Flying for the Very First Time: Mobilities, Social Class and Environmental Concerns in a Rio de Janeiro Favela

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ABSTRACT This article aims to be a contribution towards an understanding of the interplays between subjective, situated and normative justifications for traveling and the imaginary of class and global warming in Brazil. Taking as its empirical reference the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, it focuses on how people who are having the opportunity to travel by plane for the first time accommodate three interrelated issues: their willingness to experience an energy intensive way of travelling, their affective and material realities, and their awareness about the changing of the world’s climate. The article concludes with some reflections on how to reintegrate global knowing with local meaning around travel and climate change.

KEY WORDS: travel; climate change; social class; migration; favela; consumption

1. Introduction

There seems to be a consensus around the idea that if patterns of consumption and mobility typical of the Rich North end up being incorporated by societies from the Global South – as is supposedly already happening with the so-called BRIC countries – we are to face scenarios of vast environmental damage. However, with a few exceptions, analyses tend to fail in at least two aspects: assuming a generalized perspective about environmental concern in the emerging economies, social scientists do not pay much attention to why the ‘new middle classes’ consume as they do and as much as they do even when agreeing with the need for more environmentally sensitive consumption practices (Shove and Walker 2007, Shove 2010); social scientists often neglect the fact that travel habits attend to complex mobility systems that encompass various social, political and technological processes and policies (Urry 2008, Elliot and Urry 2010).
Historical, cultural, spatial and economic differences inevitably color environmental concerns, raising controversial claims and questions that never take root in a neutral interpretive field, but are related to uneven trajectories, including colonialism, through which the world acquired its gravely unequal character (Agarwal and Narain 1991, Coronil 1996, Escobar 1998, Jasanoff 2010). Regardless of the fact that climate change has global effects, to what extent can we generalize critical arguments about anthropogenic emissions, consumption and mobility patterns to the whole planet? Insofar as the effects of climate change are perceived in the daily lives of culturally diverse and socially heterogeneous groups that inhabit territories with various physical dimensions and disparate resources, what are the roles to be played by social class differences and perceptions in defining actions and responsibilities related to the global warming? To what extent do issues of class – materiality and perception – interfere with people’s sensitivity to climate change and with their commitment to strategies that diminish its effects? On a more empirical level: what do the ‘emerging middle classes’ in Brazil have to say about the emerging environmental issues?

Since 2002, around 25 million Brazilians have moved up to the middle of the social pyramid with classes C and D together having a stronger consumption power than class B. Class C has increased its share from 37.56% in 2003 to 49.22% in 2008 (Neri 2008), encompassing around 103 million people in 2010 and probably reaching a 113 million in 2014 (Neri 2010a, 2010b), when it will comprise the majority of voters (about 57%). If their occupations, levels of education and incomes are still low enough to identify them as poor or working class, these individuals are at the same time incorporating in their lives middle- and upper-scale items and leisure opportunities: state-of-the-art cell phones, kitchen appliances, 42-inch LCD digital TVs and – of particularly concern to us here – airplane trips.

The recent emergence of this ‘new middle-class’ led to the revival of a somewhat abandoned debate on social classes amongst Brazilian social scientists (Lamounier and de Souza 2010, Bomeny 2011, Veloso 2011). Although highly heterogenic in terms of theoretical affiliations, these scholars compose basically two opposing groups: one group assumes a rather optimistic view; for them, the inclusion of almost 30 million people in the Brazilian market is evidence of the change in the country’s traditionally selective scenario of exclusive participation (see Neri 2008, 2010a, 2010b). The other group highlights the alienating aspects of this relabeling based on consumption while permanent goods such as education, culture, and professional training are still highly unavailable (see de Souza 2009, 2010). In both cases, as Veloso (2011) acutely observes, scholars seemed to be more interested in finding a proper labeling for such a segment of society than actually listening to how those supposedly composing the emerging middle class define, imagine, contest and enforce their identity through ordinary practices and discourses.

This article aims to be a contribution towards an understanding of the interplays between subjective, situated and normative justifications for traveling and the imaginary of class and global warming in Brazil. Following Boltanski and Thénevot (2006), it is not our intention to theorize about the so-called new middle class but to examine what it actually means from the point of view of those so qualified and who have to justify their consumption and mobile practices to others. In this sense, we focus on our informants’ own verbal and active understanding of their social
position, highlighting their classifying operations and how they bring the process of representation back into play when justifying their travels practices.

We take as our empirical reference Rocinha, officially a regular bairro but considered to be the largest favela in South America, a territory where fundamental issues – development, inequality, environmental risk, unsustainability, among others – seem to converge. In many ways, favelas are deemed the most nefarious consequence of the ‘unsustainability of the Brazilian pattern of urbanization’ (Grostein 2001). As examples of urban unsustainability, they are at the intersection between socio-spatial segregation and environmental problems: in the absence of public policies capable of providing housing for those in need, favelas emerged as a solution often based on the self-construction in territories where building is legally forbidden – in other words, in areas beyond the reach of the formal real estate market, such as mangroves, wetlands, floodplains, riverbanks, hilltops and steep hillsides. It should not come as a surprise that they are the most vulnerable to urban hazards such as flooding and mudslides, thus completing the sad troika of injustices that characterize the excluding pattern of urbanization in Brazil: precariousness, illegality, and vulnerability to environmental hazards, including climate catastrophes (Maricato 2003, Hogan and Marandola 2005, Marandola and Hogan 2005, 2007).

There is a common saying that; Rocinha is Ceará’s largest city after Fortaleza [capital of Ceará, Northeastern state of Brazil]. In fact, Rocinha has an extremely high concentration of immigrants originally not only from Ceará, but also Pernambuco, Paraíba, Alagoas and other Northeastern states. This population profile is a result of the historical migration movement undertaken by a vast number of people from the Northeast, the second most populated (28% of the country’s population) and the poorest region in Brazil, in search of better living conditions, especially in the Southeast: the UN Human Development Index for the former is 0.57 compared with 0.78 for the latter.

This was the ‘normal’ internal migration flow in Brazil until the 1980s, when the successive economic crises of the period and the expansion of the agricultural frontiers start to change that pattern. In the 1990s, the population outflow rate of the Northeast region slowed down considerably; the region became a net recipient of population in recent years. Even though the current economy triggers more complex mobilities, we have certainly not seen the end of migration from the Northeast towards the city of Rio de Janeiro (Geiger 1963, CEDEPLAR 1973, Faissol 1974, Faissol et al. 1978, Dias 1995, Corrêa 2001).

In this article we argue that the plane trips reported by our interviewees may not be deemed ‘unnecessary trips’ even if they occur during vacation time. Most trips refer to a long-distance dislocation, which used to be accomplished by bus in longer, more uncomfortable, and less safe trips, usually with the main goal of visiting relatives in one’s homeland and therefore abiding by strict rules of family and affection-related obligations.

Environmental Concerns on Empirical Grounds: Some Methodological Notes

Brazil has the highest rate of concern over global warming amongst large countries, with 90% of its citizens regarding it as a ‘very serious’ problem (Pew Research Centre 2009). It is important to acknowledge though, that despite a large popular awareness regarding environmental issues as well as Brazil’s leading role in biofuels
and in setting a more progressive international agenda on climate change, such concern and leadership have not yet translated into proper sociological investment.

A preliminary examination (Freire-Medeiros and Name 2011) allows us to come to the conclusion that the situation that occurs in Brazil is similar to that detected by other researchers in their own countries (Storch and Stehr 1997, Lever-Tracy 2008, Shove 2010). A good portion of the research conducted in the natural sciences focusing on global climate change seems to echo old and worn-out deterministic arguments about the relationship between nature and society, something the social sciences have dissected a long time ago. The social sciences, in their turn, oddly enough have had little to say about this issue, which has been at the top of the contemporary political agenda.

Within Brazilian academia there are basically two approaches. There is one group of scholars placing ‘climate change’ within a broader discussion on international and transnational geopolitics, addressing Brazil’s role in the North-South disputes for hegemony and/or analyzing global warming as a result of the asymmetries intrinsic to the capitalist system and derived from globalization (Viola 2002, 2009, 2010, Porto-Gonçalves 2008, Acselrad 2009). In this sense, it is possible to say that this first group is restricting themselves to the macro-level of the global geographic scale. Another group of scholars is ‘translating’ climate change through the semantic prism of sustainable development, a theme that dovetails nicely with the needs of a country undergoing rapid economic growth. If the scenario traced out by studies on climate change is one of pessimism and uncertainty, the one proposed by sustainable development is marked by pragmatic action. Scholars who are part of this second group tend to assume an interventionist approach and to operate on a meso-level, i.e. on the regional or city scales, where urban planning and public policies are implemented (Jacobi 1999, Abranches 2009, Rua 2007). The micro level of analysis that takes into consideration how social meanings and definitions around ‘climate change’ are created and operated by ordinary social actors on their increasing mobile lives is absent in both approaches.

Attempting to address this gap towards the logics of micro-motives, from October to December 2010 we conducted 14 long, semi-structured interviews with people who live in Rocinha and who had travelled by plane for the first time in the last decade. The interviews were carried out with the assistance of two undergraduate students and residents of Rocinha, Gabriela Duarte and Jéssica Santos, whose close acquaintance with the families visited was extremely helpful in facilitating the contact and creating an atmosphere of trust. The central questions drew on an extensive empirical research project coordinated by one of the authors from February 2005 to August 2009, with the aim of examining the ‘invention’ of Rocinha as an international tourist destination (Freire-Medeiros 2008, 2009a, 2009b).

As the meetings took place in their households, adult members from the same family often participated, generating a most interesting discussion – an informal focus group if you will. The debates were triggered by our inquiries on how they had planned the trip (bus versus airplane, payment logistics), the trip itself (including the experience of dealing with non-familiar airport and airplane facilities) and plans for future trips taking into account their awareness about environmental impacts. More often than not, our questions on class perception and social mobility, place of living and practices of sustainable domestic consumption gave them an incentive to reflect on and discuss their ‘new’ social status, their ‘new’ consumption
and mobility possibilities as well as future scenarios when these ‘novelties’ would supposedly become ‘normal’ (Shove and Walker 2007).

These conversations were complemented with semi-structured interviews with four employees from three travel agencies located at different points of Rocinha, which supply customers from within the favela as well as from the surrounding areas. Our respondents differed in age, time availability, level of responsibility within the agency and responsiveness to our questionnaire. Our main purposes were to confirm the residents of Rocinha’s preferable destinations while confronting perceptions about environmental problems due to airplane trips of those who consume and those who commercialize them. It was also our intention to find out if mitigation strategies such as the green taxes were comprehended and supported by those social actors.

First Time on a Plane

We would like to evoke here a TV program produced by then candidate, Dilma Rousseff, and broadcast nationally on 14 October 2010 during the last presidential campaign. On that program, the viewer was invited to visit Marcílio, an illiterate construction worker, in his tidy new house equipped with a microwave oven, a new stove, a top-freezer refrigerator, and a plasma TV. His family’s greatest dream – which had just become true – was to ‘take a vacation and travel by plane’. Marcílio then shared his photo album, with the records of his family boarding a plane for the first time and their stay on a beach in his homeland – everything paid for in several installments with his credit card. The house they own, the new appliances, the beach holidays and the airplane trip are presented as irrefutable proof that Marcílio and his family had left poverty behind. Commodities and luxury travels, therefore, gain the status of a ‘civil right’, being directly associated with intangible but fundamental values such as citizenship and social inclusion.

Marcílio’s biography in many ways echoes that of our interviewees from Rocinha: a poor upbringing in the Northeast, migration to the Southeast in search of better opportunities, years of endurance, relative economic stability in the present with access to a series of opportunities, goods and leisure habits, which would have been out of the question two decades ago. What is absent from Rousseff’s program, though, is the acknowledgment that many times social and economic improvements in one’s life take place in a context of high urban segregation and reduced acknowledgement of human rights.

In the specific case of Rio’s favelas, numerous settlements have been targeted by formal plans aiming their physical incorporation into the broader urban fabric since the late 1980s. Concomitant to the infrastructural improvement, however, came the territorialization of several favelas by heavily armed drug factions (Zaluar 1985 2000, Soares et al. 1996, Burgos 2004, Machado da Silva and Leite 2007). As a consequence, throughout the years several segments of the Brazilian society have evaluated all sorts of arbitrary measures within the favelas not only as legitimate but as most desirable (Leite 2005, Farias 2009).

Favelas throw into doubt assumptions that have always been most valued by, and central to, Western modernity, making it evident that democratization and infrastructural improvements can go hand-in-hand with deepening inequalities and ‘a restricted, hierarchized and fragmented citizenship’ (Machado da Silva 1994). Patterns of consumption associated with notions of luxury, excess, hedonism live side by side with lifestyles largely associated with poverty, exclusion and
deprivation. The origins, structural dynamics and consequences of this overwhelming inequality are sufficiently complex as to require detailed treatment elsewhere, but some dates and numbers about Rocinha are relevant here.

Rocinha is located between Gávea and São Conrado. Gávea boasts Rio’s highest Human Development Index while Rocinha has the fourth worst. Gávea’s per capita income is ten times that of Rocinha (IPP 2003) and, despite a considerable increase on the quality of living in the locality in the last decades, 21.89% of its population still lives below the poverty line with a monthly income of US$35.00 and under (FGV 2004). Nearly all houses are served by the public network of electricity (99.82%) and 96.20% of households are linked to the public network of water plumbing, but only about 60% of houses are linked to a sewage system. Almost 90% of residents dispose of their waste via a series of containers scattered along the road (FGV 2004). These containers are insufficient and the contents constantly spill over, forming mountains of garbage. Due to the extreme levels of population density, Rocinha has the highest rates of tuberculosis in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

And still, ‘Rocinha’s case is many times referred to as an element of relativization of the current view that takes favelas as a space dominated by poverty’ (Grynszpan and Pandolfi 2003, p. 55). As a matter of fact, none of the 1020 localities in Rio de Janeiro that goes by the name of ‘favela’ boasts such an incredible number and variety of businesses and services (Valladares 2005).

Since early 2010, improvements are being conducted at Rocinha as part of the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) sponsored by the Federal Government, with investments of around US$120 million. In an area previously occupied by hundreds of shacks with open sewage, a major Sports Center has been erected with a semi-Olympic sized swimming pool and other facilities. The project also includes the re-urbanization of certain areas, construction of roads and of two funiculars on rails, which are supposed to enable the garbage collection on the upper part of the favela. As welcome as these improvements may be, they have not addressed a central issue in Rocinha: the arbitrary control that armed bandits from one the most powerful and profitable groups of bandits impose on residents’ daily lives – what Machado da Silva (1994, 2004) pertinently explains under the notion of ‘violent sociability’.

Rocinha is informally subdivided into socio-spatially diverse sectors – 25 of them in total. On one hand, the presence of narcotrafficking affects its population as a whole, regardless of which sector one lives in or of one’s socioeconomic status; on the other, most of those improvements, services and opportunities are not equally distributed within Rocinha itself. Residents of the areas located on the peaks of the hills need to walk up and down hundreds of steps of improvised stairways, have intermittent water provision and are often exposed to the risk of mudslides. Such is the case of Tenório, 54, and his family who reside in a small house in the upper part of Rocinha. Without proper formal education, Tenório works as a security guard in a high-middle class gated community. Different from Marcilio’s, Tenório’s household could not be showcased as an example of conspicuous consumption: in the tiny living-room, a small TV set faces an old and torn sofa, the kitchen is even smaller, the fridge is old and rusty, and so is the stove. And still, like Marcilio, Tenório also used his credit card to buy an airplane ticket and spend his vacation time in the Northeast. He shared with us his story and we briefly recount it here:

I’ve travelled by bus about five times before travelling by airplane. Taking the bus is nice because you get to know places better, you get to see the
landscape. But taking the plane is good too, no argument against that. One minute in the airplane is six hours in the bus.

I’ve only been on leisure trips really. I went to visit my parents. Some families abandon their parents, but not me. I always go to Pernambuco to visit them, I am glad they’re alive.

I paid for the trip in six installments using my credit. In one year I’ll go again, God willing so. There [hometown] I haven’t been able to spend more than I’d already spent with the plane ticket. Now, having a hard time to make ends meet, or not being able to put food on the table, none of that happened. To travel but to go dinner-less?! No way!

Today I don’t think I’m poor. A person who can buy a plane ticket and not go through a hard time, without food, is not poor. [Wife: we’re the middle class within the favela. We are homeowners, so we are not that kind of poor anymore, the type that lives in a shack.] The only thing that really bothers us working class folks is stray bullets, but they say it’ll get better.

It’s funny how when we get on the plane we feel a little sad: ‘will I make it home?’. When the airplane started climbing, the only thing I didn’t do was soil my clothes! [laughter]. But I felt comfortable in the plane. It doesn’t even feel like you’re flying. I’ve heard that rich people get a hot lunch meal, but I just got a snack, which was good. They even have a little table for you to put your snack on. The funny thing is that when the airplane is flying it’s like you’re on the ground, all is still, but when it starts going down it shakes like a vulture!

They say our planet is not doing really well, that things are a little off. Too much rain in some places and in other places no rain at all. I think that the coming of Jesus Christ is near, don’t you think?

I’m careful enough not to waste any water or energy. But me, I wouldn’t give up from travelling because of pollution. This Brazil of mine really has beautiful things. If I were a rich man, I’d visit many places, because having money and not leaving the house just isn’t worth it.

Tenório’s rich narrative, despite its obvious idiosyncrasies, echoes trajectories, opinions and perspectives from other interviewees and also relativizes several assumptions often implied in discussions of new mobility practices, consumption patterns and emerging middle classes. While much could be said, we would like to highlight three points, tentatively organized around ‘antinomic pairs’, which we consider the most relevant.

**Interregional Bus versus Airplane**

Since the 1950s, heavy public investments were aimed at the construction of highways throughout the country to support the creation of the Brazilian motor vehicle industry. Currently the paved highway network is around five times larger than the
railroad network and the waterway system is completely underused. The interregional bus system, which has existed since 1928, largely benefited from these federal government policies and privately-owned companies were able to establish themselves as the main alternative for the transportation of persons across the country. This hegemony, however, started to be challenged in the 1990s when the air transportation system in Brazil underwent a series of new regulatory measures that allowed Low Cost Companies to enter into the market. According to the regulator – the National Department of Civil Aviation (ANAC) – there were 26.7 billion passenger-kilometers flown in 2002 against 11.8 billion in 1992, representing a growth rate of approximately 7% per year. Companies such as TAM and Gol, the most used by our respondents, started offering services using the ‘low-cost, low-fare’ logic. It is worth noticing that this is mostly a national market: in 2009, 90% of the total number of takeoffs in the country corresponded to domestic flights (ANAC 2009).

Our respondents made it quite clear that taking the plane rather than interregional buses as they used to do is part of a decision that takes into consideration advantages and costs. They cited positive features they associated with the interregional bus: only using this kind of transport is one able to enjoy the landscape, to interact with fellow travelers, bring along heavy pieces of luggage (packed with gifts for and from relatives), and to really get to know places (a feature they associated with car trips as well). But the fact is that flying is simply cheaper and faster. Moreover, airplane tickets may be paid for in several installments and all of our interviewees used their credit cards to do so (or borrowed someone else’s, as was the case of Délia, a 48 year-old housemaid, who accepted her boss’s offer to use his credit card).

As Table 1 illustrates, the four cities that are most traveled to by Rocinha’s residents are a considerable distance from Rio: Fortaleza (1514 miles), João Pessoa (1321 miles), Campina Grande (1284 miles), and Recife (1262 miles). These people used to spend at least three days on a bus, had to pay for their meals as well as for the use of shower facilities, and were exposed to the risk of being robbed by criminals who often attack the roads at night. Travelling by plane therefore became an affordable and economically rational option, allowing them to travel within a country of continental proportions in a greatly reduced time frame and at significantly less of a financial commitment when compared with interregional buses. Although they have to leave the airport and catch another means of transportation to reach their hometowns in the rural areas, choosing the airplane guarantees ‘traveling with less sacrifices’, as put by one of our respondents.

The ‘sacrifices’ that still have to be endured have to do mostly with routines that ‘frequent flyers’ take completely for granted. Délia and her daughter, Geovana, while affirming that their desire is ‘never to take an interregional bus again’, approached with a humorous perspective the rollercoaster of associated emotions provoked by the new means of transportation and their reactions to it:

D: It was all different from what I expected. I thought that we would catch the plane like those presidents, down on the ground, that they would take us to the plane on a little car. I entered on that tunnel and was already inside the plane! I said: ‘Geovana, are we already on the plane?!?’ [Laughter]

G: At the airport, I was so very worried: ‘are we at the right place?!’. When you go to the boarding room it gets easier. But still, I kept on saying: ‘and what if someone takes our luggage?!’ … I wasn’t afraid of the plane itself.
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* Converted values of the Brazilian currency in 01/06/2011. Source: TAM/Gol/São Geraldo/Itapemirim/Penha.
But the first time I buckled up the belt, when I tried to open it, I said: ‘mom, it’s not opening. What do I do?!’ And then she said: ‘I don’t know. I’m trapped myself!’ [Laughter] But now we know how to deal with it.

D: Geovana sits by the window and keeps saying: ‘mom, look!’ I’m praying and she’s disturbing me! [laughter] Later on, I had the courage to look through the window and I saw the clouds – they’re so beautiful, I felt like touching them … I don’t use the toilet because I’m afraid of going and … getting lost! And another thing: I only buy non-stop flights because what really bothers me is that going up and down, up and down. [Laughter]

The majority of our interviewers admit to a deep fear of flying – a sentiment that for some persists even after several trips. Being able to deal with this fear and becoming familiar with once strange environments, such as the airport and the plane itself, seem to be experienced as the most valued accomplishments, and a source of pride.

‘Poor’ versus ‘Middle Class’ and Family Commitments

Our second point is twofold: although the shift in mobility patterns – from interregional bus to airplane – should be seen as part of a broader change in a person’s life in economic terms, this shift is equally intertwined not only with perceptions of class but also with long-lasting family obligations and reciprocities.

People perceive themselves as living a better life and the fact that they are able to afford a plane ticket, amongst other things, is taken as proof of this upward social mobility. There is not much novelty here. On her ethnography on individuals who self-identified as members of the middle class during Brazilian democratic transition (1981–1994), Maureen O’Dougherty (2002) showed how the obligatory trip to Disneyland with a shopping spree stopover in Miami was a main strategy employed to define, shape and maintain their middle-class identity.

Nevertheless, in the case analyzed here, new consumption possibilities and mobility patterns do not go without tension as they are confronted with negative perceptions about Rocinha as a place to live as well as the lack of proper access to formal education, basic services and public security. Asked if they considered themselves as ‘poor’ or ‘middle class’, Karina, her husband Manoel, and their daughter Latifah, engaged in a discussion that speaks loudly of these tensions, which were many times enacted in different households during our research:

K: This is a difficult question.

M: Poor.

L: Middle-class.

K: We live in a favela, we couldn’t afford buying an apartment. We live in a favela and whoever lives in a favela is poor.

M: We have neither a regular income nor the life of people who have a lot of culture [formal education].
I agree that Rocinha is a favela: it doesn’t have basic infrastructure as they have on a bairro [regular neighborhood], we’re all squeezed in, everyone lives on top of each other’s head. Authorities don’t come in here. But I think we fit into the middle class because real poor people don’t travel by plane, the poor don’t have any luxury. Travelling is a luxury for the poor.

If in other contexts ‘unnecessary’ travel may be seen as an indication of the spread of a ‘cosmopolitan lifestyle’, which includes not only extensive mobilities but also the ability to consume and compare destinations (Beck 2002, Elliot and Urry 2010), this is definitely not the case here. Those with whom we talked are not traveling to unknown places but are in fact reproducing the exact same journeys they used to experience by bus over and over. These journeys, which blur the boundaries between obligation and leisure (Larsen et al. 2007, Caletrío 2009), take them back to their hometowns and relatives, allowing them – and their children – to sustain, with the wider and distant family, their most valued intimacy and closeness.

As other authors have demonstrated for various research contexts that are marked by migration processes (Bryceson and Vuorella 2002, Coe 2008, Walsh 2009), despite changes in family relations, parents and relatives are still a fundamental dimension in the lives of these men and women. In this sense, it should not come as a surprise that even when projecting future possibilities for traveling to other destinations, adults always prioritize ‘visiting loved ones’. In the words of Márcia, who has lived in Rocinha since her adolescence (out of many such quotes):

‘Travelling for me is important because I get to see my family. I miss them dearly. I also get to rest, to change the routine. My kids [three], they loved it, loved the rivers, the animals, the donkeys – those things from life there [laughter]. I intend to keep travelling by plane – bus never more!’

I wish I could take my kids to that place… what is it called? Oh, Disney. Or some other [amusement] park here in Brazil. I don’t wanna go to anywhere abroad, only if it’s to take the kids. It’s to my homeland that I really like to go.

Communication technologies that allow people seem both ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Urry 2008), although part of the daily lives of most of our interviewees (there are several cybercafés within the favela and, from 2009, residents started to enjoy free wireless Internet service provided by the State), are far from being easily accessible to their relatives back in their hometowns. Access to communication technologies is unequally distributed amongst different regions: according to a survey conducted by NIC in 2006, only 53.9% of households in the Northeast owned a cell phone in comparison to 70.33% of households in the Southeast. Internet access was available in 13.06% of households in the Northeast and in 18.04% in the Southeast.

Nevertheless, even if these technologies that enable all sorts of affective connections without geographical propinquity become broadly available, they will have to be confronted with relatively fixed ideas about how family relationships ought to be carried out, the obligations and reciprocities they endure.

**Climate Change versus Mobility Needs**

So how do these men and women accommodate their willingness to experience an energy intensive way of travelling, their affective and material realities, and their
awareness about the changing of the world’s climate? On our third and final point we would like to share our preliminary findings on how representations of climate change intersect with the meaning as well as the materiality of particular mobility needs and new consumption possibilities within the context of Rocinha.

Water and electricity provision in most favelas is subsidized by the State and residents in Rocinha either pay a very low amount for these services or improvise clandestine connections. Even so, all but one of those with whom we talked said that they were ‘very concerned’ about the waste of water and electricity and were ‘always vigilant’ about it. Most of them also declared that they are aware of global warming and elaborated about its reasons and effects. In general terms, they are not skeptical about what the sciences of climate change advocate and they see themselves as part of an endangered world.

Even when inscribing drastic changes in climate within a Millenarianism logic – climate catastrophes as being driven by divine will – they do not challenge the fact that global warming has do to with human activity: God would actually be punishing humankind for its actions and mistakes. Moreover, they all declared to believe it is important to find ways of reducing carbon emissions, although some disputed whether or not it is possible to design low-carbon strategies that will definitely prevent the tragic consequences of global warming. Gabriel, a young salesperson at one of the travel agencies in Rocinha, conveyed a strong sense of distrust on reducing carbon emissions as an efficient strategy. This kind of measure is weighed, on one hand, against the supposed inevitability of the climate change phenomenon and, on the other, in the context of a general skepticism with the Brazilian government’s capacity to intervene in such matters:

I’ve heard about this [global warming] since high school. I remember well all the fuss around that ECO-92 [1992 Rio Earth Summit].

This whole greenhouse effect, and fuel emissions ... it’s like when you have an ice cube and some fire: the closer you get the ice cube to the fire, the faster it’ll melt. You may try to slow things down, but still it’s just a matter of time.

The same happens with cigarettes: the Ministry of Health adverts that smoking is a bad habit, but doesn’t prohibit it altogether. Unfortunately this is the way it is.

Gabriel’s workmate, Heloísa, on the other hand, elaborated on ethical dilemmas concerning collective responsibility, freedom of choice, and possible restrictive measures implemented by the state to mitigate global warming: ‘everybody should know better. It shouldn’t be prohibited, if somebody wants to travel, they should. They shouldn’t forget that in a couple of years their son may suffer the consequences.’

These reactions demonstrate how far we are from a situation of ignorance towards environmental risks or incapacity to understand the probabilities of a genuine climate catastrophe. Despite the claims of sociologists such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990), taking up experts’ advice and assuming personal responsibility are not the only possible responses to environmental risks – lay actors in fact draw upon intuition, inherited belief, and their own situated knowledge in constructing risk understandings and responding to experts’ pronouncements (Wynne 1996, Lup-
ton 1999). Heloísa’s and Severina’s reflections about the implementation of ‘green taxes’ on flights, for example, reveal the effort to accommodate what they consider to be their environmental obligations with their previous knowledge on ‘how things really work’ in Brazil:

S: Clients … wouldn’t pay a green tax [Would you?] No, because if it was me and everybody else, I’d pay; but if it was just me and some minority there’s no point in paying. People already complain they need to pay service tax … So they’d never pay extra just because of the environment, against global warming.

H: It’d be kind of impossible, only a few people would really contribute … I think some people would change their behavior, some would be shaken, but I think it still wouldn’t have a big influence [Would you pay?] No. I’d take my money and plant a little tree somewhere else.

As Szerszynski and Urry (2010) acutely note, ‘any description and prediction of climate change and its impacts is entangled with specific imaginaries of how society is, and how it ought to be’. Despite seeing themselves as part of the environmental problem, it is clear that our interviewees tend to attribute responsibilities and obligations based on how they make sense of their own biography and evaluate social inequality within Brazilian society in broader terms. How Délia and Geovana explained their decision to keep on travelling by plane goes along the same lines as the majority of the other responses:

D: I don’t travel often. Those people who travel almost every week, like my bosses, who are always flying, maybe they should [stop flying], who knows?!

But I, who only travel every two years…

G: It’s like … ‘hey, now that I can afford it [ticket] you tell me that I can’t travel [by plane]?!’. And we only travel every two years!

Nine years ago, Sônia, a 30-year old housemaid, migrated from Ceará to Rocinha. She claimed to be ‘very concerned’ about wasting water as well as electricity and to be ‘very aware’ of global warming. Asked if she would stop traveling to avoid high carbon emissions, Sonia replied to us with a question of her own: ‘If people weren’t supposed to travel, we wouldn’t be here to begin with, right?!’ Sônia’s interrogation reminds us that her taking a plane today can only be understood as part of her being compelled to leave behind her hometown in the Northeast, a region whose very own and specific legacy of myths, landscapes and memories relate directly to drought and migration (Castro 1992, Albuquerque Jr. 1999, Duarte 2002, Brito and Carvalho 2006, Buckley 2010). As examined by several authors, a social representation called seca – drought – was created around a climatic phenomenon, the lack or irregularity of rain, and came to define a specific social identity, namely that of the Northeast migrant. Around the discourse of the seca a whole social structure of exploitation and misery was created, a structure that is in fact independent from drought itself both in time (for it exists before and after the dry season) and in space (for not all of the Northeast is equally affected by the harsh climate). Sonia, therefore, makes us place Rocinha’s residents’ ‘luxury travels’ in the present within a long history of
displacements and migration flows animated not only by the climate adversities of one specific area, but mainly by deep social inequalities, which have left indelible marks in Brazilian society as a whole.

**Final remarks**

Listening to Tenório and the other residents of Rocinha share their life stories and their mobile experiences allowed us to perceive how far ‘unnecessary’ travel may be informed by a variety of long lasting emotional and affective commitments. Rather than an imaginary associated with a cosmopolitan lifestyle, feelings of love, loyalty and respect, as well as understandings of responsibility towards one’s family, drive most of our interviewees. Emotional commitments, nevertheless, cannot be isolated from institutional and economic constraints. Our aim was to demonstrate how their stories may provide us with various paths for bringing together and articulating different dimensions in which ‘mobile lives and mobility systems interweave and dislocate’, to use Elliot and Urry’s (2010) phrase.

In this sense, we would like to insist on three points. First, the idea that flying for leisure purposes in and of itself should not be taken as an example of an escalating conspicuous pattern of consumption. On the contrary: despite living in overall better equipped houses than Tenório’s, the totality of our respondents seemed very conscious about their expenses not only concerning the trips they have taken but also in more general terms. They proudly told us stories of cost-effective strategies, which were carefully planned, aimed at the viability of each journey, and which many times involved, for example, family members taking turns on who would go on vacation and when.

Second, labeling this segment with generic terms such as ‘new middle class’ or ‘poor’ simply does not stand close scrutiny. Our respondents challenged the taxonomic enterprise with unforeseen and thus unclassifiable qualifications: ‘we’re not poor any longer, we’re middle-class-poor, improved poor’. As they insisted on showing to us, these are categories that need to be unpacked and examined against various criteria, including their mobility realities and desires. Moreover, one should take into account a fundamental paradox that cuts across all these narratives of flows: while a considerable number of favelados may be able to afford a plane ticket, personal physical movement in the empirical grounds of Rocinha and other favelas is still highly controlled and inhibited by legal and/or illegal apparati of power.

Finally, the arguments presented by our interviewees are ultimately related to broader questions of climate justice: they do not ask whether it is true or not that carbon emissions have a negative impact on the environment, but who deserves to travel, with which kind of regularity, with which level of comfort and for which purpose. These people have waited their whole lives to have access to possessions and to a mobile world embedded into an imaginary of prosperous life and full citizenship (as opposed to a restricted and fragmented one). It should not come as a surprise that they resist the idea of having to give up their recently acquired consumption and mobility possibilities. In the words of 75 year-old Geralda:

> We’re now grateful to our President [Lula] ‘cause we took the rich people’s place, we can travel. Nowadays, you get to the airport and it looks like you’re in the bus station, everyone wearing Havaiana flip-flops! Those old privileges are over. We have taken their [rich people’s] place! [laughter]
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Notes

1. The research conducted by credit card company Itaucard among lower-income families (considered as those with incomes under or equal to 3.6 Brazilian minimum wage salaries, or 740 pounds at the January 2011 exchange rate) stated that this segment is responsible for 47.8% of revenues generated by credit card companies (Agência Estado, 2008).
2. The historical conditions for the appearance of favelas as empirical realities and as an object of discourse are numerous and have been competently retraced by scholars such as Lopes (1955), Machado da Silva (1967), Leeds (1969), Zaluar and Alvito (1998), Burgos (2004), Valladares (2000; 2005), Valladares and Medeiros (2003), and Leite (1995) to name but a few.
4. Three banks, 30 odd stores selling building materials, beauty salons, health clubs, cellular phone and DVD rental stores, a mini shopping-mall, several restaurants (including a sushi place) and four travel agencies (Camilo 2010).
5. Residents can count on three public schools and several daycare facilities, five bus lines that reach the city center and other main points in town, 600 motor-taxis working mostly within the locality – an essential service if one remembers that most streets are narrow and precariously paved. There are at least three rádios comunitárias (community radios), two locally-produced newspapers and cable television, including vicinity-based channel TV ROC.
6. Violent sociability is not driven by negotiation or persuasion, but it is rather based on the use of (many times lethal) force as a means to satisfy interests, regardless of its effects on good-meaning citizens, criminals from rival comandos, and criminals from within the same group.
7. Although the children’s opinions and expectations were not the focus of our interviews, it seems appropriate to infer that they are considerably more open to the idea of travelling to other destinations than their parents. It is interesting to note that they expressed the desire of visiting different places not so much abroad but within Brazil – ‘a land worth knowing’, as we heard many times.

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