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# Ageing, agency and work: Brazilian older adults building spaces of opportunity in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines an understudied dimension of transnational mobilities and ageing: namely, the experiences of ageing parents who take on short-term informal jobs during their extended visits to their migrant offspring abroad. Based on ethnographic research with ageing parents in Brazil and their accounts of short-term (visitor) transnational mobilities and paid work in the United States, where their children have emigrated, the article examines how older parents on a visitor ('tourist') visa take on short-term jobs and how their work and earnings abroad make them feel empowered. The article draws on a spatio-temporal analytical framework to discuss how migrants' temporal and spatial journeys are shaped by their ability to mobilize resources such as trusted transnational networks and translate these into transnational spaces of opportunity. The article concludes that through these specific configurations of time and space older adults are able to make use of their *own* work to improve livelihoods for themselves and their families, which they recount as enabling and empowering.

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## MOTS CLEFS

Vieillessement; mobilités; agencement; travail; Brésil; États-Unis

## Envejecimiento, Agencia y Trabajo: Adultos Mayores Brasileños Construyendo Espacios de Oportunidad en los Estados Unidos

### RESUMEN

Este artículo examina una dimensión poco estudiada de las movi-lidades transnacionales y el envejecimiento: es decir, las experiencias de los padres mayores que asumen trabajos informales de corta duración durante las visitas prolongadas a sus hijos inmigrantes en el extranjero. Con base en una investigación etnográfica con padres que envejecen en Brasil y sus relatos de movi-lidades transnacionales a corto plazo (visitantes) y trabajo remunerado en los Estados Unidos, donde sus hijos han emigrado, el artículo examina cómo los padres mayores con una visa de visitante ('turista') aceptan trabajos a corto plazo y cómo su trabajo y sus ganancias en el extranjero los hacen sentir empoderados. El artículo se basa en un marco analítico espa-cio-temporal para discutir cómo los viajes temporales y espaciales de

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los migrantes están determinados por su capacidad para movilizar recursos, como redes transnacionales confiables, y traducirlos en espacios transnacionales de oportunidad. El artículo concluye que a través de estas configuraciones específicas de tiempo y espacio, los adultos mayores pueden hacer uso de su *propio* trabajo para mejorar los sustentos para ellos y sus familias, lo que relatan como habilitador y empoderador.

## **Vieillissement, agentivité et travail: les seniors brésiliens qui bâtissent des espaces d'opportunités aux États-Unis**

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article étudie un aspect peu recherché du vieillissement et de la mobilité transnationale: à savoir, les expériences des parents âgés qui prennent des emplois informels à courte durée pendant leurs longs séjours à l'étranger quand ils visitent leurs enfants migrants. L'article se fonde sur une recherche ethnographique avec des parents âgés au Brésil et leurs témoignages concernant leurs mobilités transnationales de visiteurs court séjour et leurs activités salariées aux États-Unis, où leurs enfants ont émigré. Il examine la manière dont les parents âgés qui voyagent sur des visas touristes prennent des emplois de courte durée et comment leur travail et leur rémunération à l'étranger leur donne plus d'assurance. L'article s'appuie sur une structure analytique spatio-temporelle pour décrire la façon dont les trajectoires temporelles et spatiales des migrants sont modelées par leur capacité à mobiliser des ressources telles que des réseaux transnationaux fiables et à les convertir en espaces transnationaux d'opportunité. Il conclut que par le biais de ces configurations particulières de temps et d'espace, les seniors peuvent se servir de leur *propre* travail pour améliorer leurs existences ainsi que celles de leurs familles, ce qu'ils décrivent comme des sentiments de motivation et d'autonomie.

## **Introduction**

I think that in the United States, they see us, older people, as less of a threat for the country. They don't expect us to be going there for work.

These are Júlia's words as we sit in her living room that opens to a small courtyard. Júlia, an 80-year-old woman from Governador Valadares, Brazil, periodically travelled to visit her daughter in the United States and, while abroad, took on short-term paid jobs. Júlia's spatio-temporal arrangement is far from exceptional or geographically specific. It is an instance of complex ongoing negotiations between the ageing body, short-term (visitor) transnational mobilities and informal paid work, whereby older adults purposefully and resourcefully seize opportunities to improve livelihoods.

Scholars have increasingly noted the significance of focusing on later life agency and agential strategies, underscoring the resilience and active roles played by older adults (King et al., 2017). In this respect, authors have illustrated the experiences of transnational grandparenting and retirement (Newendorp, 2020; Zhou, 2018), as well as the permanent

international migration of middle and older age adults for work (Lulle & King, 2016; Solari, 2018). What remains underexamined is how ageing parents on a *visitor ('tourist') visa* take on *short-term paid jobs* while visiting their migrant adult children abroad. The article's innovative theoretical contribution to the larger scholarship on transnational ageing lies in considering this understudied phenomenon with its specific space and time configurations and the resultant empowerment it bestows on ageing parents.

Through ethnographic evidence, the article illustrates how Brazilian older parents enact their agency and strategize in order to realize possibilities of short-term transnational mobility and earnings in the United States, where their offspring have emigrated. In their experiences of short-term overseas travels, time and (transnational) space emerge as dimensions where agency and life strategies can be enacted to improve livelihoods. Short-term travels refer to periods up to 6 months, following the maximum length of time legally granted by a visitor 'tourist' visa, which ageing parents use to travel to the United States.

The article brings into communication debates on spatio-temporalities as co-constructed and co-evolving dimensions, life course (im)mobilities, and later life agency to explore the short-term transnational mobility and work strategies used by older adults to improve their living conditions and those of their families. These debates give theoretical insight into how ageing migrants' temporal and spatial journeys take shape in relation to their ability to muster resources and translate these into different forms of capital (Erel & Ryan, 2019). More specifically, they help illustrate the nuanced ways in which older Brazilian parents respond to structural constraints, seize opportunities, and enact their agency in ways that are enabling and empowering. They achieve this through specific configurations of *time* and *space*, materialized in their visitor trips overseas to see their adult children and short-term paid informal jobs they take on while abroad.

To investigate the intersections of ageing, agency and work in contexts of *short-term* transnational mobility, the article begins by critically reviewing the extensive body of work on spatio-temporalities and its connections to transnational ageing (section 1). This is followed by the research context and methodology (sections 2 and 3). The article then moves on to examine ageing parents' accounts of short-term transnational mobility and informal paid work in relation to the ageing body and earnings abroad (sections 4 and 5). The article concludes by showing that taking on casual short-term jobs while on a visitor ('tourist') visa is empowering for ageing parents because it allows them to make additional earnings through their own work, increase financial security, and relieve offspring abroad from financial obligations.

### **Spatio-temporalities of ageing: life course (im)mobilities, later life agency and short-term work**

Geographers, and scholars in the allied disciplines, have developed a robust corpus of research on ageing, space, time and their intersections (Andrews & Philips, 2005; Sampaio et al., 2018; Schwanen et al., 2012). These explorations of age, space and place have shown ageing as embodied and emplaced, socially and culturally constructed, and relationally produced over space and time, through the life course and in relation to generations (Hopkins & Pain, 2007; Skinner et al., 2015). These intersections have also been thoroughly examined in relation to local and global migration processes and the changing spaces of everyday life over time (Bailey et al., 2018; Ryan, 2018; Walsh & Näre, 2016).

Considering the crossings between space and time in the migration experience, Erel and Ryan (2019) have proposed a multi-level spatio-temporal analytical framework for examining how migrants' temporal and spatial journeys shape and are shaped by their possibilities to mobilize resources and translate these into different forms of capital. Their framework improves understanding of how micro (e.g., biological age and life course), meso (e.g., family relationality and generations), and macro (e.g., immigration regimes) dimensions influence migration opportunities, experiences and outcomes. Moreover, a spatio-temporal multi-level analysis emphasizes, in a particularly relevant way to the discussion in this article, migrants' agency and strategies to muster resources as various forms of capital. This is observable, for example, in the way ideas about chronological age and work are situated and socially constructed; how adult children's remittances to ageing parents in the country of origin can later be mobilized to attain a visitor's visa successfully; or how shifting migration regimes may facilitate or curtail time and space-specific mobility possibilities.

A comparable rationale is found in Lulle and King's (2016) and Sun's work (Sun, 2021). Lulle and King offer the concept of 'time-spaces of possibility' to capture the intertwined nature of ageing, (transnational) space and time in migration contexts, and the empowering role of mobilities later in life. Sun (2021) focuses more pointedly on a temporal dimension, arguing for the need to integrate time and the temporalities of ageing into the analysis of migration and transnationalism. To that end, he proposes the concept of 'temporalities of migration' to capture the logics, rationales and strategies that migrants utilize over the life course as they negotiate life experiences across multiple places (see also, Ho, 2019). Chiming in with King et al. (2017) work emphasizing the resourcefulness and agency of ageing parents and challenging what they identify as a prevailing 'vulnerability trope' in the ageing-migration literature, Sun underscores older adults' strategies and active responses to time and place-specific conditions.

While migration has been mainly understood as a phenomenon closely linked to space, time and 'changing temporal horizons' (Amrith, 2021; Cwerner, 2001) are central to understanding embodied and emplaced migration trajectories. A focus on the temporal dimension can illuminate the complex entanglements between migrants' shifting capabilities, migration aspirations and imaginaries, and structuring political and economic forces such as visa and citizenship regimes and immigration policy and control. Considering time and temporalities allows for an understanding of the pace, intensity, frequency, direction and elasticity of migration and mobility journeys, and how they can accelerate, hold up, expand, dwindle or stall in different moments. A temporal perspective reveals how 'migrants reorient themselves in unpredictable ways as past, present and future experiences intertwine to produce ambivalent emotional lives' (Amrith, 2021, p. 131), and shows the complexities and non-linearity of mobility trajectories at different stages of life, with 'stuckness' of younger generations prompting the movement of older adults.

And yet, the bulk of literature on the spatio-temporalities of transnational ageing and families remains primarily focused on the experiences and effects of migration on younger generations, consequently underplaying the work and contributions of older generations (exceptions include Dossa & Coe, 2017; King et al., 2017; Näre et al., 2017). When older adults' experiences feature centrally, it is often in relation to younger generations, as care providers for grandchildren upon their parents' migration (Yarris, 2017),

as managers and investors of remittances (Bastia et al., 2021), or as care providers and/or care receivers across borders (Baldassar et al., 2007). A similar trend is also found in studies of transnational Brazilian families, where parents and grandparents' experiences of ageing remain largely unnoticed (Jorgensen et al., 2021; Siqueira, 2018).

When agency is considered, particularly in mobility contexts, it is often in relation to young and middle-aged individuals who are depicted as active agents and propellers of change. At the same time, a growing number of studies has noted the active roles and agency of older migrants (Dossa & Coe, 2017; Horn & Schweppe, 2015), albeit seldom in contexts of short-term international mobility. Agency in contexts of transnational ageing includes devising strategies, manoeuvring (im)mobilities and mobilizing cultural, individual and family resources through which specific life and ageing trajectories are negotiated and achieved (Ciobanu et al., 2017).

Acts of agency and agential strategies, as understood in this article, encompass both embodied dimensions that shape individuals' capacity to act, and emplaced and circulating social, cultural, economic and political processes through which individuals' see their actions strengthened and/or constrained. Such a relational approach to agency – as socially and culturally constructed and constituted over the life course in relation to varying inequalities – allows us to focus on individual coping mechanisms but also, and especially, to consider the structural, organizational and legal framings that enable and restrict action and life possibilities (Horn & Schweppe, 2015). In this, it is vital to consider embodied dimensions such as class, gender, race, citizenship, ability and other geographical, cultural and identity elements that shape understandings of age(ing) and agency (Lamb, 2015; Näre et al., 2017). Equally important is to adopt a broader line of enquiry that goes beyond the borders of the nation-state and encompasses different forms of mobility.

A lens of agency has also been applied to understanding tactics and strategies of mobility in later life, whereby older individuals enact creative mobility strategies to enhance perceived wellbeing and improve everyday livelihoods (Sampaio, 2020; Treas, 2008; Wignall et al., 2019). Older adults are depicted as resourceful in the ways they cope with adversity and seize opportunities to enhance their quality of life by taking advantage, through transnational mobility, of gains afforded by income differentials. An extensive body of work has investigated the experiences of transnational migration and retirement among (grand)parents, their caregiving roles and support for their children's households overseas (Newendorp, 2020; Zhou, 2018), as well as the permanent international migration of mature-age adults for work (Lulle & King, 2016; Solari, 2018). What is missing is an analysis of older adults' short-term informal paid work experiences, while visiting their migrant children abroad, and how this understudied dimension advances current debates on transnational ageing.

Older adults' engagement in paid work until late in life can be understood in relation to increased longevity in possession of good or decent health which, in turn, creates opportunities to develop a broader set of roles and activities in older age. In this regard, understandings about 'what an ageing body can do' are socially and culturally embedded as individuals physically, psychologically and emotionally engage with their surroundings and redefine their embodied (ageing) subjectivities (Fox, 2005). In the specific context of Latin America, and Brazil in particular, the separation between 'active life' and 'retirement' as well as the notion of 'paid retirement' remains often elusive, and the state tends to play a less prominent role in providing for one's older age. Authors have also suggested that

the cultural importance attributed to Christian values such as ‘diligence’, ‘asceticism’ and ‘hard work’ can help explain a culture of activity and work until later stages of life (Leibing, 2005). In such contexts, it is therefore common to work well into later life.

The most typically stated reasons to continue working through older age are keeping daily routines and a time structure to the day, securing a stable income, which is especially important for individuals with a lower socio-economic status, and maintaining an overall sense of purpose in life. Furthermore, good health, flexible work arrangements, ability to control work times, motivation, and opportunities to take on paid work constitute important predictors of extended employment until later in life (Sewdas et al., 2017; Virtanen et al., 2014). Considering the experiences of immigrants’ older parents in the U.S., either permanently relocated to join family or temporarily visiting, Treas (2008) shows that a high level of control over working times and conditions was an essential factor for them to take on casual, informal jobs such as sewing at home, recycling aluminium cans, or babysitting for neighbours, as a strategy to earn some money. Building on the debates outlined above, the article is guided by two main research questions: How do ageing parents on a visitor (‘tourist’) visa take on short-term jobs? What makes ageing parents feel empowered by working while visiting their (grand) children in the U.S.?

## Research context

Emigration from Governador Valadares to the United States pulsates in the everyday life of the city. Governador Valadares is, as noted by other scholars, a longstanding hotspot of international migration and thus a meaningful setting to observe transnational family dynamics (Jorgensen et al., 2021). The high point of emigration to the United States can be traced back to the late 1970s and 1980s and to a context of a profound economic crisis in Brazil. These mobilities drew mainly on international connections forged with U.S. companies mining mica – a valuable mineral resource after the Second World War – and making other investments in the region (Siqueira, 2018). Through these earlier contacts, as well as middle-class student exchanges to learn English abroad, a migration chain was created and subsequently extended through family and friendship networks.

According to the last census data available, Governador Valadares has 263,689 inhabitants, making it the ninth largest city in the inland state of Minas Gerais (IBGE, 2010). Over the years, thousands of individuals officially left for the United States, but the numbers available are most likely an underestimation given the numbers of unreported migration taking place via Mexico. Given the challenging, and sometimes dangerous, nature of these migration journeys, migrants tend to be young, economically active individuals (20–40 years old; Siqueira, 2018). Despite mounting securitisation of the Mexico-United States border, with more people returning without being able to reach their final destination, and less favourable exchange rates from the U.S. dollar to the Brazilian real, existing social networks and widely reproduced stories of success abroad have crystallized a culture of migration in the region (Siqueira, 2018). Data from the Migration Policy Institute shows that 433,500 Brazilians lived in the United States as of 2019 (2015-2019). Among these, the same source estimated the total number of unauthorized Brazilian migrants in the country around 178,000 (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Migrants’ ageing parents tend to stay in Brazil, in some cases with the added responsibility of caring for grandchildren. Given the prolonged contexts of separation, where the



migrant offspring often find themselves undocumented for long periods, it is common that it is the ageing parents who travel to the United States, if granted a visitor ('tourist') visa. The process of applying for a visa was described by the ageing parents as lengthy, strenuous, and expensive, including long coach trips to the main Brazilian cities where U.S. consulates are located. It was common for my informants to see their visa application rejected the first time, wait several months, and then reapply (cf., Zhou, 2018). Since in many cases, the adult children were unable to travel due to their undocumented status, there was additional pressure on the ageing parents to get a visitor visa. In order to be granted one, which allows for a stay of up to 6 months, the informants had to provide detailed evidence of their assets in Brazil, namely owned properties and/or savings, proof of a state pension, if applicable, as well as any other obligations that indicated no intention to overstay their 'tourist' visa in the United States.<sup>2</sup> They were also required to purchase travel health insurance for senior citizens. The narrated family negotiations that took place across borders revealed the intricate entanglements and tensions between movement and stasis where new constellations of mobility and varying spacings/timings of (im)mobility (Colon, 2011) emerged as a result (see, also, Oosterbaan, 2014).

Despite the Brazilian state's recognition of the Statute for the Elderly (*Estatuto do Idoso*), which acts as an instrument to support and promote seniors' socio-economic rights and wellbeing (see, Neumann & Albert, 2018), state support often remains insufficient thus generating the need and/or desire to keep economically active for as long as possible in order to generate additional savings. In a rapidly ageing Brazil, however, data shows that opportunities for keeping active in the labour market later in life are unevenly concentrated on those with better qualifications (Wajnman et al., 2004). This broader backdrop, coupled with the predominantly lower-income background of the informants in Brazil, helps explain their willingness to take on short-term, informal jobs while visiting family abroad. Whilst lacking the financial resources, the informants strategically mobilized their transnational networks and social capital in order to make additional earnings that secured them and their households better living conditions back in Brazil. They voiced the significance of engaging in short-term work abroad as a result of an embodied cultural practice of working well into later life to secure more money and feel financially more secure and empowered in older age (which also meant alleviating adult children abroad from financial obligations), and a real economic need for making earnings that could help with unforeseen costs such as health treatments, medicines, or house repairs.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

The article draws on findings from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2019 with ageing Brazilian parents who remained in Brazil when their children emigrated to the United States. During this time, I spent time with and interviewed 33 ageing parents in Governador Valadares, Brazil.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were conducted by myself, in Portuguese, and with the help of a local key informant who acted as a trusted liaison. Building a trustworthy and open relationship with the informants took time, particularly when it came to speaking about sensitive topics such as economic precarity, the legal challenges faced by the children abroad or health-related concerns. In some cases, the interview only took place after several meetings and conversations about the purpose of the research. The interviews were conducted mainly at the interviewees' homes or trusted places such



as a family member's or a friend's home. The informants were mainly reached through common trusted networks and snowballing.

The interviewing process followed a life narrative approach that enabled considering ageing parents' historically and spatially situated accounts and subjectively constructed representations of social life, and family reconfigurations over time and space (Riley & Harvey, 2007). Such a methodological approach allows for 'a recollection about self, about relationships with others and a place, insights rarely provided in such depth by other methods' (Andrews et al., 2006, p. 170). The interviews covered a number of issues relating to the ageing parents' everyday lives, their children's migration, their own transnational mobility, care, and family negotiations. The ageing parents interviewed included 22 women, 5 men and 3 couples, and they were mostly aged 60 years old and above (average age of 71 years old). Despite their generally modest socio-economic backgrounds, which would position them among the Brazilian working classes, most had experienced some degree of financial relief – through remittances and their multiplying effects – resulting from their children's migration projects abroad. The majority benefited from some kind of state support or received a state pension. As previously noted, these assets proved key in formal terms for their visa applications, for they signalled that they had no intention to stay in the United States illegally.

The data collected was transcribed verbatim in the original language (Portuguese), coded and analysed according to main themes using NVivo 11. The identified themes were then carefully considered in relation to the literature. Relevant quotes focusing on the ageing parents' experiences of work outside the household while visiting their children abroad were translated into English. The analysis examines in detail the accounts of informants who vividly described their experiences of transnational mobility and proactively engaging in paid work. The writing process was conducted in a way that strove to capture the informants' narrated sense of resourcefulness and earnings during their extended visits abroad, and it developed in a continued dialogue between theories and the material collected in the field. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of the informants.

As I ethnographically illustrate in the next section, the experiences of short-term transnational mobility and informal paid work among Brazilian ageing parents to the United States are realized through specific configurations of time and (transnational) space, whereby they can realize their agency and improve livelihoods. In the following, I first consider ageing parents' short-term transnational mobility practices and how they articulate this in relation to the ageing body and subsequently elaborate on their experiences of short-term paid work, earnings abroad and the opportunities this generates.

## **Transnational mobility and the ageing body**

The last time I went to visit my daughter in the United States, I stayed for two months, but I wanted to stay longer. I always want to stay longer. It's difficult because my son here needs my help. But the longer I can stay, the more I can bring back too.

[...]

The first time I went to the United States I was very nervous, but when you go in a wheelchair they do all for you, they take you to the plane, they sit you, you don't have to worry. That's the good thing about being old. (laughs)

Júlia, whom I introduced at the beginning, was one of the first ageing parents to talk about her earnings abroad while visiting her daughter in the United States. She lived in an intergenerational household in the outskirts of Governador Valadares. Her eldest daughter, Bárbara, had left for the United States many years prior to help the family, who struggled to make ends meet, and to provide support for her disabled brother. Like many from this city, Bárbara entered the United States illegally through the Mexican border, which has encumbered her documentation process. She had been living abroad for almost 20 years and unable to visit family in Brazil. Instead, Júlia visited her once a year, or less frequently depending on other obligations. Cases such as this help explain why ageing parents were particularly keen to pursue a visitor visa strategy as a means to see their adult children who were undocumented and therefore unable to travel. Júlia's experience and opening quote to this article capture the nuances and intricacies of life course (im)mobilities, and the advantage older parents described having as aged, retired individuals applying for a visitor visa to the United States.

Like many Brazilian migrants in the United States, Bárbara worked as *faxineira* (housekeeper). When she visited, Júlia usually stayed for two to three months and, during that time, she rapidly realized that she could keep busy by taking on small jobs that granted additional earnings for herself and to help her family in Brazil. Instead of 'sitting at home' during the day, she started joining her daughter in her cleaning schedules, which in turn allowed her daughter to take on more homes and make bigger earnings. Some days of the week, she also babysat for (Brazilian) neighbours. While she initially did not anticipate to engage in informal work, her migration aspirations and the temporal horizon of her stay in the United States progressively adjusted as work opportunities unfolded.

As Júlia remarked, the fact that she was older gave her tranquillity when travelling abroad. Not only she could benefit from additional support (e.g., wheelchair service) that smoothed the travels in terms of logistics at the airport and language barriers, but she also recounted that it felt less 'threatening' to enter the United States as an older person. Her account suggested a consideration of the structures that constrain movement and the role played by the (ageing) body as it moved across borders. In the face of immigration restrictions, with which she was well acquainted through her daughter's migration experience, she found comfort in her (retired, abled) ageing body. In her understanding of the biopolitics of border crossings and normative views of the ageing body, she believed that her physically aged body was less likely to be regarded as a menace by border authorities, for it exhibited a less clear association with ('illegal') labour migration.

Like Júlia, other informants in Governador Valadares engaged in short-term paid work while visiting their (grand)children in the United States. Lucilene, 68 years old, told me about her experiences of transnational mobility to visit her (undocumented) daughter who was unable to visit her in Brazil: 'The last time I went, the only reason I didn't stay longer was that my husband didn't go. So, I only stayed for four months'. She was an immigrant in the United States herself for over 10 years, having left Brazil in the early waves of emigration of the 1980s. When she left for the United States, crossing the Mexico-United States border, she left behind a young daughter to be looked after by

her mother. When her daughter turned 16, she managed to bring her to the United States by using forged documents. As a result, Lucilene's daughter was never able to regularize her situation abroad. Lucilene returned to Brazil once her mother fell ill and needed to be cared for in the 1990s. More recently, she was finally able to apply for a visitor visa for the United States successfully. Having previously lived undocumented in the United States, she shared that being granted a tourist visa was '*um trabalho de Deus*' (a work of God).

Lucilene recalled her experience at the U.S. consulate, where during her interview she was asked if she intended to stay abroad permanently. She replied that she had her retirement pension and a home she had built in her home town, and thus no interest or motive to move abroad. Lucilene's plan was to see her daughter, whom she would not be able to meet in person otherwise. Once abroad, she also cherished the idea of taking on some short-term jobs to make additional savings that could add up to her and her husband's small pensions and, at the same time, relieve her daughter from financial obligations towards them. She usually stayed between two and four months, but the length of her stays were also dependent upon her husband, who preferred shorter visits. In her case, too, the temporal demarcations of her stays abroad were continuously reassessed and reworked as she pondered over and weighed different possibilities. On the one hand, the opportunity to spend more time with family abroad, take on more jobs and make more savings and, on the other, be considerate towards her husband's preference for shorter stays abroad and a quicker return to their routines back home.

By joining her daughter in her cleaning schedule, Lucilene could spend time with her, thus meeting emotional needs while simultaneously being monetarily proactive. Having been an entrepreneurial woman while an immigrant in the United States – she had her own food business and set up her own small daycare – she still had some contacts in the city and knew how the informal sector worked. While she shared feeling 'too old' to partner up for a business, she valued the possibilities that short-term trips abroad could afford in terms of moneymaking activities. The fact that Lucilene could make savings through her own work, improve her living conditions, and help other family members in Brazil, was particularly empowering in a period of life often associated with physical decline, inactivity and dependency.

I get there [to the U.S.], I can stay with my daughter, I can work, I like it there. People I used to work with when I lived there, they tell me 'Lucilene, let's put together a restaurant, this and that ...'. But, for that, I'm a bit tired ...

For Josiane, 65 years old, too, visits abroad opened up a transnational space of opportunity. Over the years, her children emigrated to the United States. Despite many decades abroad, some of them have never managed to get their U.S. documents and have thus been unable to travel to Brazil. Retired from her job as a janitor in a state school, Josiane and her husband spent a good part of their time in the *roça* (farm) where they owned a house and some land. Josiane, still feeling healthy and active, described travelling to see her children and grandchildren in the United States as essential. She recalled her visits to the U.S. consulate and how, after a detailed enquiry, the consular officer was convinced by her and her husband's retirement pensions and the fact that they owned a house and some land in Brazil. Josiane and her husband's positioning as older and retired was described by Josiane as an important enabling tool for short-term

transnational mobility and a way to bypass, if not overcome, the 'stuckness' of some of their adult children abroad.

Josiane was of the mindset that 'after undertaking such a long trip, you want to stay for as long as possible', and she often stayed for several months. Feeling restless indoors most of the time, taking care of her children's homes and grandchildren, she was keen to take up small paid jobs, such as babysitting or cleaning, that allowed her to regain a sense of purpose, keep active and, crucially, make some earnings. Thinking about the jobs she could perform while abroad, she quickly took action. She made acquaintances in the neighbourhood and strengthened ties with other Brazilian families living near her daughter. During their conversations, she emphasized that she was staying for a couple of months, mostly available, and keen to do some work.

The informants presented themselves as active social actors who proactively sought transnational mobility possibilities and resourcefully seized earning opportunities while abroad, taking advantage of these specific time-space arrangements and creating opportunities for themselves and their families. These accounts revealed ageing parents' resourcefulness and agency and reflected their determination to be successful in their visa applications and find paid jobs that allowed them to generate savings that improved everyday livelihoods and alleviated their children abroad from responsibilities towards family. In the next section, I explore in more detail ageing parents' short-term earnings and their empowering nature.

## Earnings abroad

And so, I stayed 5 months in this lady's home, looking after her baby ... well, I would do everything: cleaning, cooking, ironing, everything. We agreed on an amount and they paid me double. So then I bought the car you saw downstairs, it still smells brand new! I had the dream of buying a car, so I worked hard, and I bought it. It's good for us to go after a dream, accomplish something. With money from here, it would have taken me a long time before I could afford a car.

For Josiane, above, staying with her family abroad for several months, only taking care of her children's homes and looking after grandchildren after school, was unimaginable. She shared that after a couple of weeks, she felt restless, and through making acquaintances in the neighbourhood, she found a job as a babysitter for a Brazilian neighbour. She stressed that besides babysitting, she diligently cooked and cleaned. As a result of her commitment and eagerness, in the end, the couple paid her twice as much. The couple was keen to hire her on a more permanent basis, but her 'tourist' visa restrictions would not allow her to stay longer. This acted as a reminder of the temporariness of her stays and existence in the United States and illuminated the limits of her presence abroad. While this was not a sudden revelation or a contested reality, it signalled the very concrete limits to her migration aspirations and that, according to immigration law, her body was unmistakably located within the Brazilian nation-state.

Josiane's experience also showed how she mobilized social and cultural resources as a form of capital across space and time, taking advantage of opportunities of meso (e.g., trusted ethnic networks) and macro (e.g., the informality of the labour market) timescales. What was also observable in her narrative was a sense of achievement and empowerment

resulting from being able, through her *own* work, to purchase a car for herself. The fact that such achievement was accomplished with 'U.S. money' (worth more than 'money from here', to quote Josiane's words) made this experience of short-term work particularly enabling and rewarding. In a sense, then, this was a special form of income and thus different, in its meaning and significance, from remittances sent by the adult children abroad.

Similar to Josiane's case, most mothers travelling abroad engaged in work niches such as babysitting and housekeeping, sectors in which their daughters worked and had established networks. These were jobs that did not require language skills and could be performed within the house or vicinity (cf., Treas, 2008). They were also preferred for their flexible schedules and inherent informality. In addition, there was a legal convenience to these arrangements. Because the migrant offspring were often their own bosses, this allowed them to easily incorporate their mothers into cleaning schedules, thus helping to manage the legal risks associated with taking on (informal) paid jobs during their short-term 'tourist' visits. Drawing on interviews and everyday observations, three main reasons can be given to explain a gendered pattern wherein mothers on a visitor visa tended to more frequently take on short-term work: i) jobs such as cleaning and babysitting tend to be highly gendered and mostly performed by women (see, Martes, 2011); ii) short-term jobs available to men such as construction and landscaping require a higher level of outdoor exposure and tend to be more bodily demanding and potentially hazardous, and iii) men were generally more zealous, in theirs and their wives' accounts, about their own space and routines in Brazil and less keen to spend extended periods in their adult children's homes. Hence, it was common that the ageing (grand)mothers travelled alone, without their husbands, to spend longer periods with the family and, during this time, took the opportunity to engage in short-term paid work. When the (grand)father joined, the trips were typically shorter and more focused on family activities.

Equally, in Júlia's experience, short-term trips to the United States combined the family purpose of providing emotional support for her daughter living on her own in the United States and the goal of making earnings while abroad. She did so by joining her daughter's cleaning schedule in private homes. It was through a close, trusted network abroad that she had access to short-term job opportunities which allowed her to spend time with her daughter, while also making some savings for herself and supporting her family in Brazil. Júlia, who received only a small state pension, described these short-term earnings as meaningful and empowering because they helped improve her and her family's lives and generated an increased sense of financial security and wellbeing.

The money I make there is worth more. I can afford better physiotherapy for my son, so that my daughter doesn't have to worry too much. I can make savings for food, medicines, anything we need to fix around the house.

As exemplified by Júlia's case, remaining economically active revealed concerns about one's livelihood, but it also meant relieving family members abroad from financial obligations towards the family in the home country. As illustrated here, notions of wellbeing were typically framed more broadly within the context of the (extended) family rather than focused on individual achievements. Travelling abroad and being able to work meant attaining spatial and, crucially, social mobility as intertwined dimensions. As

information about work opportunities abroad circulated transnationally and translocally between families in Brazil, so did aspirational narratives such as Raquel's, in her early 60s:

Last year we went to the consulate. We gathered all the papers, but the visa was denied. 'It wasn't God's will, not yet', I said. We speak every day with our son, and he's already talking about us trying to get the visa again, but this time in São Paulo.

If we manage to get to the United States, my husband is going to work. As for me, I'm still not sure if I'm going to work there. I'll see once I get there. If we work, that means we can come back and improve our home here.

Raquel's wishful account and active pursuit of a travelling 'tourist' visa reveals how short-term work possibilities afforded abroad can encourage transnational mobility in later life. Her story and proactive attitude also shows that economic reasoning does not act alone. Instead, it gains shape in relation to the fixity of the adult children's lives abroad and extended household livelihood needs and strategies. A common denominator to these experiences is the ageing parents' agential strategies. Through their acts of agency, they resourcefully seized short-term, informal work opportunities abroad that enabled them to improve living conditions for themselves and their families.

## Conclusion

The experiences of ageing parents who take on short-term paid jobs while on a visitor ('tourist') visa to see family abroad reveals distinct intersections of the temporal and the spatial. These time-space configurations encompass *temporariness* and *transnational spaces of opportunity*. Temporariness marks the limits of the stays abroad and concretely defines the ageing parents' existence and aspirations in the United States. The creation of transnational spaces of opportunity through work set these older parents apart from 'tourists' who spend their time abroad in leisure and household activities, despite sharing the same legal category. These intersections of time and space illuminate, moreover, the complex entanglements between 'stuckness' and movement across generations, where the immobility of younger generations co-produces the mobility of older parents.

A spatio-temporal framework is productive in illustrating how migrants' temporal and spatial journeys take shape in relation to their ability to mobilize resources and translate these into different forms of capital. Such complex spatio-temporalities thread through micro (e.g., one's biological age), meso (e.g., family and other trusted networks), and macro (e.g., migration regimes) dimensions. This is observable, for example, in Josiane's eagerness to make Brazilian acquaintances in the neighbourhood, which allowed her to find short-term work and later be able to afford a better car for herself; or in Júlia's ability to conveniently join her daughter in her cleaning schedules, which in turn allowed her to make savings that can finance better physiotherapy options for her disabled son. This was equally patent in Raquel's eagerness to travel abroad, thinking about the short-term work prospects and positive financial outcomes that such a trip might afford. And while the temporal horizons of these stays abroad were continuously reassessed and new demarcations were created and negotiated, these women were also routinely reminded of the temporariness of their presence in the United States and the limits to their ambitions abroad.

But how do ageing parents who are on a visitor visa take on short-term jobs? As the article shows, older parents were often keen to pursue a visitor visa strategy as a means to see their adult children who are undocumented and therefore unable to travel. Such life course (im)mobilities and the advantage older parents described having as aged, retired individuals applying for a visitor visa to the United States were both significant in these spatio-temporal arrangements. Moreover, because the migrant offspring abroad were often their own bosses, this allowed them to easily incorporate their mothers into cleaning schedules, thus helping manage the legal risks associated with taking on (informal) paid jobs during their short-term 'tourist' visits. This also helps explain the deeply gendered and generational dimension of these accounts. On the one hand, the jobs taken abroad were typically attainable for women, as they could easily join their daughters' cleaning schedules or help with babysitting and daycare activities. On the other hand, such migration projects could more easily be realized through intergenerational support, namely economic remittances that over time allowed the ageing parents to attain a better chance of being granted a visitor visa.

The second question this article attended to is what makes ageing parents feel empowered about working during family visits overseas. This is revealed, in their narratives, as connected to i) being able to afford their own trip and make additional savings to improve one's life and ii) help family and relieve the offspring abroad from financial responsibilities towards older generations and the family in Brazil. These actions are especially empowering in later stages of life because they challenge stereotypes about aged bodies as passive or in decay. In this regard, then, this money was perceived differently from other sources of income (e.g., economic remittances from adult children) because it resulted from their *own* ability and resourcefulness to use their *own* labour. Of course, the question remains on how these mobile trajectories will evolve in the future as the ageing parents grow older and potentially more dependent, and what other constellations of mobility and time-space formations may develop as a result. What did not transpire from the informants' accounts was the adverse or depleting effects of this short-term overseas work. In this regard, while migration research has extensively documented the negative qualities of this type of work for other age cohorts, much less has been written about older migrants and virtually nothing about visiting older adults. This is a topic that compels further research.

## Notes

1. Data on Brazilian undocumented migrants in the United States tend to vary greatly according to source, with the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimating significantly higher numbers than the American Community Survey.
2. In this regard, scholars have emphasized the 'chronopolitics' inherent in transnational mobility, whereby time is used as a political device to manage, control and keep at bay migrant bodies deemed undesirable by the state (Merla et al., 2020). In particular, studies have documented the challenges faced by older (grand)parents trying to reunite permanently with their (grand) children abroad (Braedley et al., 2021). By travelling as 'tourists', Brazilian ageing parents circumvented some of the challenges associated with permanent migration, such as sponsoring.
3. It is important to note here that there are, of course, multiple risks associated with taking on short-term jobs under a visitor 'tourist' visa. These include vulnerability regarding legal status,



informality, and health and safety in the face of an injury or accident during work. Whereas this article does not wish to downplay the depleting sides of work (in older age) or the legal blurriness of taking on short-term jobs during visits, its focus is on the positive and empowering nature of these actions as shared by the interviewees.

4. The data analysed in this paper is part of a larger research project which also included ethnographic research with Brazilian migrants in the United States.

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