to address domestic mobilities without the clear-cut distinction between temporary and permanent migrants, because we believe such an approach has a limiting outcome that annihilates the possibility of relating to individuals’ (im)mobilities in more encompassing ways. Focusing on ‘temporariness’ when relating to mobile individuals, especially lower-skilled workers, has, in many ways, the power of constraining their rights (Dauvergne and Marsden 2014).

## Human mobility and urban expansion in Brazil

As we have argued, although it is commonly known that migrants shape the (physical) urban environment, when taken into account at all, scholars have focused mainly on the impact of international migration on the urban environment (Buckley 2014; Erlich and Grabelsky 2005; Krings et al. 2011; Malheiros 1998). In many countries, however, especially in the ‘Global South’, domestic mobilities are paramount and, therefore, should not remain unaddressed when analyzing these ongoing processes in cities. To address this gap in the literature, we focus on domestic labor migrants, taking the city of Rio de Janeiro, particularly in the context of the recent sports mega-events, as a case study.

Rio de Janeiro's growth and expansion is a great example of the impact of human mobility on cities, both numerically due to the associated population increase, and because of the city's physical construction, often carried out by newly arrived migrants, and its subsequent expansion. Around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the twentieth century, Rio's poor concentrated almost exclusively in the city center, more often than not sharing 'collective residences', commonly referred to as *cortiços* (tenements) (Vaz 1994). The rapid increase in Rio's urban population around this time was strongly associated with the arrival of recently freed slaves who moved from the hinterlands to Rio and with the arrival of international migrants from Portugal, Italy and Spain. This population growth increased the need for cheap housing in the city, leading to an explosion in the number of tenements. However, as the number of *cortiços* grew, so did the problems associated with it: too many people occupying a relatively small space led to a lack of hygiene and subsequent frequent epidemics of cholera, smallpox and yellow fever (cf. Vaz 1994; Perlman 2010).

Apart from the working class, *cortiços* were also home to the so-called 'dangerous classes' of society: tricksters, vagabonds and criminals. According to Valladares (2000), the image of the city center tenements as the *locus* of disease was the main pretext for several administrative measures, culminating in Mayor Pereira Passos' massive urban reform between 1902 and 1906.<sup>2</sup> As tenements became forbidden and were even destroyed, those who did not want to leave the surroundings of the city center started building shacks on the hills near the city center, moving then towards the South Zone and later on to other areas. After the occupation of the city center, the South and the North Zone, and in what seems to have coincided with the greater move towards the city by internal migrants from the Northeast region of Brazil, the expansion towards the West Zone gained momentum in the second half of the twenty-first century (cf. Ferreira 2009; Portes 1979).

The emergence of the first favelas on the hills of the city illustrates the severe need for affordable housing among Rio's residents, a problem that persists today (Ferreira 2009; Freire-Medeiros and Name 2013; Vaz 1994). The growing number of domestic migrants arriving in the main cities of Brazil between the 1940s and the 1980s, with Rio and São Paulo as the most important destinations, is credited as one of the factors responsible for the quick expansion of favelas in the rapid process of urbanization Brazil experienced (Pero, Cardoso, and Elias 2005; Silva 2012). According to estimates by Silva (2012, 29), 3 million people migrated from rural to urban areas in Brazil in the 1940s, rising to 7 million in the next decade (1950–1960), 13.6 million ten years later (1960–1970), and reaching its highest point of 17.4 again in the following decade (1970–1980). These numbers declined to 9.2 (1980–1990), but rose again slightly to 9.5 before the turn of the century (1990–2000). Many argue this decline coincides with a period of economic stagnation and crisis in Latin America in general (Freire-Medeiros and Name 2013; Silva 2012).

It is said that Rio in particular became less attractive to domestic migrants with the transfer of Brazil's capital to the newly built Brasília in the 1960s, evidenced by slower immigration than in the two decades before (Pero, Cardoso, and Elias 2005). However, as argued by Freire-Medeiros and Name (2013, 169), this does not mean that Rio lost its importance as a main destination for migrants throughout the second half of the twentieth century: large favelas in the city, such as Rocinha, are known as 'Ceará's largest city outside of Fortaleza [capital of Ceará, Northeastern state of Brazil]'. This matches what many workers we spoke had to say about Gardênia Azul being 'a Little Maranhão' [Northeastern state where many of our interviewees are originally from] in Rio. The overwhelming presence of Northeastern migrants in cities in the Southeast of Brazil (mainly São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) is also shown by Almeida and D'Andrea (2004) with the example of Paraisópolis, a favela in São Paulo where 80% of the residents are originally from the Northeast of the country (mainly from the states of Bahia and Pernambuco). The authors stress the importance of family networks as a crucial element of residents' mobility, as we will also point out in this article.

### Setting the (ethnographic) scene

Studying domestic labor mobility of construction workers in the context of mega-events is an interesting point of view because of these events' alleged positive legacies (Salazar et al. 2017). Both job creation

and an improved urban infrastructure, from transport and sports infrastructure to schools and museums, are common and prominent features in mega-events' bidding books (cf. Brownill, Keivani, and Pereira 2013; Chalkley and Essex 1999; Gaffney 2010; Miagusko 2012; Millward 2016; Minnaert 2012; Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013). Simply put, without the flexible and mobile worker who is willing to attend to this temporary higher labor demand, the urban transformations so frequently coupled with mega-events would not be possible.

While our initial focus was on those domestic migrant workers who travel back-and-forth over the years, we eventually broadened our research to also include those who have been in Rio for many years. We did this to do away with the dichotomy so often applied in mobility and migration studies of permanent settlement versus temporary movements. The study of mobility should, after all, also take immobility into account (Salazar and Smart 2011). This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, mainly before and during the 2016 Summer Olympics. The fieldwork took place predominantly around one of the support sites (*canteiro de suporte*) of the Bus Rapid Transit line 'Transolímpica' in the West Zone, with a couple of interviews being conducted in Gardenia Azul (or simply Gardenia), a neighborhood where many workers were living, located nearby the main Olympic sites.

### **Workplace and living space**

The Transolímpica BRT line is one of the several construction projects that were carried out in the context of the Rio Olympics (see also Rio 2016 Olympic Committee 2009). It is part of the promised material legacy of the 2016 Rio Olympics. Most of these 'Olympic projects' materialized in the West Zone of the city, where the brand new Olympic Park was constructed. Together with three other BRT lines, namely Transcarioca, Transoeste and Transbrasil (the latter still unfinished more than a year after the Rio Olympics) and the expansion of one of two urban metro lines, the Transolímpica is part of the improved mobility infrastructure for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Although the Transolímpica road was concluded before the Olympics took place, many workers told us during the interviews that the 'final touches' would take place only after the event, given the delays on the project (as was the case for many other Olympic projects).

We obtained formal access to the support site through the human resources (HR) department of the consortium responsible for the Transolímpica road. The HR employee who gave us permission to access the support site emphasized that a great number of workers employed on the project were from outside the state of Rio de Janeiro. According to their statistics, from the 4500 employees (between construction workers, engineers and administrators), 3800 were indirectly employed via outsourcing firms (*empresas terceirizadas*). Almost 55% of workers were from the state of Rio de Janeiro, which also means that almost half were from another state. From these migrant or mobile workers, they argued more than 11% were from the state of Maranhão, in the Northeast of Brazil. It is important to notice, however, that these formal numbers that were made available to us by the HR department do not apply solely to the construction worker 'on the ground', which is the main focus of our study, but include besides construction workers all employees such as security technicians, engineers, administrators and lawyers.

We confirmed during our interviews on the support site that most men were originally from different states in the Northeast region, with Maranhão being clearly overrepresented: 18 out of 28 workers were from Maranhão, with the remaining 10 interviewees representing the Northeastern states of Ceará (5 workers), Pernambuco (2) and Piauí (1), as well as São Paulo (1) and the Federal District (1). Although the numbers showed that most workers were indeed from Maranhão, it was common to hear men say 'we're all *nordestinos* here' whenever we explained we were looking to talk to workers who were from outside of the state of Rio de Janeiro. Another element that many men reinforced was the length of time spent in Rio or the number of times they had returned to the city. They did this particularly often when they felt insecure about talking to us, preferring to send us to someone else who knew all the in and outs of Rio or, in their words, had more 'Rio experience'.

From the *maranhenses* we interviewed, most were living in Gardenia, a typical favela in the West Zone of Rio, close to the well-known Cidade de Deus<sup>3</sup> and Rio das Pedras<sup>4</sup>. Much like the Santa Marta favela, located in the affluent South Zone of the city and described by Saunders (2011, 69–75), immigration from different states has played an important role in Gardenia's emergence and expansion over the past decades. As some longtime residents emphasized, both recent arrivals and more established migrants from the Northeast definitely form the predominant group of residents. Like many favelas in the West zone of Rio, the emergence, expansion and consolidation of Gardenia is closely linked to that of Barra da Tijuca, an upper end neighborhood that started gaining attention from policy makers in the second half of the 1960s (Ferreira 2009; Maia 1998).

The presence and influence of northeastern migrants is in many ways palpable when one wanders around Gardenia: from bars, shops and restaurants with typical music, products and dishes, to the accents heard. Moreover, the emergence of migrant networks and (material and immaterial) infrastructures both in Gardenia and between Gardenia and the Northeast of the country (more specifically several villages in the interior of the state of Maranhão), has greatly facilitated the mobility between these localities, as we will illustrate in the following sections. The presence of local bars and shops with products from the Northeast, for instance, is one example of how infrastructures built by previous generations of migrants make it easier for current workers to stay in a city they often see as merely a place to work, since many of them have never visited the sites so often associated with Rio, such as Copacabana or Christ the Redeemer. We will now look more closely to the patterns of mobility shown by the workers and their relation to the mega-event and the promises that go with it.

### From arrival to circulation

Brazil has always known great internal population movements, motivated by the country's interregional inequalities. The South and Southeastern regions concentrate the most significant share of wealth, whereas the North and Northeast have been historically marked by flagrant poverty (Jones 2017). Logically, the most traditional pattern of domestic labor mobility, and the one that is reinforced and propagated in day-to-day conversations and in the media, is the Northeast-Southeast pattern. Research on this internal mobility has tended to focus either on the movements' nature, size and directions (cf. Baeninger 2000, 2012; Lima and Braga 2013; Nunes, Silva, and Queiroz 2017) or, more specifically, on the movements' (possible) impact on the process of urbanization and economic development in Brazil (cf. Alves, Souza, and Marra 2011; Amaral, Rios-Neto, and Potter 2016; Cunha 2005; Perz 2000; Wagner and Ward 1980).

The general perception in Brazil about this classical Northeast-Southeast population movement is that people from the Northeast *always* migrate to major cities in the Southeast with the intention of settling there permanently. This perception is based on the fact that many older Northeastern migrants have indeed been in cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo for decades. However, it does not take into consideration the fact that intentions might change – what was once supposed to be a permanent move, may become, intentionally or unintentionally, temporary (or vice versa) (Hamilton 1985). It also does not consider the influence of technological and societal changes, such as faster and more accessible means of domestic travelling, the rise of social media, and the networks and infrastructures created by established migrants (cf. Korpela 2016). These changes have come to facilitate greater mobility (back-and-forth movements) at the expense of permanent settlement in a place one is sometimes not particularly fond of.

The temporary to permanent character of work-related mobilities has led to terminological ambiguities. Scholars have used a multitude of denominators, partially overlapping with one another, to denote short-term mobilities. In the past, these have variously been labeled as 'repeat, rotating, multiple, seasonal, cyclical, shuttling, or circuit-based modes of migration' (Vertovec 2007, 5). Other, related, terms are serial migration, transient migration, pendular migration, return migration, swallow migration, recycling migration, and nomadic work.

Uriely (1994) identified a continuum of migratory mobilities, from sojourners (temporary migrants) to settlers (permanent migrants), with 'permanent sojourners' taking the middle ground between the two. Permanent sojourners are those who maintain a general wish to return to their homeland and their orientation towards their new place of residence represents a compromise between the sojourner and the settler. In line with Buckley's (2014) work, we argue that the importance of mobile laborers for the construction, expansion and transformation of a city is not diminished by whether they settle permanently or not, thus whether they see the city either as a place of 'arrival', of 'transit' or even of 'permanent circulation' in the form of back-and-forth movements (Salazar 2017). In the context of the 2016 Summer Olympics, the temporary need for labor in the construction sector simply encouraged more workers from the Northeast to come to the city in search of employment.

### **Mega-event promises**

As we have pointed out, mega-events are most often drenched in promises of major urban transformations that should benefit the whole city or country. One could say that at its core are, on the one hand, promises of improved urban infrastructure (which are of a more permanent nature), and, on the other hand, the temporary increase in employment opportunities across sectors. Within this perspective, the construction sector should be perceived as a key element in realizing the promise of improved infrastructure, which consequently makes it one of the sectors that most benefits from the increased labor demand.

The division of labor for mega-events is not always equitable, and may tend to favor groups who are already in a stronger socio-economic position. Nevertheless, the idealized models one finds most often in bid books presume that only (local) citizens, not migrant workers or contractors, will engage in new employment opportunities. Particularly in developing or emerging economies, the reality on the ground is often radically different (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2011). Despite the fact that there are cases in which mega-event related employment is specifically promised to local residents (as temporary legacy), such as in the context of the 2012 London Olympics (Martins et al. 2011), this seems to be more an exception than a rule (Minnaert 2014). In general, a temporary higher demand in construction requires flexibility from laborers and is therefore more often addressed by migrant labor (cf. Buckley 2014; Erlich and Grabelsky 2005; Malheiros 1998; Meardi, Martín, and Riera 2012; Van den Broucke et al. 2017).

João Luís is a talkative 38-year-old man from Maranhão who is always smiling and joking with his colleagues. He is well known both among colleagues at the construction site and in Gardenia, where he lives with his wife, who is from the state of Bahia, also in the Northeast. Between 1999 and 2009, thus roughly from the age of 21, João Luís spent 6–8 months every year working on the cotton harvest in the state of Mato Grosso (Center-West region in Brazil). In 2009, he visited some cousins who were working in Rio and they convinced him to stay in the city, as there were plenty of job opportunities around that time. Rio had just won the 2016 Olympic bid and the city was already preparing for a series of events that would take place before that, such as the 2007 Pan-American Games and the 2014 FIFA World Cup. His cousins, on their turn, had been 'summoned' by other cousins in 2007 to come to the city to work on the construction of Cidade da Música, a large cultural complex located in the expanding neighborhood of Barra da Tijuca, close to Gardenia and the main Olympic Park. João Luís admits he would rather be living in Mato Grosso than in Rio, because the city is violent and he does not handle its traffic very well. The main reason why he has not left is financial: despite the fact that the cost of living in Rio is quite high, construction is still better remunerated than working on the plantations – and employment opportunities in construction are better and more frequent in Rio than in other parts of the country.

João Luís typifies the 'mobile laborer', who is flexibly shifting between labor sectors and cities, adapting to the employment opportunities that come up, while also demonstrating the importance of social networks when changing jobs, moving out of employment sector and/or moving towards different locations. Although he argued during our interviews that he planned to stay in Rio for a while longer because he aimed to continue working in construction (for its better remuneration), by the time of our last visit to Gardenia a year after the Olympics, we heard he was working in a grocery store not far away.

Many construction workers stressed the fact that the most – if not the only – positive effect of hosting the Olympics in Rio was the creation of temporary jobs, especially in construction. Despite the fact that they were all employed on a project that was supposed to improve urban mobility for Rio's inhabitants, they believed the BRT Transolímpica's promised positive impact was in fact a double-edged sword: it would facilitate life for those who live close to the BRT stations they were building, but it would also lead to the extinction of a great number of regular bus lines. This insight among workers was based both on their own experience with other BRT lines that were already finished, and on complaints they had heard among their own acquaintances.

José, 28 years old and from the interior of Maranhão, worked on the construction of the Transcarioca line that connects Rio's international airport to Barra da Tijuca. A resident of Complexo da Maré, in Rio's North Zone, he would take this same line every day to work on the construction of the Transolímpica line. His greatest complaint was the fact that the Transcarioca line was always very crowded and that not enough buses circulate besides the BRT. Although the BRTs were supposed to improve mobility, they did not always make the journey quicker, safer or more comfortable. In relation to the employment opportunities that were created in the mega-event era, José complained, as did many other workers, that he was having trouble finding subsequent projects. As the Transolímpica reached its final construction stages just weeks before the Olympics, many workers started being laid off. Much like João Luís, who still hoped to continue in Rio, José pointed out that a lot of construction workers from the Northeast who lived from project to project in the sector, were choosing to go back to their localities of origin due to the rapid 'cooling down' in the sector. However, he was confident that the best thing to do was to stay in Rio, because there were more opportunities in the city and the costs of living in Maranhão were too high in comparison to the employment opportunities he would have there. As he summarized, 'that's just how it is, seven fat cows and seven lean cows', referring to his expectation that some slower and more difficult years were about to start.

From the perspective of migrant construction workers, the increase in job offers in Rio due to the many big sports events hosted in the city over the past ten years have had a positive effect on their lives. As Valmir, who is also from Maranhão and who has been living in Rio for more than 15 years, argued, over the past ten years anyone who came to the city looking for employment in construction could actually choose from many opportunities. He told us how he had had the opportunity to work at the Olympic Park before he started at the Transolímpica, but how he decided against it because he 'didn't like the work atmosphere over there'. In many ways, such a freedom to choose between various options in such an unstable and volatile labor segment was almost inconceivable for most men.

Despite the workers' acknowledgement that they play an important role in the urban transformations – both related to the recent mega-events and more in general – and that there is generally a relatively high labor demand they can benefit from in Rio, most of them emphasize that the even higher demand in the sector over the past decade was clearly perceptible. In sum, the promise of a *permanent* positive legacy (new and improved urban infrastructure) can only be achieved and delivered by those who benefit from the *temporary* positive impact of increased job opportunities. As Dona Maria, a shop owner in Gardênia summarized, 'this city [Rio] is built by men from the Northeast'. This could not be any different in times of major events such as the Summer Olympics.

### Temporary permanence or permanent temporariness?

The temporary increase in demand for construction workers generates the assumption (sometimes even the hope) among urban policy makers and residents that this sets in motion *temporary mobility* among laborers, either domestic or international. This perception was clearly embedded in the guest-worker schemes that prevailed in the second half of the twentieth century in several Northern European countries (Castles and Miller 1998, 162–163; Dauvergne and Marsden 2014). This falls short to explain, however, the various cases where labor mobility becomes a personal or family strategy. In many ways, being mobile in the labor market becomes a strategy of staying at home through mobility. Martins (2013, 93–100) dissects the various notions and perspectives of migrants from the Northeast

in Rio das Pedras, where, she argues, the wish to stay is a form of resistance and a way of fighting for their inclusion in the city. The author identifies a ‘wish to stay through mobility’ (95) that is exemplified by the fact that migrants sometimes move between different communities in the city of Rio or move back-and-forth between Rio and the Northeast.

Although employment may be temporary, mobility can become a *permanent* strategy. In an international context, Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias (2015, 1211) argue that Brazilians living in Belgium and the UK perceive leaving home as ‘a strategy of staying at home, as the focus of living abroad is still – at least initially – building up a better life “back home”’. As pointed out in their article, Brazilians in Belgium and the UK tend to perceive their stay abroad as something temporary, with continuous mobility happening to a certain extent as an ‘unintended process’, which might end someday, but may just as easily be picked up again at a later stage. According to the authors, most respondents stress that they always have the intention of going back. This underlying intention of returning ‘home’ is also present in the mobile Northeastern workers in Rio, as many perceive their own mobility as temporary (a couple of months, years or, as many men said, for as long as they could still find work in construction). In the end, many men argue they would rather not have to travel to Rio for work so often, but the lack of opportunities in the Northeast made any other choice impossible.

It is important to stress that there are certain aspects that facilitate and incite continued and permanent mobility, be it at the domestic or the international level, such as social and family ties either ‘back home’ or in the city of destination, adapted and improved urban mobility infrastructures, temporary and affordable accommodation, accessible air travel, and better means of communication. These material and immaterial infrastructures facilitate the move, the permanence, the circulation, and the return of laborers. In the following sections we offer some non-exhaustive examples of these intangible and material infrastructures in the case of Brazilian domestic migrants.

### ***Intangible infrastructures***

It is mainly because older migrant laborers have established themselves in Rio and have, more specifically, built a network that tries to support newcomers from the Northeast, that greater mobility and back-and-forth travelling is enabled and encouraged over permanent settlement. Although the specific reasons for this labor mobility are diverse, many workers are heavily influenced by the mobility (or even the immobility) of their own network in their own (ongoing) trajectories, as we will illustrate.

Although Valmir has been in Rio for more than 15 years and says he does not want to go back to Maranhão, he argues not all of his five siblings see their stay in Rio in the same way. Three of them have also established themselves in the city: his sister owns a shop and lives in Rio das Pedras, whereas two of his brothers also work in construction. The two brothers do not want to ‘stay in Rio’ (in the sense of settling in the city and building a life there), travel back-and-forth to work in construction, aided both by their parents, with whom they live when they are in Maranhão, and by their siblings in Rio. This mobility is facilitated by the family members that have put down roots in the city as well as by the family that has stayed behind.

Francisco, a 40-year-old man from Água Doce in Maranhão, finds himself in a slightly different situation. Because his wife and three children aged eight to 15 do not want to exchange Maranhão for the city, he is to some extent ‘forced’ to remain mobile to provide for his family. He has been travelling around the country, and particularly often to Rio to work in construction, for more than 20 years, staying away from home for up to eight months in a year, something he seems to dislike profoundly as he explained that it is ‘getting harder by the year staying away from the family’. When in his hometown Francisco works as a hairdresser, but he emphasizes constantly that it is not sufficient for him and his family to live on throughout the year. In a way, his family’s wish to remain ‘fixed’ makes his ‘mobility’ crucial to their survival.

Fifty-two-year-old Antônio has been living in Rio for almost 35 years and says he does not feel the urge to go back. He moved from the interior of the northeastern state of Pernambuco to the city as soon as he turned 18 with the main purpose of finding employment in the construction sector. Despite the



fact that he has been in Rio for far more than half his life, he still has a very strong and distinct accent from the Northeast of the country, sufficient reason to experience some level of daily ‘friendly mocking’ at work. According to Antonio, he has become very good at ignoring them – ‘with me, it goes in one ear and out the other’.

Antônio’s brothers also live in Rio and work in construction, although in his own words he is the only one who works for a ‘big company’, arguing he likes having the kind of certainty that a large company can provide (mainly a formal contract, which gives right to unemployment benefits and the opportunity of building pension, etc.). His brothers, on the other hand, prefer working independently on smaller (local) projects, building and renovating houses in the area. Antônio understands this preference as it also means that his brothers have more flexibility and are ‘their own bosses’. Because of this, they can also choose whom to employ when they need a (temporary) assistant on a certain construction site, often opting for men from the Northeast, who, according to Antônio, are hard workers. *Cariocas*<sup>5</sup> are, in his perception, definitely lazier than *nordestinos*. These temporary assistants do not necessarily have to be from the state of Pernambuco, but in general Antônio believes new arrivals are often eager to work and deserve to be helped in that endeavor.

### **Material infrastructures**

Besides the social and family fixities and mobilities that enable and incite the circulation of northeastern workers in Rio, there are infrastructural and technological changes that have led to greater circulation rather than permanent settlement. For instance, many northeastern workers on the Transolimpica reported to live in small one-room apartments, often shared by two or three men. According to Dona Maria, many established migrants invest in building these apartments, often two- or three-story buildings, sometimes occupying the second floor of their own homes. By sharing these small spaces with siblings, cousins or friends in similar situations, workers save money that they either send back home in the form of remittances or that they can save up to guarantee their survival when they decide to go back again. Francisco, for instance, told us that he sends some money home monthly (usually in the form of food checks, a formal part of his monthly salary), but that he also saves up money before going back. This particular kind of accommodation, commonly known as *kitnets*, seems to have replaced an older strategy explained by Coutinho (1980) in which workers would live on the construction site, moving up in the building as construction progressed, thus saving money with housing by not needing to pay rent.

Regarding urban mobility, workers make use of a system of vans that has been set up and expanded by long-time residents of the more distant communities in the city as a way of coping with the lack of or the insufficient offer in bus and transport services by the municipality and the transport companies in charge. More than in wealthier areas of the city, main bus (and van) stops in communities such as Gardenia usually have bike storages close by, so that workers can ride a bike to the stops before heading by bus or van to their work location. This physical infrastructure, although not always created directly by (established) migrants, facilitates the permanence and the circulation of mobile workers who arrive in the community by easing both their search for accommodation and their access to a work location.

Another aspect that facilitates greater back-and-forth mobility of workers between Rio and the northeastern communities of origin, is the fact that air travel is becoming increasingly accessible to a larger share of (Brazilian) society (cf. Freire-Medeiros and Name 2013). The first northeastern migrants in Rio or São Paulo are reported in academic research and in classical works in Brazilian literature to have undertaken weeklong trips in deplorable conditions by bus or on the back of trucks, so-called *pau de arara*<sup>6</sup> (cf. Nemer 2016; Bagno, Ewald, and Cavalcante 2008). Today, many men say they usually wait to go back home until they find a good offer to travel by plane rather than enduring the challenges the so-called *retirantes*<sup>7</sup> had to face<sup>8</sup>. Even though there are clandestine buses that ride straight between communities in Rio such as Gardenia and regions in the Northeast where workers come from, workers prefer travelling by plane and argue a bus trip is only worth its inconveniences when one wants to take a lot of food, electronics or other articles to or from Rio. Older workers whose first trip(s) were necessarily by truck often stress that things are a lot better today.

Improved and better means of communication are also of great importance and influence human mobilities. These elements are often considered to be a crucial aspect of current transnational population movements (Komito 2011; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Lindquist 2017), but seldom discussed in relation to domestic migrants. Although during fieldwork available and improved means of travel came up more often and appeared to be more relevant in facilitating and encouraging ongoing mobility than specific means of communication, some workers did mention staying in touch with each other and with family through applications such as WhatsApp. According to them, these technologies facilitate both finding new job opportunities in Rio, making it easier to 'call for someone' (often brothers or cousins) who travels back-and-forth whenever there are new job opportunities, and staying in touch with family back home. Although this was not the focus of the fieldwork, we noticed some similarities with the urban ethnography presented by Braga (2016) on the use of WhatsApp as a means of staying together in Rio between northeastern migrants. However, more research on this material infrastructure in relation to mobile laborers is needed.

Finally, to speak of the existence of certain 'moorings' that facilitate and enable these workers' mobilities is to acknowledge that mobility only exists because of immobile practices, elements and people (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). The increased ease with which workers travel back-and-forth is facilitated by infrastructural and technological improvements, but also because older generations of less mobile northeastern migrants have by now put down roots in several communities throughout Rio and established networks and infrastructures that enable and even encourage circulation rather than settling in the city.

## Conclusion

People frequently perceive the impact of migration on cities merely from the perspective of increased urban population and the associated urban expansion, because more inhabitants will naturally occupy more space. To a lesser extent, research has been conducted on the importance of migrant labor in the physical construction of cities (Buckley 2014; Erlich and Grabelsky 2005), although the focus, particularly in relation to mega-event construction projects, has been mainly on the role of international migrants (Millward 2016). This article puts domestic population movements higher on the mobilities research agenda by examining the mobility of Brazilian construction workers in the context of the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Although the general perception in Brazil is that internal population flows from the Northeast of the country to the Southeast region are of permanent nature, we have identified a much more diverse pattern among mobile construction workers in Rio. The workers who build all kinds of formal infrastructure in the city, construct their own mobility by building on the intangible and the material infrastructures that have been created by more established migrants. As we have shown, this is clearly the case for employment opportunities, accommodation and urban mobility. Permanent settlement in the city is, due to a myriad of developments that have facilitated circulation, no longer the only option for laborers from the Northeast.

The migrants' social ties, both in Rio and in the regions of origin, facilitate and enable the circulation between both localities by providing accommodation and employment (either concrete jobs or by indicating someone). Simple one-bedroom apartments, frequently built by more established migrants, are often rented by laborers who are only in the city for a relatively short period of time. They also make use of a system of vans that take people to less accessible (sometimes newly expanding) areas of the West Zone. Moreover, advancements in communication (smartphones and applications such as WhatsApp) facilitate the staying in touch both with those who stayed behind and the contacts in Rio when 'at home'. The fact that domestic flights have become more accessible over the last decade also makes circulation easier in comparison with the three to four day bus trips migrants had to undertake in the past.

In sum, many Brazilian migrant construction workers are positioned differently on a continuum of which permanent temporariness and temporary permanence are the two extremes. To a certain extent,

this shows some similarities with the approach to mobility of Brazilian international migrants, who, according to the literature, live in mobility as a way of staying home (Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2015). These similarities are not necessarily related to the fact that they are Brazilians, but to the specific way in which mobility is approached and experienced as a way of life, something that might (temporarily) end, but that might also turn out to be necessary again in a near future. From this point of view, we argue it is necessary to reconsider the use of a strict distinction between permanent and temporary migration, as there are many forms in which mobilities take place.

## Notes

1. Saunders (2011, p. 3) describes the arrival city as a 'special kind of urban space', a 'transitional space' that is being created by the great migration towards cities worldwide.
2. For more on Pereira Passos' reforms and their impact on the image of Rio see e.g. Barbosa (2010), (Leite 2000).
3. Cidade de Deus (City of God) became internationally renowned due to the homonymous novel (1997) by writer Paulo Lins. Lins, who grew up in the favela, tells the story of three young men as they grow up in the fast changing community, in which they are confronted with petty crime in the 1960s, evolving in the 1990s to the violent drug trafficking for which favelas are now known.
4. Rio das Pedras is known among researchers and lay people as one of the communities in Rio with the strongest northeastern presence. Construction workers and residents of Gardenia we spoke to also emphasized the size and the importance of immigration from the Northeast to the expansion of Rio das Pedras. Our focus, however, was on the construction projects related to the Olympics, and consequently on where these specific workers were finding support for their mobility in Rio. This turned out to be in Gardenia, a much smaller and less studied community, but clearly not less important in these domestic labor mobility patterns.
5. Carioca is a demonym used in reference to the city of Rio.
6. These flat bed trucks were adapted to transport passengers in long and extremely uncomfortable trips across the country. The term is still used pejoratively as a nickname for Northeastern migrants.
7. Meaning 'those who move away', the term has been vastly used in Brazilian Portuguese to relate to Northeastern migrants who moved to the South and Southeast of the country in the 1940s and 1950s.
8. Classical works include Graciliano Ramos' *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives) originally published in 1938, and João Cabral de Melo Neto's *Morte e Vida Severina* (The Death and Life of a Severino), originally published in 1955.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) [grant number G075914N].

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