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EDITORIAL

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Mobilities and labour

Mobility has been in the academic spotlight at least since the 1980s, in the wake of globalisation studies (Salazar 2013), together with post-modern trends, which called for a theoretical breach in an academic scene dominated by perspectives on structures, territory and stasis (examples of this breach can be found in Clifford 1997; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; de Certeau 1984; Virilio 1986). In this context, 'the nomad – whether traveller, refugee, runaway' became 'the symbolic identity of our age', as suggested by Kendal, Woodward and Skrbis (2009, 85). At the turn of the millennium, the world was portrayed as revolving around movement and migration, transnationalism and hybridism, networks and cosmopolitanism, liquidity and fluidity, nomads and runaways (Salazar 2020). Metaphorized as proximity and togetherness, along with cultural exchange, hybridism, networks, connectedness and cosmopolitanism, mobility was perceived by many as *positive* and as reducer of inequality gaps. Just as social mobility was systematically translated to its upwards trajectory towards the erasure of social, economic, and cultural inequality, physical mobility was conceived along the same lines, having the potential to challenge the 'old' boundaries of nationalism, ethnicity, race and even gender. In a word, mobility was equated to the promise of a more cosmopolitan, ethical, better world.

The contradictions hidden under such optimism emerged to plain sight in the early 21st century: 9/11 and the wars that followed it, the looming threats of climate change, financial crises and related structural adjustments, imposed austerity and generalised impoverishment, the multiplication of massive displacements by warfare and by political-economic conjunctions, the intensification of border violence, and more. Mobility turned out to be a useful concept to highlight the disruptions, turbulence, inequalities, and differential access in contemporary societies (Sheller and Urry 2006); rather than obfuscating inequalities, the mobility lens further elucidated them.

The field of mobility studies (e.g. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006) is itself built on a number of previous works that, in one way or the other, had pressed towards taking mobility seriously, as exemplified by Janet Wolff's study of gendered traveling, where she demonstrates that meanings of movement are intrinsically rooted in conceptions on gender (1992), or Doreen Massey's analysis of space, where she considers that meaningful places only exist as always 'moving on' (1993), or yet James Clifford's influential *Routes* (1997).

Inspired by the rich literature on mobility and moved by our own interest in the labour-related production of difference, we used the concept of *mobile labour* as a catalyst for current, innovative, and ethnographic approaches to labour and mobility. That includes movements *for* labour (migrant trajectories, economic-induced displacements), movements *as* labour (highly mobile jobs), and movements *of* labour (labour-related geographical displacement and its different rhythms). It also includes the associated production and reproduction of ideologies, stereotypes, processes and conditions of exclusion, and the making of hierarchized, racialized inequalities. Overall, this special issue on *Mobile Labour* explores how mobility and labour conflate to create and perpetuate conditions of segregation, discrimination and differentiation, with a special emphasis on processes of racialization (although not excluding others, like gender and age).

Labour, mobility, and the making of race

There is a dense and painful history of labour mobilities that dates from the time when the joint expansion of empire and capitalism materialized in the colonial plantation economy (Mintz 1985; Williams 1944). Such system articulated colonial conquest, indigenous land dispossession, financial expansion, and the commodification of crops; it also included the forced, enslaved, kidnapped, indentured, or contracted labour that tended to the soil and the plants, that harvested, transported, and processed them under frantic rhythms and extreme violence. The plantation created labour before the industrial revolution did. Labour moved on slave-ships across the Atlantic, as millions of enslaved men and women from Africa forced into the Americas and Caribbean.

Labour moved on refashioned slave-ships across the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic oceans, as millions of indentured men and women from Asia were brought to Mauritius, the Caribbean, and Fiji. Labour moved on sailing vessels across the Pacific with South Sea Islanders kidnapped into Australia or Fiji. Labour moved on barks, clippers and steamers across the Atlantic and the Pacific with contracted laborers from Japan, China, Madeira, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and other places into the plantations of Hawaii. People aboard became labour as they moved, whether forced, lured, kidnapped, persuaded or by their own free will. They embodied the plantation as labour, and in the process, they were racialized, segmented, and hierarchized. Plantation was a race-making device, as suggested by sociologist Edgar Thompson (1975, 2010). The embodiment of plantation labour became itself the embodiment of race; only later did the racialists ratify as scientific knowledge the racialized hierarchies produced by the plantation system.

Massive industrialization followed the colonial plantation as a magnet that attracted people into mills, plants, floors, furnaces to live the proletarian lives depicted by Dickens (1854) and Engels (1845) for England; a reserve of mobile labour conveniently kept the wages as low as needed for capital growth, as theorized by Marx (1867). A few decades later, it was the United States that functioned as a magnet for the European masses of dispossessed – who voluntarily crossed the Atlantic to feed, as labour, the ever-devouring textile and steel industries, manufactures, slaughterhouses, processing plants, as dramatized by Sinclair (1906) and Bell (1941). There, too, each incoming group was brought to the bottom of a hierarchy as labour and racialized in ways that vaguely echoed the plantation (Bastos 2018a; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991). A parallel movement involved East Asians across the Pacific, mostly into American West coast, adding to their previous routes into plantation islands, complexifying their racialized existences as labour.

The extent to which displacement is embodied as race in more recent contexts of mobile labour is a question that unfolds in multiple research lines, as we explore in the project *The Colour of Labour – the racialized lives of migrants* (Bastos 2018a, 2018b; Le Petitcorps 2020; Macedo 2021; Miller 2019; Nóvoa 2021; Peano 2019). Racialization takes different appearances, including in the form of co-exiting ethnic, national or cultural differences that obfuscate the enactment of the hierarchized inequalities associated with labour (Bastos 2020). While our research provides some keys to approach contemporary labour displacements – be it on agriculture, industry, or services – that are often depicted as analogous to slavery, more research is needed. This special issue partially responds to that need, through the analytical lens of mobility studies.

Labour and mobilities: a brief overview

While labour-related mobilities are thus by no means new (Prothero and Chapman 1985), as described above, their nature and purpose became increasingly complex in recent decades due to the intensification of global connectedness, increased levels of education, proliferation of global media, improved transport systems and the internationalization of business and labour markets (McKenna and Richardson 2007).

The temporary to permanent character of work-related mobilities has led to terminological ambiguities (Seiger et al. 2020). Scholars have used a multitude of denominators, partially

overlapping with one another, to denote short-term mobilities. In the past, they have variously been labelled 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. For labour mobility between countries where there is free border movement, the terms 'commuter migration' (Torre, Rodriguez Vecchini, and Burgos 1994) and 'revolving-door migration' (Duany 2002) have been used. In corporate settings, notions appear such as 'flexpatriates' (Mayerhofer et al. 2004), referring to short-term (less than a year), commuter (usually weekly or bi-weekly) or frequent flyer (business travel without relocation) assignments. Traditional expatriates, employed and sent by their country or company, are distinguished from 'independent internationally mobile professionals' (McKenna and Richardson 2007), 'self-initiated movers' (Thorn 2009), or 'self-initiated expatriates' (Andresen, Al Ariss, and Walther 2013).

Contract workers and transnational labour circulation are commonly hailed as economic arrangements that benefit all parties involved. They reflect a global division of labour that has been appearing since the late 1970s in the wake of other forces of globalization. Jobs are flexibly moved from one location to another, or to multiple other locations. Transnational work experience is increasingly becoming an expectation (Smith and Favell 2006). As Aihwa Ong wrote two decades ago, 'flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability' (1999, 19). People are 'often proud to explain how they repeatedly manage to obtain visas and work permits, to find work, and learn new languages. Some develop a kind of performance of cosmopolitanism in social situations, intended to portray something of their trajectory to various audiences' (Ossman 2004, 117). In the far end of this equation, seasonal agricultural workers push their lives to the limits of physical resistance, of ability to move through close borders, of endurance towards toxic materials and of inhumane paces that often short-circuit their pendular movements – by death, illness, and permanent disability (Holmes 2013; Horton 2016; García-Colón 2020).

The political and economic preference for frequent short-term/non-permanent circulation over long-term/permanent migration has produced a 'transient' pattern of human movement and set up a highly mobile, cross-border labour force. People moving within companies have more guaranteed jobs, so that employability for them is a qualitative issue of how the experience abroad influences their long-term employability. In contrast, for so-called free agent movers (the term 'free' is conditional of course), mobility should be understood in terms of their employability in their countries of origin, and prospects of securing any, or specific types of jobs, in the country of destination.

Labour mobility is positively valued by respected international organizations such as OECD (Dayton-Johnson et al. 2007) and UNDP (UNDP 2009). As with mobility in general, work-related mobility is intimately intertwined with the promise of economic and symbolic mobility. This is based on the assumption that a position abroad is 'a source of exceptional learning … that allows individuals to enhance their employability over time' (Williams 2009, 23). As a result, 'mobility itself becomes a valued measure of individual achievement; people point out the obstacles they had to overcome to make each successive move' (Ossman 2004, 117). One can see border-crossing mobility as a response to a neoliberal requirement for employment flexibility, which is believed to be a prerequisite for 'success' (Sennett 1998).

However, labour mobility may also be the result of fecklessness and/or marginalization (Gama Gato and Salazar 2018). The neoliberal frameworks that value flexibility, mobility, and reward entrepreneurial individuals may oppress workers by withdrawing job security and causing loss of community attachments (Sennett 1998). Moreover, as Richard Sennett (1998) argues, career mobility is not simply a matter of choice. Rather, it is forced on vast populations, also so-called 'highly skilled' people, as a means of flexibilising the labour force and perfecting the distribution of human resources. Indeed, economic constraints turn out to be equally as, or more significant, than their personal preferences in propelling people elsewhere and in influencing their choice of destination (Kennedy 2010).

The costs of mobile labour

Do work-related mobilities increase or diminish opportunities for socio-economic mobility? The relationship between temporary work abroad and occupational mobility, for example, is unclear (Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2016). Some researchers suggest that the experience and money obtained does give people scope to get better jobs, either at home or in the host country. Others argue there is no positive effect at all and, in the case of some groups, the effect can even be negative (Masso, Eamets, and Mõtsmees 2013). This may particularly be the case in regulated circular migration systems, which see people returning year after year to the same job rather than trying to negotiate their way into better jobs and localities like unregulated circular migrants might do (Vertovec 2007). Work-related mobilities rarely allow for family unification because of immigration restrictions imposed by destination countries, and it is difficult to suggest that people naturally prefer to be without their families (Wickramasekara 2011, 23).

Temporary transnational working schemes have been criticized as 'labour without people' (Wickramasekara 2011, 3), in which the host society invests less in the welfare and integration of temporary workers, who end up with fewer rights and opportunities. The theme of 'sojourners', put forward in the 1950s (Siu 1952), depicted an ideal mobile worker who travelled afar for economic intents, but would return home after accomplishing that goal; further analysis and policy implications were framed in terms of 'integration.' Host societies that promote work-related mobilities often avoid integration policies for temporary workers for fear that an integration strategy would encourage them to stay permanently (European Migration Network 2011). Continuous mobility can thus be very isolating, as those involved are prevented from 'settling' anywhere. People may end up losing out financially, as remigration to the country-of-origin costs money, as do intermediary agencies that are sometimes used to find employment.

As Nina Glick Schiller (2009) shows, migration researchers are contributing to the legitimization of new forms of mobility-related exploitation by emphasizing the benefits of transnational remittances while neglecting to address the severe and permanent restriction of rights that accompanies short-term contract work and the decreasing access of temporary workers to naturalization. Some migration scholars, for instance, have continued to sing the praises of circular short-term mobilities regarding development. This reinforces the desirability of the new mobilities regime of contract labour, which makes settlement increasingly difficult (Salazar and Glick Schiller 2014). New migration laws leave foreign workers with only short-term options. Absent from the scenario of the benefits of circular migration are 'the dehumanizing aspects of short-term labour contracts with their dramatic restrictions on, or denial of, rights and privileges to the individuals who are producing wealth, paying taxes, and sustaining infrastructures and services to which they have no entitlement' (Glick Schiller 2009, 27–28).

Global neoliberal capitalism has made many people's 'liquid' labour, 'trapped in mobility whether they are high earning professionals with bulimic work patterns or part of a new 'precariat'' (Büscher 2014, 224). Spatial mobility in the form of freedom of movement often comes at the price of downward occupational mobility (Salazar 2016). As this special issue illustrates, 'mobility not only provides the opportunity for more flexibility, control and freedom to choose how, when, and where we work, but also brings with it uncertainty, ambiguity, and challenges as boundaries blur and space–time compresses' (Gluesing, Meerwarth, and Jordan 2008, 154).

Nicholas De Genova points out how 'free' and mobile labour, produced by the evolution of capitalism, is 'a distinctly circumscribed' form of freedom (De Genova and Peutz 2010, 56) – the 'freedom' to move about and sell one's labour is produced by the lack of freedom to withhold one's labour. Mobility is, then, a contradictory form of freedom, produced by the needs and effects of global capital, yet resistant to total control by capital or the state. Labour mobilities, marked by the imposition of restrictive regulation, are entirely consistent with neoliberal labour regimes and their need for flexible, docile, and expendable labour. The intersection of mediating influences such as the changing social divisions of labour, regulation and institutions, and issues of social identities, social

recognition and discrimination determines whether transnational mobility leads to labour market entrapment or potential stepping-stones for individuals.

The articles

The articles in this special issue were selected for their potential to provide a wide range of analyses that encompass different cultural, economic and social contexts, including the life in arctic working camps, the lifestyles of expats between Europe and Dubai, the processes of racialization aboard container ships and the ones occurring amongst Chinese workers in Singapore, an analysis of segregation in Cyprus and Italy, as well as the roles of age differentiation in the future of mobile labour or a historical perspective on mobile labour in the Atlantic in the 19th century. Taken together, these contributions are meant to showcase the entanglements of mobility, labour and racialization as described above.

Johanna Markkula explores the lives of Filipino labourers working aboard international ships, through a compelling study that includes ethnographic fieldwork with maritime organizations and businesses, such as training centres, staffing agencies, seafarers' boarding houses, and the Maritime Industry Authority in the Philippines. Her research highlights how these workers are racialized and hierarchized in the contexts of their mobile labour – one that is on the one hand shifty and elusive by the nature of its watery profile, and on the other hand structured by the predicaments of colonial legacies. In that context emerges a set of narratives and stereotypes highlighting the hardworking temper of Filipinos, one that conveniently fits their actual hard life on board.

Jaafar Alloul's piece explores in an original manner the connection between racialized experiences and mobility. He follows high-skilled workers from France, Belgium and the Netherlands who move into societies that free them of being racialized on the accounts of their Islamic heritage. They decide to overcome the 'racial stuckness' experienced in their birth countries in Europe by migrating to places in the Arab Gulf, like Dubai or Qatar. Alloul shows how the relocation uplifts their status from a racialized position in Europe into being perceived as modern Europeans in the Gulf countries – showing the contingency of the racial categories that move along with their own mobility.

Gertrude Saxinger's article brings to light a fascinating account of labour life in the Arctic. Saxinger pledges herself to a fieldwork immersion in two extractive-industry (mining, oil, and gas extraction) sites in Russia and Canada, where labourers work in a FIFO system (fly in, fly out), or have rotational posts, or are subject to long distance commuting. She provides a rich ethnographic account on how these labourers go about, create daily routines in these bare and isolated camps, and produce meaningful sociality. Saxinger shows how these contexts of laser-focused labour and high-mobility are still rife with elements of segregation, namely in terms of gender inequalities and in the interaction between settlers and indigenous communities.

Irene Peano studies the turbulences and contradictions of mobility and containment, showing how different drives to contain and channel the mobility of people and commodities may be in alignment or clash with each other. Through an analysis based on long-term research in agro-industrial districts in Italy, as well as in Nigeria, Bulgaria, and Romania, where many of these workers come from, Peano shows that encampments where workers live are often assembled in the intersections of migratory routes with logistical space-making effects of agri-food supply chains. As these encampments are formed, evicted, and reassembled, mobility figures as one of their distinctive traits. Still, these spaces are very much formed and informed by deep processes of racialization and segregation, which manifests itself through spatially and symbolically segregating and containing operations. Race and gender play crucial roles in their local hierarchies and functioning.

Leandro Fischer's contribution complements and dialogues well with Peano's article. Fischer, too, deals with the dichotomies of mobility and confinement. He reveals the paradoxical nature of Cyprus, an island that is both a place used by high-up individuals to enter the so-called 'core of the world system' (in this case, the European Union) through special visa schemes, as well as a place of brutal confinement for migrants that try to cross the Mediterranean. In a word, the mobility regime that is

very much installed in Cyprus smooths out the mobility of some at the expense of the immobility of many others. Those that remain immobile are only made mobile when the market makes such a demand, specifically when (precarious) jobs become available and there is a need for workforce. In the meantime, they are subject to complex processes of segregation, including racialization.

Sylvia Ang examines the myths of migratory transience – the idea that migrants are *en route* to someplace else, preferably their 'original' homeland. She explores this through interviews and fieldwork in Singapore, where 46% of the population are foreigners and 30% are non-resident. Ang comes to the realisation that many individuals from China, who move to Singapore in search of work, can secure a permanent visa or even Singaporean citizenship on the accounts of their ethnic background (the State of Singapore maintains that 75% of the population must be 'Chinese'), yet this does not alleviate their discrimination through processes of racialization. In fact, despite their so-called 'ethnic similarities', these people are perceived of as inferior by those who think of themselves as the original, permanent inhabitants of Singapore. In this context, racial profiling stems from mobility itself, through an idealisation of transience.

Megha Amrith's contribution introduces a new layer of analysis to this special issue, by adding the concept of age to explorations of labour and mobility. Amrith asks herself what happens to 'temporary' migrant workers as they age and become older, particularly because, often, these workers have very precarious labour arrangements, the majority of which do not accommodate retirement plans. Basing herself on an ethnographic fieldwork with migrant workers in Singapore, she sheds light on how migrant bodies are often conceptualised of as ageless and how that creates irreparable disruptions in their life courses. In her analysis, mobility and labour conflate to perpetuate a stereotyped vision of the migrant as always young, one that produces brutal inequalities as migrants become seniors.

Finally, Marta Macedo's brings the analysis to the quintessential colonial plantation island of S. Tomé, which, as a bed of experimentation for sugar production before it made it to the Caribbean and Brazil, and as a nodal point in the transatlantic slave trade that followed, stands as 'a perfect case-study to examine the entanglements of empire, slavery and capitalism'. Combining the angles of mobility and global history of technology, Macedo follows people, things, ideas and practices, mapping the circulation of coffee production technologies as they refer not just to the beans, soils, and other material elements, but to the technologies of labour – which involved racialist doctrines about which bodies were fit for which tasks, perpetuating the racial categories produced in the wider plantation system and adopting them beyond the abolition of slavery.

Conclusion

Taken together, the various articles that make up this special issue offer a variety of analyses in different social, cultural, material, political, economic, and historical settings from which to understand how discrimination, and segregation are formed in contexts of high mobility and intense labour, with a special focus on processes of racialization, but not excluding others like age and gender. The papers explore how mobility and labour converge to create and perpetuate racial categories, cultural profiling, and forms of exclusion. The contributions include both contemporary and historical studies, and their geographies encompass the arctic, the Middle East, Asia, the Atlantic, Europe and the seas themselves. These include analyses of labour lifestyles in arctic working camps, the racialization of Filipino workers in container ships, or the racialization of Chinese workers in Singapore, the livelihoods of expats between Europe and Dubai and how they cope with different racial categories, as well as an analysis of segregation in Cyprus and Italy, the roles of age differentiation in the future of mobile labour, and a historical perspective on mobile labour in the Atlantic in the 19th century.

The main point is to show how mobility is a factor in amplifying categories of race, as well as gender and age. Mobility does not necessarily mean deleting or alleviating these. Highly mobile lifestyles, particularly in the context of labour mobilities, do not translate into a more liquid,

transnational, or hybrid outset. What people *do* and how people *move* operate together to perpetuate certain categories and profiles – and, as we discussed, there are even new categories and profiles that are created by a moving lifestyle. This special issue only offers a starting point to consider and tackle these important issues.

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