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Rondônia, Brazil to New Orleans, USA: Post-Katrina New Orleans as a Brazilian "*el dorado*"

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In the spring of 2006 I drove over to visit a group of Brazilian construction workers from Rondônia who had relocated to New Orleans (via Boston) after Hurricane Katrina. They had come for work opportunities, and that evening they were relaxing in their backyard after a hard day's work. I had met them through my Portuguese translation work in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, which had both destroyed the city and shifted the city demographics substantially since many immigrant workers relocated there to work in reconstruction. When I arrived at the house of these immigrants, they were eager to share with me some of the recent adventures they had had while exploring the area around New Orleans. The previous weekend they had decided to go fishing in the swamplands surrounding the city since fishing had been one of their favorite pastimes in Rondônia. The group commented on how the rivers and swamps of the Mississippi Delta had reminded them of being back on the Guaporé River close to their hometown of Colorado do Oeste. I looked in amazement at the pictures that they had taken in which I saw these young men (mostly in their 20s) posing with an alligator that one of them had caught on a dare from the rest of the group. They had contemplated taking this alligator home to eat, they told me, but then they thought better of it, since there might be a large fine for alligator hunting without a license (not to mention jail time). They opened up the refrigerator to show me that they had come back instead with twelve catfish.

The above vignette highlights the emergence of rural Brazilian immigration to the United States and asks us to explore the local complexities and the regional diversity of the Brazilian migrant community. This post-Katrina Brazilian demographic is one that differs drastically from the first wave of Brazilians in the 1980s and 1990s coming from relatively urban areas of Brazil such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. This anecdote also illustrates the complexities of immigration from the rural Amazon region of Brazil. Not only were these young men fishing without a license, but they even caught an alligator. In other parts of the country, this act would most certainly have got them in trouble with legal authorities, but in the chaos of post-Katrina reconstruction, monitoring the waterways was the least of the problems for New Orleans.

The migration chain from Rondônia to the United States is quite unexpected since the state of Rondônia in the far western corner of the Brazilian Amazon would seem to be a region too isolated and disconnected from world markets to be a hub for an international migration chain. However, the failure of proper infrastructure under a governmental plan to integrate Rondônia into the national economy through settlement resulted in both massive unemployment and devastating deforestation in the region. The subsequent international response to Rondônia's rapid rates of deforestation spurred migratory shifts for communities in the region. Residents from the town of Colorado do Oeste, Rondônia began to look at the United States as a possible migrant destination when it became obvious that Rondônia would not offer the lucrative farming opportunities that migrants had hoped for upon their government-sponsored migration from Southern Brazil (which happened as recently as the 1960s and 1970s). By the 1990s, migrants to Rondônia were already looking elsewhere for economic opportunities. The international attention given to environmental degradation, the lack of productive markets for the pioneer settlers who resettled there from Southern Brazil, and subsequent policies to save the rainforest (at the detriment of farming opportunities) were all motivating factors in an undocumented immigration network that linked Colorado do Oeste, Rondônia to Boston and finally to New Orleans, USA in the early 2000s.

The Brazilian state of Rondônia has the largest tract of tropical rain forest in the world with more than 3.8 million square kilometers of forest and a wealth of mineral resources (Browder 1994: 45). One of the most isolated and least-developed regions of Brazil, Rondônia is also the state that has experienced the most rapid rates of deforestation (Pacheco 2009: 1340). So rapid is its deforestation that it came to the attention of international NGOs and the World Bank, who lobbied for intervention in public policy and settlement operations that were environmentally and socially more sound. These environmental protection interventions changed settlement

patterns in the region. Diminishing opportunities for settlers had the unforeseen effects of increasing an undocumented immigration chain to the United States.

From Southern Brazil to Rondônia

The history of rapid immigration to the Rondônia region began with the change of the federal capital from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília in 1960 and the federal government's implementation of active policies of economic development, occupation, and integration of lesser populated regions during the period of military rule. Occupation of the Amazon also coincided with changes in southern Brazil. Brazilian agricultural exports at the time depended on the production of traditional tropical cash crops, most coming from the southern region. Because the prices of these crops had been declining since World War II, in the mid-1960s the military government initiated a series of rural credit programs to stimulate the production of nontraditional export crops, especially soybeans and wheat. Corporate agribusiness was favored for such projects, which were accompanied by land consolidation and government-sponsored modernization programs involving new machinery. This led to the breakdown in traditional tenant/sharecropper arrangements in the agricultural heartland in South and Southeastern Brazil. With the governmental initiatives to integrate the Amazon into nationalistic projects and the diminishing prospects for southern agricultural workers, policy makers began to look to the Amazon region for purposes of economic exploration, specifically mining, cattle raising, and cash crop farming. The Amazon was (and continues to be) a region of low population that lacked the economic infrastructure of the South. Thus, the price of land was significantly lower than the rest of the country. For potential migrants coming from southern Brazil, migration to the Amazon was looked upon as a new beginning, and this optimism helped integrate the Amazon into the national economic plan and into the national imaginary during the years of the military dictatorship (1964-1985).

Browder writes that

the settlement of Rondônia was the historical artifact of the military authoritarian regime's efforts to modernize agricultural production in Brazil's heartland. By shifting the family farm from the South to the Northwest frontier, the government reckoned it could stimulate cash crop production for export markets and food crop production for domestic markets, while avoiding the political unpleasanties associated with genuine agrarian reform. (Browder 1994: 62)

In order to facilitate migration, Brazilian officials began the construction of the Transamazonian Highway (BR-364), which was set up to link the Atlantic coast to the Peruvian border. In terms of colonization, the goal was to settle 100,000 families (around 500,000 people) in five years along the Transamazonian Highway (Stewart 1994: 13). The project was slow to take off, mainly because of the federal government's failure to provide the proper titles for land, avenues to secure loans, or a proper road maintenance system. Since these migrants were moving to previously unpopulated areas of the country, they were relying heavily on governmental support to help create the necessary infrastructure to establish towns and settlements.

When the section of the highway linking Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso, to Porto Velho in Rondônia, was finally finished, it was a major turning point in immigration to the Rondônia region because it allowed access to the state throughout the year (Mahar and Schneider 1994: 162). The number of farmers and the population in Rondônia overall, which had been the second lowest in the country only a few years earlier (FIBGE 1989),¹ suddenly rose from 69,792 in 1960 to 111,064 in 1970 (FIBGE 1991). These were mainly immigrants from Southern Brazil hoping that the Amazon region would offer new opportunities for raising cattle and possibilities for expanding ranches located in the more densely populated southern states. By 1980, an estimated 2.5 million displaced workers left Paraná due to shifts in agricultural production management. (Andersen 2002: 15)

In December 1980, the World Bank announced its decision to finance the paving of the Cuiabá-Porto Velho highway as part of a larger regional development package aimed at promoting the "orderly" socio-economic development of the region, together with the protection of the physical environment and local Amerindian communities. In order to accomplish this, the World Bank also agreed to co-finance the Northwest Region Development Plan (POLONOROESTE) that sought to populate the states of Rondônia and the tangential portion of Mato Grosso. POLONOROESTE was put in place to try to "help bring order to the large, spontaneous migratory flow to the Northwest and [to increase] the productivity, incomes and social welfare of the region's present and future population [through] the promotion of sustainable farming systems based mainly on tree crops" (World Bank 1987: i). With the paving of the road, immigration to Rondônia began to increase at a rate that the Brazilian government had not foreseen, and these new settlement communities had no planned infrastructure to handle the number of arriving migrants. More settlers came than the government had expected, and many who had arrived with the promise that they would be granted land did not receive their allotted tract due to improper land titles or bureaucratic inefficiency.

Economic development in the Amazon region tends to be pursued through forest conversion, logging trees in order to open pastures for cattle ranching and fields for agricultural production. This sequence of forest conversion is common within pioneer frontier regions of the Brazilian Amazon because rapid conversion tends to result in immediate economic returns for settlers. However, this economic development is also coupled with the most rapid rates of deforestation. Deforestation, in turn, tends to result in boom and bust patterns of development.

In a study of 286 municipalities in the Brazilian Amazon in different stages of deforestation, researchers revealed boom-bust patterns in the levels of human development in relationship to forest conversion. The Human Development Index (HDI) was calculated by looking at rates of life expectancy (based on life expectancy at birth), literacy (based on literacy rate and school enrollment), and standard of living (based on per capita income). Plotting the HDI against the extent of deforestation in each region, revealed that communities usually saw a large increase in their HDI rates immediately following initial stages of deforestation (and settlement) and then a steady decline of HDI as the frontier settlement began to advance and deforestation reached active levels. (Rodrigues 2009: 1435)

The increase in HDI in early stages of settlement makes sense as people capitalize on the newly available natural resources (land, timber, minerals) and have more access to markets through development in new roads that are associated with frontier expansion. The bust that follows usually reflects the exhaustion of these same natural resources paired with unsustainable increases in human population to the region motivated by the initial good fortune of pioneer settlers. The easiest and cheapest way to justify land ownership in pioneer communities is by converting the land into pastures because pasture is less costly than establishing cash crops. (Pacheco 2009: 1338) The soil in the Brazilian Amazon also loses productivity for agricultural reproduction at a quicker rate than farmers and ranchers had anticipated.² By the early 1990s, more than 75% of the land that had been deforested in the region had already been abandoned (Rodrigues 2009: 1436). Thus, forest conversion in the region was shown to be an unsustainable way of improving human development and settlement over time. As the local economies in the region made a rapid downturn when the initial logging and ranching reached saturation, so did the patterns of settlement and migration to the region.

With the decisions of the World Bank to monitor settlement by implementing policies for the protection of the natural environment and the local Amerindian communities, the rhetoric surrounding migration to Rondônia began to change. The government had once told migrants to clear land for agriculture and cattle raising, but by the 1990s the new policies told these same settlers that there was a percentage of their land that had to remain natural, undeveloped forest. Many people who had moved and bought land before the World Bank became involved were asked to replant trees on their properties.

While towns sprang up at a rapid pace with new immigrants eager to work in the lumber, ranching, and agricultural industries, the official policies surrounding these industries had changed, offering fewer opportunities and more monitoring of land tracts. There were more people than productive land available, causing high rates of unemployment in the region. In southern Rondônia, this rapid progression of settlement boom followed by economic bust became a motivating factor for settlers to try their luck in the United States after their ranching and/or agricultural pursuits in the region failed. Even though Rondônia would seem to be an isolated region for sending immigrants to the United States, in truth, policies encouraging deforestation, which are linked to international markets, and subsequent policies to save the rainforest spurred contact with world economic and political systems, and these policies created contact and motivation for migrants to begin to look internationally for economic opportunities.

Colorado do Oeste, Rondônia

Colorado do Oeste is a city in Southern Rondônia close to the Mato Grosso border. The municipality of Colorado do Oeste was only founded in 1973 and it wasn't recognized as an official city by law until 1981. It is about one and a half hours by bus from Vilhena, the first major city encountered when entering Rondônia from Mato Grosso.³ Like most settlements in the Amazon region, Colorado is an agricultural city with many immigrants from Southern Brazil, mainly Paraná, who had come to Colorado when the timber industry was flourishing in Rondônia. After the trees had been cleared, the region became a center for cattle farming, soy, coffee, and rice farms.

Most of the settlers to Colorado arrived after 1970 with the development of the road system between Cuiabá and Porto Velho. During the 1970s and 1980s in the municipality of Colorado do Oeste, colonists settled on lots of 50 to 100 hectares when it became the focus of colonization efforts. (Brown 2005: 98) Immigrants came seeking land promised to them by the government under the Institution of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (*Instituto de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (INCRA)), which developed a set of settlement projects to populate the Amazon region and prepare it for agricultural work.⁴ In order to carry out economic development in this region, INCRA sold these 50 to 100 hectare lots to farmers at a minimal cost payable over 20 years with an initial 4-year grace period

where no payments were necessary.

In total, INCRA only absorbed 7,839 families, but this number is not a clear indicator of the number of migrants to the region. Estimation of rates of migration into the Amazon is extremely difficult; unofficial migration was encouraged because it was hoped that the “trickle-down” effects would ensure that the supporting industries, services, and commerce would flourish around the favored target sectors of agriculture (Andersen 2002: 15). However, there was little infrastructure and few start-up funds available for the recently relocated migrants, and these communities began to look towards other markets to find necessary resources.

Although Colorado do Oeste was only founded in 1981, as early as the 1990s, the children of pioneer migrants began to express frustration with settlement plans because their parents had been given land and told that if they did not use the land to its fullest potential by converting it into pastures or agricultural plots, then they would not receive their proper land titles. Then, only 10 years later, they were told that they would be fined if they converted all of this land to pasture or agricultural fields. Thus, the new policies asked settlers to replant trees on the very same plots that, only a decade earlier, they had been encouraged to clear. One of the unforeseen consequences of these policy changes was the creation of migratory chains where the children of pioneers set off temporarily to other locations to find necessary funds to begin or maintain family investments in Colorado since the replanting policies (and often the fertility of the soil in the region) often had left the family farms in debt before the local settlement of Colorado could even be well established. At its height, in 1981, Colorado had an estimated 53,000 people, but by 2006 the number of people in Colorado had decreased to 19,000. While some of the migrants moved to other areas in the region, following opportunities in the lumber or cattle industry, a large portion of young adults in the town began to think that the most profitable place to find a prosperous income was by following an ever-growing undocumented migration chain to the United States.

Migration from Colorado do Oeste to the United States

The migration chain from Colorado, which began in the 1990s and took off in the early 2000s, first led immigrants to the Boston region. Boston had become the largest community of Brazilians in the United States by 2005. Cristina Braga Martes notes that there are several reasons for the large community of Brazilians there: The immigration network to Boston can be traced to a town in Minas Gerais called Governador Valadares where significant numbers of citizens have at least one family member living in the US. Valadares migration to Boston is often explained through the context of World War II when American mining companies based out of Boston were operating in the Valadares region. After the war ended, American workers for the Morrison mining company returned to Boston and took their domestic servants with them, beginning a migration chain. Along with the mines, American companies came to Valadares buying and reselling semi-precious stones. Through these business operations, Brazilians became aware of the money that could be made by linking into US markets. (Martes 2000: 61-62)

The extensive network of Brazilians in Boston (as well as an established Portuguese community with services already available in the Portuguese language) meant that new migrants to the area would have a support network upon arrival. The chain from Colorado to Boston followed in the footsteps of these earlier immigrants from Minas Gerais. *Atravessadores*⁵ working in the illegal migration ring, who had once worked mainly within the state of Minas, began canvassing in other regions of Brazil, making contacts and visits and promoting travel packages for crossing illegally into the United States from the economically precarious region of Rondônia. Discounts were even given to those who could organize a group of potential migrants ready to make the voyage (Valdir 12 February 2009).

My contact with immigrants from Colorado did not begin in Boston, but in New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans in 2005, a group of recently arrived migrants from Colorado decided to relocate to New Orleans from Boston with the hopes that the hurricane damage would offer abundant opportunities for construction work. For those who migrated right after the storm, the opportunities in reconstruction offered economic opportunities far beyond what was available in the saturated immigrant labor network in Boston. Most Colorado immigrants who arrived in New Orleans in 2005 were able to take advantage of the fact that they were pioneers in a region where the local population had evacuated. In the reconstruction economy, Brazilian immigrants often earned enough money to attain their pre-migration financial goals relatively quickly, and the majority of those from Colorado had returned home by 2009.

In many ways, the stories of immigrants who relocated to New Orleans are similar to those of migrants who remained in Boston, with the difference being that those pioneers to New Orleans were able to accomplish financial goals at a faster rate than they had expected because of their work in post-Katrina reconstruction. Because of the post-Katrina environment they created a bond with the city of New Orleans rather than specifically with a Brazilian enclave as had occurred in places such as Boston. New Orleans post-Katrina became imagined as an immigrant *e/*

Dorado, though there was actually only a small window of opportunity in New Orleans accessed by only a few resourceful pioneers. A large percentage of migrants from Colorado were in this group.

The immigrants to New Orleans whom I interviewed in Colorado are children of the first settlers to the Rondônia region. That is, their parents had moved to Colorado from the South (Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, and Santa Catarina) in search of agricultural land to start a new life in the 1970s or later. There were two ways in which public land in Colorado could pass into private ownership: *licitações* (large contracts to private owners) and selling small plots to colonists in government-sponsored settlement areas (in Rondônia colonists had a five years grace period and a 6% interest rate on the repayment of these government loans).

There were people who came to Colorado hoping to receive a plot of land for farming, but they found that the allotted plots of land had already been given. Or, they had a plot of land, but were now being asked to reforest a portion of the land as part of environmental rehabilitation projects. Ibrahim, the son of cattle farmers who relocated from Boston to New Orleans in 2005 said, "People who cut down trees here in Colorado were seen as heroes at one point. But now all the government talks about is reforestation" (Ibrahim 28 January 2009). Like Ibrahim, in frustration, many children of the first settlers to Colorado decided to go to the United States. In my interviews with residents of Colorado who had decided to emigrate to the United States, the "fever of immigration," as it was referred to by immigrants themselves, was self-reported to be related to the policies put in place by the World Bank to protect the environment and stop deforestation. The current environmental law states that 80% of each property should be set aside as legal forest reserves, yet these policies are weakly enforced. The repercussions were the emergence of a black market to falsify the necessary paperwork for settlers to escape the fine (Margulis 2004: 44) and a black market of undocumented immigration to the United States.

Cultures of Migration

Migration from Colorado to the United States happened in the context of a culture of migration in Brazil that hit its peak in 2005. The border crossing experience itself had become mythical in many of these rural communities, especially as the underground economy of migration grew. The most common method of entry among the first Brazilian immigrants to the US, those who came in the 1990s and before, had been by overstaying a tourist visa. When talking about methods of immigration for the Brazilian community during the 1990s one Brazilian migrant commented on the 1994 World Cup in the United States as also being of paramount importance. "Many Brazilians obtained visas and then they never left. These people then established connections and helped other friends and families come over" (Fabio 25 Oct. 2006). But with increased difficulty in obtaining a tourist visa, more and more Brazilians began choosing to make the journey through Mexico.

In the early 2000s, it became difficult for many Brazilians to convince U.S. officials that they had sufficient funds to vacation in the United States, thus tourist visas have been much harder to obtain. This caused an increase in illegal immigration across the Mexican border as well as through islands in the Caribbean (Moeller 2007). The events of Sept. 11, 2001, also made it much harder for Brazilians to obtain tourist visas, causing more Brazilians to choose the route to the United States through Mexico and making it more difficult for them to move back and forth between countries (Margolis 2008: 1). Even though it became more difficult and riskier to cross, the number of Brazilians detained on the Mexican border rose from 500 in 1999 to more than 8,616 in 2004 (Department of Homeland Security Yearbook of Immigration Statistics). In 2005, this number quadrupled, with the number of Brazilians trying to cross the border then estimated at around 30,000 (Margolis 2008: 4, "Com América" 2009). Brazilians were recorded as the largest and fastest-growing immigrant group detained at the Mexican-U.S. border in 2005, other than Mexicans (Hay 2007). This is quite noteworthy since this immigration occurred during the optimistic Lula years of national economic "boom" for Brazil, suggesting a significant discrepancy between this national economic experience and that of rural communities in Brazil's interior.

From March 14 to November 5, 2005, Brazilian TV Globo aired a *telenovela* called *América*, which focused on immigration (both legal and illegal) to the United States. This *telenovela*, as a cultural space where pressing national issues enter into discourse in the realm of popular culture, highlighted the trend of increased Brazilian immigration from rural communities in Brazil to the U.S. and perhaps even transformed undocumented immigration into something more tangible and possible for Brazilians. This happened not because the *telenovela* glorified undocumented life in the U.S., but simply because it highlighted that it was a route that many Brazilians had opted to take, revealing the increased culture of migration in Brazil and the possibility of finding a Brazilian support network upon migrating. Even as the difficulty of immigration increased, so did the number of people who wanted to do it. And the stories that people continued to tell one another about crossing the border illustrated how the migration corridor itself became reimagined as an adventurous rite of passage in certain communities.

Return immigrants would provide stories of their successful employment opportunities in the US, often exaggerating the truth or hiding the hardships involved in living clandestinely. Young people in sending

communities would then be encouraged to follow in their footsteps. Crossing the border and being able to endure the hard conditions also became seen as admirable qualities within the community. The experience was often the first time that young men and women would be living on their own, setting their own rules and managing their own households and work life. Within cultures of migration, these were all markers of the most adventurous and successful members of the community. The myth-making and adrenaline involved in crossing the border and the ability to share those experiences with a *communitas* of other Brazilians who also went through this crossing instilled a further sense of group identity.

A “culture of migration” can become so pervasive in a community that it turns into a common aspect of local culture, engrained in everyday community life and decision-making. The stories of migration are similar: Someone knew someone who had prospered by going to the United States. Witnessing the success of past immigrants motivated the next generation to make the journey. These stories reinforced the belief that, upon arrival in the United States, immigrants would encounter a rich and developed country where anything is possible; these imaginings permeated an entire generation of young people that decided to migrate as sojourners from communities such as Colorado, with the thought of one day returning home.

In towns in Brazil with strong cultures of migration, local infrastructure begins to depend on the continuation of transnational flows of people to and from the US. It is not surprising that within these communities, there are often public officials and high-ranking members of the community involved in the migration process because it is both powerful and lucrative to be an enabler of migrant mobility. In the town of Colorado do Oeste, for example, the *atravessador*, the trafficker who set up “packages” for illegal immigration through Mexico in 2008, was the cousin of the mayor of Colorado. The *atravessador* before that had been a local schoolteacher. Having prominent community members, especially those linked to local government, involved in illegal immigration rings to the US speaks to the fact that there are major economic benefits at the municipal level to having a percentage of the town living abroad. These economic benefits also begin to change the local geography of the town.

Colorado do Oeste’s Geographic Landscape

As you walk through downtown Colorado, it is easy to see the influence that money from the United States has had on the town. By looking at the immigrants who lived in New Orleans, we can get a picture of the importance of US dollars on the local economy. Markinhos and his family own the largest general store in downtown Colorado. Markinhos spent three years in New Orleans and two years in Boston. His migration decision was a family venture. The money that he earned in New Orleans allowed his family to open a supermarket. He merged this supermarket with his father’s smaller general store, so now the family has the largest general store in a prime location, right at the central point for the bus and taxi stops on the main drag.

Ibrahim, another immigrant who spent three years in New Orleans and six months in Boston, owns the largest event-planning business in Colorado. It is also the largest liquor store in town. His store is well organized, even importing some beers that had become favorites among Brazilian immigrants in the United States such as Heineken and Bud Light. Ibrahim invested \$150,000 in his store. He reports that \$100,000 of that investment he earned through his time living in New Orleans. The remaining \$50,000 he took out as a loan. (Ibrahim 28 January 2009) Marcelene and Nego invested their money earned in New Orleans into a corner store and ice cream shop. All of these new business owners expressed the conviction that if they had not gone to the United States then it would have been impossible for them to get the necessary capital to open their businesses.

In addition to owning small businesses, return immigrants from New Orleans in Colorado work in both agriculture and the local government. Fernando invested money in a herd of cattle after 3 years living in New Orleans. However, the policies surrounding land use in Colorado have become too costly for him and he has decided to relocate his family and his herd to Mato Grosso do Sul in a ranching town where his wife grew up. Gabriel invested in milking cows, though he feels skeptical about whether this investment is practical in the long term. At the time of this interview in 2009, he was considering a second trip to the United States to get more money to buy more cows. Reggiano works as a private lender after one year in Boston and 4 years in New Orleans, using his money to provide loans with interest to other people in Colorado. Many of these loans are given to ranchers and farmers in the region. It is significant to note that immigrants who moved abroad and reinvested in farming endeavors still see agriculture as a precarious livelihood. Small farmers are transitioning out of agriculture, and land is being consolidated for corporate owned soy farming.

Immigration to the US also works as a way for immigrants in service sectors to develop a nest egg. Vaquerim, who immigrated to the US in 2004 and then back to Colorado in 2008, works for the city electrical company and has a portion of his earnings saved in the bank as part of his retirement money. He says, “Life for me has not changed much since my time in the US. I just satisfied my curiosity of going there” (Vaquerim 4 February 2009). He has

returned to work for the same electrical company that he worked for when he left. He also does construction jobs on the side, utilizing building skills he learned in New Orleans. He reports that he is still very frugal with money in the same way that he was before immigrating, and he illustrated this point by mentioning that he did not even buy a new car upon returning home to Brazil. This has allowed him to have extra money to invest in needed family expenses. The family no longer passes months in which they feel unsure about making all their monthly bill payments, as they had before Vaquerim went to the US. Migration, thus, brought him a sense of security, and the practical skills that he learned in reconstruction allowed him to expand his construction business in Colorado.

Orlando works as a public official in the sewage and water board for the government of Colorado, but he was able to pay off his house and fund his daughter's college expenses with the money earned in the US. Orlando's migration story is interesting because he is in his 60s and does not fit the profile of the average immigrant, who is typically young and hoping to begin a new life. He is also unusual because of the fact that he went straight from Colorado to New Orleans in 2005. Orlando decided to move to New Orleans when he began to accrue a lot of personal debt after buying a house and sending his children through college. He realized that in his previous job in Colorado, there would have been no way to pay off this debt, so he asked for two years hiatus from his job, paid the \$10,000 coyote fee, and went to the United States. Orlando's reasons for going were so that he could essentially "save" his old life that he could not support on the salary that he earned as a public official in Rondônia. He arrived in the United States on September 14, 2005, about 15 days after Hurricane Katrina. Friends told him that there was a lot of work to be done in New Orleans, so he went straight there where he was oriented to the United States by friends from Colorado who had already arrived in New Orleans. He first stayed in Motel Six, financed by an American construction company in charge of rebuilding Tulane University, while he and his friends worked on the repainting of college buildings. In the two years that he was in New Orleans, he earned enough to pay off his debts of about R\$25,000 from Brazil (around US\$12,000) as well as his US\$10,000 coyote fee.

Colorado residents have used their migration opportunity as a way to secure a livelihood that they would have been unable to attain had they remained solely within their communities in Rondônia. Migration from the Rondônia region has been so prevalent that many of the local farms and businesses have been financed with money earned by a family member who immigrated, at least temporarily, to the United States. In doing so, they have created a culture in which the United States and the customs and traditions associated with their migration experience became an immediate reference point in Colorado. When I left Colorado do Oeste in 2009, a group of return immigrants from the United States was in the process of organizing a party in which guests had to present some sort of identification related to their time in the United States for admittance. This is an ironic phenomenon because these same sorts of insider parties had also happened in the US, except in the US immigrants had to be from Colorado do Oeste in order to attend. The 2008 party for people from Colorado do Oeste living in Boston had over 500 people on the invitation list and was a way to celebrate Colorado while living in the US.

Upon returning, organizing a party for people with documents from the US in Colorado reveals the pride and prestige involved in the migration experience and in the sacrifices made in order to obtain these documents. Documents from the United States represent the earning of a certain amount of social status and a bond with the community of people who went through the migration experience and worked hard in order to improve their living situation back in Brazil. These are also the people whose economic capital has allowed them a certain amount of prestige within their community. Those who hold documents from the United States unite behind the hard work and sacrifice needed to obtain those documents, the symbolic representations of their migratory accomplishment that allowed them to build their current livelihoods in Colorado.

Construction projects financed with money from the US become markers perpetuating the myth of the economic benefits of migration. Ironically, migrants become rooted closer to their hometowns through the act of leaving it. In Colorado do Oeste, becoming an immigrant to the US is actually a way for citizens of Colorado to invest in their futures and become part of the culture of migration in their hometown community. The changing policies regarding settlement and environmental protection directly affected the livelihoods of settlers to Colorado, and, thus, became a motivating factor in an undocumented migration chain to the US. The social impact of the World Bank's reforestation policy has revealed a disconnect between global priorities and local circumstances, and it has revealed as well undocumented immigration to the US as an unintended consequence of such policies. Colorado do Oeste is, therefore, an example of how illegal immigration patterns from Brazil to the US have been affected by decisions made in environmental policy at both the national and international levels. Due to unsustainable policies of integration and settlement into Rondônia, citizens of Colorado created their own route for accessing international market systems that led them all the way to New Orleans in order to sustain many aspects of the local infrastructure of their hometown Colorado do Oeste.

Notes

1 *Fundação Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*

2 The discovery of relatively good soils along the BR-364, the highway leading from southern Brazil, occurred during this same time that family farms were being squeezed out of southern agriculture by corporate firms. The reports of good soil, however, turned out to be false. Today it is estimated that only about 9.9 percent of Rondônia's soil is suitable for agriculture. (Browder 1994: 49) Even so, by 1988 between 24,000 and 30,000 square kilometers, or 11 to 14 percent of the original forest in Rondônia had been cleared for agriculture (Perz 2002: 110).

3 Vilhena was first established as a telegraph post by Marechal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon in 1911. From then until 1960, Vilhena consisted of only a single house and a telegraph post. In March 1960, Vilhena became the home of the workers constructing BR-364 and an airstrip. The highway was completed in 1968. Vilhena gained municipality status in 1977 and migration into the area via the newly paved BR-364 accelerated during the first half of the 1980s. (Brown 2005: 463) Colorado do Oeste and Vilhena are also located on the major soybean export corridor in western Brazil. The rise in soybean production in the Vilhena region intensified between 1996 and 2001. (Fearnside 2001: 23) Such proximity to new transport infrastructure results in forest conversion for soybean production, which also led to consolidation of smaller farms at the loss of jobs for independent farmers.

4 It is worth noting that a portion of the deforestation in the region may have happened prior to the arrival of INCRA settlers. More than 85% of the deforestation currently taking place is happening outside of INCRA settlements. (Pacheco 2009: 1343)

5 The name used to describe the people who organize and coordinate undocumented travel from Brazil to another point of entry (often in Mexico) into the United States.

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