

Returnees: some reflections on the social conditions and survival of enslaved rural migrant workers in the present time¹

Os retornados: reflexões sobre condições sociais e sobrevivência de trabalhadores rurais migrantes escravizados no tempo presente

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RESUMO

O artigo é dedicado ao estudo de trabalhadores rurais de Barras, Piauí, que migram repetidas vezes para os estados do Pará, Mato Grosso e Goiás e vivenciam formas de trabalho análogo à escravidão. Após um longo período do ano longe de casa, eles chegam cheios de notícias sobre o trabalho duro e a exploração, o pouco salário, as ilusões, as agruras, o engodo praticado pelos empreiteiros, sobre o que os faz ter vontade de voltar para o seu mundo. E, passado o período da entressafra, partem novamente, vestidos em suas melhores roupas como em um dia de festa, imbuídos pelo desejo de materializar sonhos, maravilhados por um mundo cujos perigos lhes impõem desafios.

Palavras-chave: trabalho escravo; migração e retorno.

ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the study of rural workers in Barras, Piauí, who repeatedly migrate to the states of Pará, Mato Grosso and Goiás, where they often experience forms of slave-like labor. After a long period living away from home, they arrive full of news about hard work and exploitation, low wages, illusions, hardships, and the deceptions practiced by the contractors, which makes them want to return to their own world. After the end of the inter-harvest period, they leave again, dressed in their best clothes as if it was a festival day, imbued with the desire to materialize dreams, amazed by a world whose dangers pose challenges to them.

Keywords: slave labor; migration and return.

Migration to other parts of Brazil has been presented as a practice transmitted to successive generations, present in the lives of many *nordestinos* (as those from the Northeast are called). For the rural workers who migrate from

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Barras, Piauí in search of work the places of origin and destination permanently alter during the working life of the men, which last on average until 35 years of age, both in the cutting of sugarcane or in the clearing of *juquirá* vegetation (*roço de juquirá*).² For these men, the act of migrating includes the perspective of returning after a previously defined period, in accordance with the activity carried out.

According to Maria Silva and Marilda Menezes,³ since the 1970s various studies have identified an important group which has migrated various times with the aim of finding means of survival.

The category of return migration is based on the idea of a point of departure and of return. However, the migrant himself does not identify his coming back as a return. He does not leave his place of origin in order to integrate himself in his destination, to the contrary migration represents a permanent contact point between the two locations (Silva; Menezes, s.d., p.6).

This article is based on the use of oral sources as a methodology and is concerned with the analysis of the social conditions and the survival of enslaved rural workers in the present time. I will focus on interviews carried out with rural workers, migrants and former migrants, their relatives and the then president of the Rural Workers Trade Union (*Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* – STR) of Barras. The narratives of these subjects show an interlinking set of factors which motivate the return to their native land, one of the characteristics of the type of migration being studied.

According to the Diagnosis of Slave Labor in Piauí,⁴

Generally the workers return bringing some money home (Group 2,⁵ 84.9%), which is basically used for family expenses ... Few manage to return with sufficient sums for greater expenditure, such as building a house, buying a motorbike, or investing in the land with the money obtained. (Diagnóstico..., 2005, p.8)

As shown in this Diagnosis, despite the negative points highlighted by the subjects interviewed in relation to the migratory itinerary, they intend to keep travelling. In a second interview given by Seu Francisco Lino, a former migrant worker, he stated that “in this conditions a worker’s life lasts until he is 35, after this he cannot stand any more. We have to do the best we can until 35, after this we cannot earn any more.”⁶

It is increasingly clear that the possibilities for the survival of these poor families in their places of origin have been diminished, in such a way that they have come to increasingly depend on temporary work in other regions in the

country. Commenting on the departure of these workers, in particular the *as-sentados* (rural workers who have been granted land), seen as the majority of migrants from the region, Lina,⁷ then president of the STR, stated: “It is difficult to keep these workers on the land here in Barras, because they are already so very anxious about travelling that there is no other way, even though they have a means of survival here.” Given this, I asked what were these possibilities of survival, and she commented:

At that time there were some, now there are none, because they have finished everything [referring to the period when some settlements in the region were granted land credit]. Well, a settlement received a new truck, a new tractor, received more than 100,000 *reais*. There was a settlement here which received more than 100,000 *reais* to invest in agriculture ... in cattle, in livestock raising, in agriculture, to produce different foodstuffs. And now you go there and there is nothing, the families are poorer than ever. If they had worked, they would be able to stay. Because they would raise animals, they would plant, produce, there would be irrigated fields for them to produce. (Lina, 2009)

In referring to the anxiety of workers to travel, Lina pointed to the existence of a tradition of temporary migration in Barras. At a later moment, the narrator constructs explanations about the shrinking of the possibilities of subsistence in the region, attributing this to the bad use of resources received or even the lack of experience of workers in dealing with the proposed agricultural activities. The temporary migration process in Barras precedes the creation of Incra settlements, as well as the availability of the resources mentioned by her in the 1990s.

The alternative of remaining on their native land basically involves land and employment. The majority of rural workers stated that they neither had access to employment or work in the area, nor conditions to work the land.

On the two occasions I went to meet Seu Francisco Lino in his house, I sought to observe his material conditions. The house had been built recently, as he had not migrated since the beginning of the 1990s. In his discourse about working outside the region, what predominated was the concept of using the time to acquire or accumulate goods. Nevertheless, he commented vaguely that even in a decade of annual migrations to Pará, only on two trips did he get some small financial advantage. I asked then how he had built the house where he lived with his family, and he told me that his children had built it. The house had brick walls and a tiled roof. This type of construction is the dream of many

residents in the region, who still have houses made with branches stuck into the ground, with clay filling in the spaces between them with clay. The living room was filled with four motorcycles waiting for their owners – each belonging to one of his sons.

According to Francisco Lino,

They have contacts there and go on their own account ... My children are travelling, cutting sugarcane, two in Mato Grosso, one in Mato Grosso do Sul and one in São Paulo. I am alone here. Now [referring to the period between harvests], they are working in civil construction, kneading clay, making one thing or another. There in Mato Grosso. At the beginning of the year they come back to cut sugarcane. They rang yesterday, they are good. (Francisco Lino, 2008)

His children only intended to return to Barras at the end of the following year, at the following harvest. Meanwhile, during the inter-harvest period, they work as laborers to guarantee their survival.

Francisco Lino was a *posseiro* (squatter) on the lands where he lived, though according to him his ownership was recognized in the 1980s through the intermediation of Incra. In referring to the other residents in the area (Angical), he stated that “it is the government which passes the possession on to us. Everyone here owns their land. No one is ordered by anyone else.” In relation to this, when still a child and adolescent, he lived with his parents and brothers on a plantation, also located in the Mata region of his municipality, which according to him was expropriated by Incra in the 1990s. The search for paid employment in distant regions was presented in part as a means for rural workers to preserve their property in their places of origin. While many returned to their places of origin without having their dreams realized, those who remained there continued in the day to day routines of domiciliary work and working the land, necessary for the vital minimum.

In addition to the feelings of homesickness, the interviewees presented a lament for not having achieved some dreams – not having become rich, bought a motorbike, or built a brick house with a tiled roof, amongst other possibilities.

I find it interesting how this past is reiterated by interviewees as a conquest. For this reading of the past, it is convenient to highlight that memory is built on the interests of the present: the narrative is filtered in a seductive way, so that it comes to improve their lives as a source of inspiration.

To better understand the study of these memories of places of destination, it is important to highlight the work of Ecléa Bosi:⁸

It is necessary to recognize that many of our memories, or even many of our ideas, are not original: they were inspired in conversations with others. Over time they come to have a history within us, they accompany our lives and are enriched by experience and conflicts. They seem so much ours that we are surprised if their exact point of entry into our lives is pointed out to us. They were formulated by others, and we simply incorporated them into our possessions. In most cases I believe that this is not a conscious process. (Bosi, 1987, p.331)

These ties of acquaintanceship, whether family or professionally based, favor the development of a social memory which consist of traces and fragments. It highlights the autonomy of the individual in the act of remembering, considering that he can remember things that are significant just for him.

Sônia,⁹ the daughter-in-law of Seu Francisco Lino, reported that in 1996 she migrated with her husband to Pará, when he had accepted a contract on a plantation in the region. While the husband was in the field, clearing the vegetation, she remained in shacks to cook for the other *peões*. She said:

There everything was abundant. Entering Pará is great. It is such as good place there ... At two in the morning I had to get up to make coffee, in two large flasks. There I would make cuscus, I would be making it and the *peões* eating. So, when I had to take the water for the coffee from the fire, I had already put the beans on. Then I would mind other things. Sometimes what would arrive would be a cow and I would have to cut it all up. I by myself, sometimes the *gato* would go to the street and the *peões* would say: I am leaving, I am gone because there is no meat. And I would go alone to the butcher to get meat, it was 18 kilometers from where we were and I went on foot. He [the *gato*] would tell the plantation butcher to kill the cow and send it to there. (Sônia, 2009)

The narrator does not describe only what had happened, she goes further, interpreting what was experienced in accordance with the set of elements circumscribed in their daily lives, such as desires and needs, amongst others. The search for work in other regions in the country is the life project of many residents in the region. In these terms, the comprehension of this life project as a family project allows us to see the anxiety of wives, mothers and relatives, in general terms, for the departure, as well for the successful return of their migrants. The dream of work elsewhere is sustained by the need for production

in their own land, since with the money acquired from work on the land of others, they can ensure the sustenance of their families and the continuity of work on their land.

Sônia and her husband had established a relationship of friendship with the *gato*, the contractor, before leaving Barras, so that he hired her to cook to work in the shacks where the *peões* are commonly installed. Sônia's discourse emphasized the period of three years that they spent in those places, including the periodical returns to Barras, as the best years of their lives. The fear of hunger she felt appears almost constantly in her discourse. I believe that Sônia's day to day routine was constructed in order not to die of hunger. At various times, she returned to the question of daily food, especially meat and milk. According to her:

There it was good, really good, I will never forget it. There everything was abundant, here a liter of milk is three *reais*, and there no, you could get it in the corral. There the people bought sacks of sugar, the people trusted us, we paid what we owed. I would get what was needed and the owner of the store would give it to me. Sometimes the owner of the plantation would go to the street and ask: "Sônia, do you want anything?" He would get it and would not accept payment, he paid for it. There I would sometimes cook for *Seu Nonato*, *Seu Nonato* was the *gato* of the *peões*. He said to bring five sacks of sugar, there it was sacks, not kilos, it was sacks, biscuits were in sacks, everything was in sacks there. (Sônia, 2009)

The context described by Sonia also reveals part of the functioning of the labor system in question: the regimentation, the food provided to the workers and discounted in later payments, the strategic network established by the *gato* and by the other employees in the production unit, including the relations of power, which allowed the work to be carried out properly in the field. The context described shows the permanence of the myth of abundance symbolized in the legends of Eldorado in the Brazilian Amazon, thanks – amongst other aspects – to its enormous natural reserves.

This deceitful seduction of wealth in the green of the Amazon is found throughout the discourse, especially among those who no longer migrate and is something which is related to the collection by settlers of medicinal plants which are abundant in the forest (Castro, 2008).

Leaving aside questions about the work of Castro¹⁰ published in 1954, compromised by *nordestino* regionalism and the discourse of regional disparities diffused in the historical circumstances in which it was written, it is

important to reflect on the conditions of poverty which notoriously affect the large majority of the population of Barras, especially in its rural area. According to the author in the Northeastern *Sertão* – which includes the central areas of Piauí – we can find a new type of hunger, no longer permanent hunger dependent on daily living habits, but one that occurs in epidemic outbreaks, due to the periodic droughts. This is an area where the basic foodstuff is corn, which, associated with other regional products, allows the population during periods of drought to have sufficient energy and vigor to survive the scourge.

The fragments of Sônia's discourse lead to me to reflect on the images constructed by travelers in relation to places of destination and about the circulation of their memories in their native lands. In discussing the images created about the Amazon region by migrants from Ceará in 1942 and 1943, Kênia Rios¹¹ comments that the descriptions of those lands shows an infinity of fantastic narratives:

The nordestino, the sertanejo, the sufferer, the pilgrim, the hero, the monster, the Judas... are all faces of individuals with histories in an eternal march. Restless bodies perpetually seduced by the road. Inhabitants of places where drought, constant misery, exploitation, but also pride, desires, and illusions are part of a suffering and fabulous life. Elements which are interconnected in the enchanted life of the men, women and children who speak of the struggle for survival in the forms of the world and the otherworld. (Rios, 2008, p.52)

The elements described by Kênia Rios are common in the narratives of those interviewed for this study. Since a very young age the migrant Bruno¹² had heard his grandfather, Seu Raimundo,¹³ tell tales about Pará, which were narrated to me in a didactic tone, showing what should and should not be done to earn and accumulate money elsewhere. The abundance of the place is represented in his discourse by the green of the region and the abundance of meat and milk.

To understand the insistent presence of these elements in narrative, I consider it important to highlight the words of Castro (2008, p.181), according to whom “the *sertanejo* always ate meat ...”, when referring to milk and meat as foodstuffs consumed in a generalized form by the populations of the *sertão*.

In her daily life, Sônia did not have a lot of food, and shows this like a dream. Usually she only had one daily meal. Meat, so stressed in her discourse, is not part of her daily diet, as she basically eats rice, beans and eggs. She stated:

I live breaking coconuts, just breaking coconuts. I swap days with my father-in-law, today I give to him, tomorrow he helps me with the planting. Because he is alone, right?! And I am alone, so the two of us join together, and we work in a group, us two. So when midday arrives, we cook an egg, eat, drink water, let an hour pass and go back. So four hours later, we arrive, make dinner, and that is how I live. (Sônia, 2009)

Unlike what appears in Castro's work (2008), the daily consumption of meat is the privilege of a minority of the residents of Barras. In this way the abundance that Sônia says she experienced in Pará – food bought in sacks, the killing of a cow for consumption, and the availability of milk in the corral, for example –, is highlighted against a present of hunger experienced in her native land.

Francisco Lino remembers his trips to Pará as very difficult times, since he was tricked by the *gato* who hired him and brought him in a truck to his property. The *gato* to which Seu Francisco Lino refers was a trader he knew from the city, who worked there and in neighboring municipalities, enlisting young rural workers during the 1980s:

He brought us there and when we arrived, he let us loose, like animals in pasture. He sold us like you sell cattle, per head. He brought fifty, one hundred men, and left them in the middle of the snakes, in the middle of the forest, suffering. He brought two, three truck loads here, everyone in captivity. He arrived here and made a proposal. However, I only went with him once. (Francisco Lino, 2008)

In remembering his times as a migrant, Francisco Lino also commented: “in 79 I went through a very hard time, there were jaguars, every type of snake, but I was young ...”. His narrative is associated with his not knowing his region of destination, followed by his surprise with situations he had not previously experienced. Francisco Lino reports his first trip to Pará in a logical and casual sequence which is like a fable, with an emphasis on the adventuring nature of his experiences in a dangerous and unknown region. The construction of this narrative shows his efforts to present the image of a fearless man, whose life was always dedicated to work.

According to him, one of the promises made by the *gatos* to the starving workers in the region was the availability of food: “when they wanted to bring us, they would say ‘boy, there it is good, there we eat meat, we make money’.” Then, abandoned in the middle of the forest to their own luck, some did not

manage to make it home. Francisco Lino survived, but neither ate meat there, nor became rich. And on his return to Barras, he began to work as *gato*.

The difficulties experienced by Francisco Lino in those 'lonely outposts'¹⁴ lay in both the geographic conditions of the region, and in the working conditions themselves. In remembering this he highlights his dexterity in relationships with employers and other migrant workers who he enlisted for the work and above all, his arrival like a skilled warrior – he stated – able to pick up a snake and bite it.

His narrative demonstrates the presence of animals who threatened the proper carrying out of this work, the cutting of *juquira* vegetation. Threatened by nature and by his employer, he survived like a hero and was afraid of nothing. Seu Francisco Lino initiated his children as travelers looking for work elsewhere. He started with the oldest, Francisco Filho,¹⁵ husband of Sônia. With the exception of this son, who is in the family house for reasons of illness, all his male children are working outside the region: "only Francisco is here. He is sick, nervous. He is afraid, he is taking medicine." Afterwards he warns that his son is not following his example: "Because I am afraid of nothing. I say to him, 'Boy, stop being afraid, when I was your age I bit a live snake.' When I left here, I said, 'I am not afraid of anything, I will go without any fear'."

The lack of fear also extended to the perspective of death. His ideal is work at any cost. At a certain moment in the interview, his discourse about those places intercrosses with what was said by Sônia (his daughter-in-law) and Seu Raimundo (his uncle). According to him, "there is abundance there, lots of meat, milk. We work and we manage. Pará is better than here." He makes an exception, "there are lots of good things there, it is much easier to earn there. We can walk around well dressed, with good shoes. Health is what is not very good." I also consider it important to highlight here the family ties which unite the returnees, for the construction of their memories.

The question of health in Francisco Lino's discourse, other than the occurrence of epidemic common in the migratory destination region, is concerned with the use of strength demanded in agricultural activities. Isolated in the middle of the forest, these workers run the risk of dying due to lack of medical assistance, associated with mistreatment in captivity.

The experiences of the subjects show different temporalities. Those who do not migrate anymore, especially the old men like Raimundo Batista and Francisco Lino, are considered within the social group to which they belong as men who have lived their lives, a form of thought which runs through their narratives. I understand that they feel more free to remember. According to

Ecléa Bosi (1987, p.23), this is the moment of 'social old age,' whose function is to remember, and remember well:

A real test for the psycho-social hypothesis of memory can be found in the memories of old people. In these it can be verified whether a social history is well developed: they already lived through a determined type of society, with well marked and known characteristics; they have lived in contexts of family and cultural references that are equally recognizable: thus, their current memory can be drawn over a more defined background than the memory of a younger person, or even adult, who in some way is still absorbed in the struggles and contradictions of a present which solicits them much more intensely than an elderly person. (Bosi, 1987, p.22)

For Raimundo Batista and Francisco Lino 'remembering' assumes a didactic tone. Their function is to teach those younger than them the ways of work, and thus, they (re)invent themselves within their discourse. At the beginning of this research, in getting close to the residents of the rural area of Barras looking for information about who had migrated, they suggested to me that I speak with the older people, as they were no longer migrating they had become the guardians of the memories of that social group. In their narratives I recognized what Bosi (1987) defines as 'social old age:' someone who does not migrate anymore, who now has the act of remembering as a function with the group to which they belong.

The workers who have experienced this coming and going in the search for work were presented in their discourse as survivors of the world of slave labor.

In one of the meetings held by Caritas¹⁶ in the municipality, workers presented a discourse of survivors of a labor exploitation system. This is what we witnessed in the narrative of Francisco Moreira,¹⁷ a migrant during the 1980s to Pará, where he worked on plantations, clearing *juquira* vegetation, and in Serra Pelada during the gold rush.

I believe that the use of memory as a historical source should consider subjective value, in the sense of perceiving, amongst other aspects, the social nature of memory and its meaning for the subjects. Francisco is currently president of a Residents' Association and is very well known as a storyteller. His life story is linked to the struggle for land in the municipality, and thus comes to intertwine the present and past, referring to the past as something overcome by time. This fact also highlights the need to valorize their experiences as migrant rural

workers. In other words, he put himself forwards as an activist in the struggle for land in Barras, and as a former enslaved worker:

When I left Pará, the people began to work for the Association, at this time we managed to found an Association, until then there had existed a prison. With our work, the trade union, CUT and Fetag, we managed to improve a little, because we had taken the initiative to create the association and we managed to distribute water to the community, we managed also to get a road, energy, everything we managed through the Association. (Francisco Moreira, 2007)

Amongst other aspects, what was noticed was the need to valorize associationism in a context of a rupture with the residential system which had predominated in the region, which he presented in the form of 'prison.' Unlike what happened with the other interviewees, I perceived that in Francisco Moreira's narrative, his memories of working as a migrant, of exploitation and the bad treatment experienced, emerged in questions related to the importance of associationism and of the trade union. This was done in relation to the social place that this subject occupied in the present, within the location where they lived, the forest region in that municipality.

As Portelli stated,¹⁸ "the narrative depends on personal and collective factors." Francisco Moreira claimed a central role in the struggle for land in Barras, especially in the 1990s. I observed during one of the Caritas meetings in Barras, that when he requested the inclusion of something on the agenda and making some comments, many of those listening murmured. Francisco spoke about the problems experienced by the residents of the community, at the same time that he emphasized his actions as president of the Residents' Association. His narrative was marked by a strong tendency towards the kingdom of fantasy and fable. He told me a detailed story about his childhood in Barras, his going to Pará in order to work on the *garimpo* and later the plantations in the same region, clearing *juquira* vegetation. Francisco Moreira's report follows a logical sequence, in which he emphasizes in particular his pains, suffering and risks of death. In relation to this experience in the *garimpo*, he commented:

At this time it was the gossip about Serra Pelada [1980s]. That everyone left richer, many got much gold, many got richer, others left suffering, many died, they were killed inside, a time of much suffering, some days people got better, other days they were saddened. The time came, the person went below the ground with some iron bars and dug, there was a time when you looked up and you were at a depth of more or less thirty meters, you were some thirty meters depth distant

from the mouth of the hole. There we brought a lantern in our mouths, you took those handfuls of earth to see if you had gold, often they hit the mouth of the barrier and the barrier closed with thirty people inside, the greatest sadness in the world. When they locked thirty people in there the Federal Police arrived, there *peões* would dig, they were sent a tractor to drag the people from within. When she was working in the *garimpo*, a stone rolled from above, a small stone, but due to the depth, which was very deep, a small stone when it hit one of us, it was the same as hitting a chicken, he would fall down dead ... For me it was one of the worst times of slavery. (Francisco Moreira, 2007)

In his report Francisco Moreira made himself into a warrior. A large part of his discourse was dedicated to his experience in the *garimpo* in Serra Pelada. In my view, this aspect was due to a context of frustrations and anxieties on the part of the interviewee. In relation to this, he commented on the need for him to return to Pará to get his *garimpeiro* identification.

It should be noted that this context of necessities occurred against the backdrop of the existence of some bills in the Federal Congress which demanded compensation on the part of the government and the right to retirement for the *garimpeiros* of Serra Pelada. This *garimpo* was shut down in 1992 by the Collor administration, and the sums resulting from the gold, silver and platinum left were deposited in *Caixa Econômica Federal* (the Federal Savings Bank).

Francisco Moreira put into evidence a context of rupture with the housing system he experienced in his childhood and youth. He stated:

At that time we slept here, with my father, then the boss would come and call us to work. If our father, because at that time I was a child, had said that I would not go, he [the boss] would have ordered the knot in the hammock to be cut and let us fall into the world. Today, things have changed thanks to the Popular Movements, the Association, the Church, the Trade Union, CUT, Fetag. I thank God a lot and those who shed their blood for the land. (Francisco Moreira, 2007)

Migration was also presented by these residents, in particular those who were migrants in the 1980s, as a means of breaking with this system. In these terms the act of migrating signified an attempt to refuse to submit to plantation owners' control of the region. In relation to this, It should be emphasized that all the interviewees stated that they were grown up in their families in the housing system which had previously predominated in the region. Now they live in settlements. Francisco Moreira gives great attention to social movements,

seeing them as responsible for the changes in the region in relation to living and working conditions.

It is through this experienced social place that Francisco describes his past. His discourse meets the expectations of the present in relation to the past, configuring a past through the present. The interpretation of the experiences of these subjects has to take into account that in narrating the subject invents himself, transforming ideas and images, constructing different pasts, and meeting the needs of the present.

Usually the working life of a migrant is severely short. Physical and emotional disease surprise many, if not the majority. According to Lina, president of the STR in Barras:

This is our concern today, it is a question of their age, because 35 is still a young man, but the companies do not take them anymore. And the number of diseases has risen, the loss of the characteristics of rural workers has risen. He has nothing here, nothing that can be recognized as a rural worker, he has no right to get financing from a bank, they have lost the right to retirement, and they still get sick. Because the majority of these workers who travel, over time they get sick, because they do forced labor, they have very hard work. And working with burned sugarcane, without eating, they had a standard of life very different from what they would have if they were here ... because instead of him lasting 50 years, he only lasts 40. Look, when they travel, they go in such a way, when they come back, it is a pity, they come back skinny, with their skin burnt, all ill, just because of the bad treatment there. Because for them to earn some money, they do a lot. (Lina, 2009)

In this way, Lina highlights the desire to migrate as being connected to the anxiety and demands of the family:

But the greed for money is so great that there are women who, when their husbands do not like to travel, argue with them all the time because they will not travel. I have seen many women complaining, saying: "Ah, I so much want my husband to travel, 'X travels, and sends money,' they have things, and we do not because he does not want to travel ...". Vanity is huge, it is vanity really ... travel to have a different standard of living, to buy a motorbike. The motorbike shop here in Barras never closes. At the end of the year they start to stock up the shop. When he [the migrant] arrives, if he has an old motorbike which he had left with his wife, he goes there, and changes it for a new one, for a bigger one. (Lina, 2009)

This fragment remind me of Sônia's discourse, who expressed feelings of frustration for not yet having a brick house with a tile roof, and she associates this with the vanity and the individualism of her husband, as has already been mentioned. Francisco Filho, because he contracted a disease in Mato Grosso was not able to continue there. I asked Sônia if he had got better. She answered that her husband's problem was the fear he felt, which she did not understand as a disease, but rather something 'nervous.' Francisco Filho said he suffered from nervous gastritis.

He is not sick. What he has is being fickle. He is nervous, too nervous. He is afraid, but he is badly behaved, when he wants to tell me something he does. But if you want to say something to him, he takes it silently. But when he comes to me, he takes it out, he wants to take what you said and what I say to him. It is terrible. (Sônia, 2009)

She highlights the ambiguity of her husband's behavior inside and outside the house in a tone of indignation. In my opinion the hostile behavior of Francisco Filho in relation to his wife, different from what normally happens, can be considered here as a reaction to the hardships, humiliations and pains, amongst other issues, related to the daily life of slave like labor.

Sônia commented that her husband constantly took prescription medicine and had other health problems, such as high pressure, but nonetheless migrated to work on the plantation in Pará. I asked why he had changed his migration destination, since Mato Grosso had been his option in previous years. Sônia was emphatic, stating that her husband had not left any 'any' problem in Mato Grosso:

It was his uncle who brought him, but now his uncle has lost his opportunities there. My husband was not in any difficulty. It was his uncle who lost the opportunities, as I just said. He [the uncle] brought him, did everything, they came to collect them here, they left in front of the Union, three truck loads. And when three months passed everyone was wanting to leave, so they got everything and left, so the sugar mills did not want them again. Because the cost is great to come to get them here, to get then and leave them. So they are not wanting to take them. (Sônia, 2009)

For Lina the increase in the number of accusations of mistreatments and irregularities in the workplace is well known. When I met with a group preparing to leave Barros for Mato Grosso at the beginning of 2008, I became aware

of some strategies they had if they happened to be victims of some type of illegality. An example of this is a list with the telephone numbers of the Mobile Group from the Ministry of Labor, CPTs (Pastoral Land Commission) from various regions in the country and Unions, accompanied by a small leaflet about worker rights.

The condition of *returnees* in the inter-harvest period is tense for the majority of them, and they express themselves in talk and gestures as if there was a tightrope between the goodbye and remaining at home. It is a short time, lasting two or three months until the next harvest. Sônia commented that her husband would not rest until he migrated again.

The idea of *return* is created by the desire to feel welcome, since far from the native land, estrangement invades the soul, provoking homesickness. Returning in this case involves the search for something imagined. They arrive full of news, speaking of the hard work and the exploitation, the low wages, the illusions, the hardships, the enticements of the *gatos*, of what makes them want to return to their world. Everyone – relatives, neighbors and contemporaries – finds out what happens in the destinations, and these impressions run through generations. From a very young age, these populations are bombarded with information about the destinations of their parents and relatives, in such a way that the real and unreal are mixed and confused in the narratives of those who survived those parts of the world.

Many workers from Barras are fed daily dreams of the imaginary places passed through by successive generations, in such a way that this could provide them with nurturance, or the minimum necessary for the vital survival of the family, or even enrichment. They go in the illusion of elsewhere finding new possibilities.

The propaganda created about the places of destination is strongly used by the *gato* in regions of origin. The decision to move to other destination involves fantasies of conversations told on the threshold of doors, in the plantations and the grocers, but it also involves warnings about the world out there. And in this mesh of feeling, the workers leave dressed in their best clothes as on a festival day, imbued with the desire to see dreams materialize, in wonderment with a world whose dangers imposes challenges for them.

NOTES

¹ This article is part of the third chapter of my Masters' thesis presented to the Post-Graduate Program of Social History, UFC, in April 2010, with the title: *Memória migrante: a experiência do trabalho escravo no tempo presente* (Barras, Piauí).

² This is the clearing of dense forest which grows in a previously deforested area made into pasture. A scythe is commonly used as a tool.

³ SILVA, Maria Aparecida de Moraes; MENEZES, Marilda Aparecida. *Migrações Rurais no Brasil: velhas e novas questões*. Available at: www.nead.org.br. p.6.

⁴ CEPETE – Comissão Estadual de Prevenção ao Trabalho Escravo, Piauí – Brasil. *Diagnóstico do Trabalho Escravo do Piauí, 2003 e 2004*. Teresina, 2005.

⁵ For this diagnosis 367 families of migrant workers were interviewed in the municipalities considered as having the highest rates, of which União, Miguel Alves and Barras were in Group 1, and Esperantina, Corrente, São Raimundo Nonato and Uruçuí in Group 2.

⁶ FRANCISCO Lino do Nascimento Silva. Interview with Cristiana Costa da Rocha (hereafter CCR) on 6 July 2008, in the municipality of Barras.

⁷ LINA Gonçalves da Silva. Interview with CCR on 6 April 2009, in the city of Barras.

⁸ BOSI, Ecléa. *Memória e sociedade: lembranças de velhos*. 2.ed. São Paulo: T. A. Queiroz; Edusp, 1987.

⁹ SÔNIA Maria de Sousa Santos. Interview with CCR on 7 July 2009, in the city of Barras.

¹⁰ CASTRO, Josué de. *Geografia da fome: o dilema brasileiro: pão ou aço*. 8.ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008.

¹¹ RIOS, Kênia Sousa. A Batalha de João nas Terras do Sem Fim. In: GONÇALVES, Adelaide; COSTA, Pedro Eymar Barbosa (Org.). *Mais borracha para a vitória*. Fortaleza: Mauc/Nudoc; Brasília: Ideal, 2008. p.50.

¹² BRUNO de Oliveira. Interview with CCR on 11 Feb. 2007, in the municipality of Barras.

¹³ RAIMUNDO Batista. Interview with CCR on 11 Feb. 2007, in the municipality of Barras.

¹⁴ Expression used by Euclides da Cunha (1999) to describe the Amazon region.

¹⁵ FRANCISCO Lino do Nascimento Silva Filho. Interview with CCR on 6 July 2008, in the city of Barras.

¹⁶ Here the NGO Cáritas Brasileira, with the support of Fetag-PI, SPM and DRT-PI, coordinated a project for combating slave labor in some rural communities in the municipalities, see as the most needy and from where departed the largest number of migrants for slave labor.

¹⁷ FRANCISCO MOREIRA da Silva. Interview with CCR on 2 Oct. 2007, in the city of Barras.

¹⁸ PORTELLI, Alessandro. *Sonhos ucrônicos: memória e possíveis mundos dos trabalhadores*. *Projeto História*, São Paulo: PUC, n.10, 1993. p.43.

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