

# Categories as learning practice: navigating contested belonging along transatlantic mobile trajectories

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## ABSTRACT

Although mobility-related categorization processes are central to migration studies, the ways that mobile populations understand, adapt, or contest them remain understudied. To trace such interpretations across both space and time, this paper explores a migrant trajectory that first crossed national borders within Africa before continuing to Brazil and later proceeding to Canada. The research combines ethnographic insights with the autobiographic reflections of one protagonist, whose perspectives and experiences move between different places, countries, institutions, people, and critical events. Following that individual's learning processes, this article traces which categories were meaningful in the context of origin, how these changed in the interaction with different authorities, how transformative events played into valorizations, and which signs of categorical dissolution were recognizable during these trajectories. A biographical learning perspective sees not only the aspirations and the ideals but also the pragmatism and skepticism around the impact of mobility-related categories change along such journeys.

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## Introduction

Current migration research considers the meaning of mobility-related categories highly relevant to distinguishing, sorting, and hierarchizing people. Although, independent of migration issues, categorization processes are part of our ordinary everyday life (Brubaker 2015; Dizdar et al. 2021; Hirschauer 2023), they are particularly consequential and even conflictive in the lives of migrants. Grounded in differentiating terms, formats, regulations, and objects, mobility-related categories inform the migration policies that

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allow entry for some and deny it for others (introduction to this special issue). However, categories can also be harnessed to raise awareness, to lobby, and to mobilize. Nonetheless, what remains underexplored is that categories do not function everywhere in the same way. Whether they are threatening, useful, or banal depends on the respective circumstances of configurations, representations, and encounters (Vertovec 2021).

This paper concentrates on two dimensions of this (spatial and temporal) conditionality of mobility-related categories. First, it considers that migrant journeys often do not occur in a linear and binary sense from country of origin to country of destination, instead crossing several regions and countries (Crawley and Jones 2021; Drotbohm and Winters 2020, 2021; Schapendonk et al. 2020; Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021). Along such migrant trajectories, societal representations, institutional framings, and subjective valorizations of categorization processes shift. Second, mobility-related categories do not always and exclusively result from a state interest in human categorization (Menjívar 2023). Other classifications beyond the state system, brought about by “softer” but no less powerful institutions of human differentiation, such as informal support structures, family members, work life, political allies, researchers and society at large, also contribute to the differentiation of people on the move, prompting them to understand their status within the respective environment alongside their opportunities and their room to maneuver, especially in terms of access to support (Sheller 2018). As stated in the introduction to this special issue, categorizations are also sedimented in public images, discourses, social interactions, and stigmata. To better understand processes of mobility-related categorization as a product of the asymmetrical encounters between actors who are differently endowed with power along migrant trajectories, this paper concentrates on the learning processes of mobile subjects. By tracing how individuals interpret the changing significance of categories along routes that bring them into contact with different types of authorities, this paper argues for applying reflexivity and openness towards the question of which types of categories are relevant at which level of social experience.

My considerations relate primarily to a total of approximately ten months of anthropological fieldwork conducted in Brazil between 2014 and 2019. Central to this research was the fact that newcomers to the megalopolis of São Paulo, typically mobile actors – citizens and foreigners – from within the Americas, but also Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, receive support from a wide range of organizations (state institutions, NGOs, churches, social movements) that differentiate between different forms of mobilities, border crossing, and understandings of vulnerability in a manner corresponding to the stratification of support as well as processes of subjectivation (Drotbohm 2021, 2024). During this research, I relied on qualitative research methods, especially participant observation while volunteering in two

humanitarian organizations, one mainly targeting migrants and one targeting asylum seekers and refugees. Interviews were conducted with the staff of the organizations as well as their clients, who were living in the city for different lengths of time. Furthermore, recent arrivals to the city were accompanied on their inner-city trajectories that brought them into contact with different types of organizations and care-providing networks, all of which worked with their individual target-group related agendas of support. Semi-structured biographical interviews proved particularly useful for this paper, and I subsequently kept in touch with selected individuals and families using social media.

This paper combines insights gained from this fieldwork in Brazil with the autobiographic reflections of one key protagonist, Tau,<sup>1</sup> a young woman from Angola whose life storytelling and lived experiences move between different places, countries, institutions, social relations, and critical events. Our first encounter took place during my fieldwork at a humanitarian organization in São Paulo, conducted in 2016. On that very day, Tau arrived in the city with her two younger sisters. For several weeks, I accompanied them in the process of accessing different care-providing institutions. After my return to Germany, we remained in touch via telephone, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. Upon each of my subsequent several-weeks-long returns to Brazil in 2017 and 2019, Tau and I continued our dialogues. Later, when she left Brazil and continued her journey to Montreal, Canada, we still exchanged information about each other's lives.<sup>2</sup>

Methodologically and epistemologically, I base the validity of my argument on the classical case study of a single individual actor. This approach, following scholars like Mitchell (1983) or Just (2004), acknowledges individual agency, interpretation, and contestation and understands sociocultural milieu as "part and parcel of the individual agent's existential consciousness" (Just 2004, 189). With this, I intend to acknowledge the theorizing capacities of people on the move, who have their own ways of critically reflecting the meaning, power, and challenges of processes of human differentiation.<sup>3</sup> Before I start, I would like to address the influence of my own presence and my questions, which certainly reinforced my interlocutor's examination of categorization processes. The fact that a European, white academic was not only selectively but persistently interested in her biographical trajectory assumably supported Tau's examination of the status attributions that had marked her life up to that point. At the same time, the ambiguity of my personal engagement, sometimes actively supporting on site, sometimes spatially far away and triggering self-reflective evaluations, must have contributed to her own positioning. Especially given that the beginning of our relationship was situated within a highly power-infused context – in which mobility-related categories are far from innocent but highly contributory to the approval or denial of claims – my presence

certainly added to this categorical subjectification. “Refugees, in particular, learn to tell stories about their experiences in particular ways because of the requirements imposed on them by refugee camp administrators, [...] writes Besteman, digesting comparable stories during her ethnographic work” (Besteman 2016, 30). Of course, verification of these individual stories is impossible. Yet the key patterns that emerged from Tau’s stories correspond to those of other individuals I encountered during my work. In view of the existential dimension of any kind of interaction, when biographical passages, specific events, and self-descriptions confirm or deny the legitimacy of an existence, questioning the “truthfulness” of these very positions does not seem legitimate to me.

### **Understanding categorization processes across space and time**

We can distinguish two major strands of research concerning the implications of categorizations in relation to mobilities and mobile people. First, a large body of research deals with the operationalization of the border and the continuation of in- and exclusive state policies, especially regarding access to (for example) support, benefits, the labor market, and health care (Squire 2011; De Genova 2017; Fauser, Friedrichs, and Harders 2019). This research, often focusing on administrative and bureaucratic processes, is supplemented, secondly, by research addressing mobility-related groupisms within national contexts (Baumann 1996; Schrover and Schinkel 2013). This boundary approach, which originates with Fredrik Barth (Barth 1969), examines the culturalizations that relate to the lifestyle of migrants, for example, in dealing with their national background, their religious orientation, and their often culturalized gender, family, and marriage practices (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021; Fischer and Dahinden 2017; Moret, Andrikopoulos, and Dahinden 2021). This approach also tackles the attempt – or rather, the failure – of policies such as “integration”, “multiculturalism”, or “asylum”. Rather than bringing people together, these policy-based approaches tend to cement the differences between people on the grounds of their national origins and confirm a culturalized understanding of ethnicity (Favell 2022; Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018). While most of these studies mainly contend with the problematizations of the host (i.e. receiving) society, others consider how migrants deal with the classifications and stigmatizations that follow their migration experience (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Kumsa 2006; Rodriguez 2020). These approaches also include the perspectives of actors who have never migrated but are considered or classified as minorities with a so-called migration background (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014). Particular interest focused on changing political framings, with new prejudices, stigmata, and racism often imposed on individual ethnic or religious groups on the

occasion of newly pronounced nationalisms and iterations of xenophobia (Boulila and Carri 2017; Sadeghi 2019).

Despite important insights into the interplay between mobility and borders, the early observation that people live not in “boxes” but across geographic distances and national borders (Wimmer and Schiller 2002), continues to be apparently missed. This is reflected in transnationally oriented research and (above all) in the recently established “trajectory approach”, which considers the ongoing movement of people who continue to change their physical location according to necessity or occasion (Amrith 2021; Drotbohm and Winters 2020; Drotbohm and Winters 2021; Ossman 2013; Schapendonk et al. 2020; Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021, Winters et al. 2025). This invites us to also explore migration and displacement as process, condition, and category, as suggested by Bakewell (Bakewell 2011). During such routes, journeys, and stepwise migrations, the continuous interpretation and appropriation of categories through the lens of migrating actors are particularly central because positions, rights, and opportunities change depending on an individual’s classification in different (regional or national) contexts.

Even independent of migration experiences, people do not find categories fixed, instead experiencing them over life courses during which they learn to interpret, use, and deploy categories, adapt their content to changing requirements, and, if necessary, avoid, negate, or contest them. Understanding categories as part of the individual learning process has mainly been in the foreground of inquiries within the fields of educational sciences and psychology, especially with regard to the attentional filtering of information and the formation of stereotypes (Imhoff 2021; Oakes 2003; Sherman, Macrae, and Bodenhausen 2000). Cognitive anthropology has also examined the knowledge systems of persons in terms of the degree to which a category that becomes part of a taxonomy is treated as a particular entity, with prominent examples including “race” or “gender” (Hirschfeld 1988, 1998).

Transnational dimensions of life, which see people on the move confronted with new bodies of knowledge that were previously alien to them and which prompt them to adapt their understanding and perception of categories, constitute both a significant and an ordinary learning impulse. Whether people stay temporarily at a vacation site, whether they leave their country of origin for work and return or settle permanently elsewhere, or whether they stay in transit, orientating themselves and remaining prepared for moving on later in time, they constantly revise and eventually question their pre-existing categorical knowledge, adapting it to navigate a new, often unfamiliar, and certainly challenging terrain of human differentiation. As the following makes apparent, tracing categories along migrant trajectories implies that the traveling subject defines the field of inquiry.

## Making sense of emerging categories in life's key transitions

When I returned to the city of São Paulo in 2017, more than a year after we first met, I couldn't wait to meet Tau again. I wanted to know how she and her sisters had fared in the meantime, whether they had finally found better accommodation, and whether their asylum application had been processed. We met for lunch at a small lunch café near the humanitarian facility where our relationship first began, Tau beautifully dressed in African cloth and a huge turban. At the end of the meal, she sat in front of me, thoughtfully, and then she suddenly said, "You know, Brazil is a bit like a stepmother to me". Responding to my puzzled look, she continued, "She provides me with the basics and sometimes she's even generous, but she's not really close to me. But that's all good. My biological, my real mother was never generous to me, never loving. That's why it's better that I'm here". With this description, Tau made a big leap into a biographical phase that our conversations had not touched on up to that point: her childhood and youth in Angola. Perhaps I had regarded this phase of her life as less relevant in view of dramatic later events, perhaps it would have seemed indiscreet to ask questions about the relationship with relatives who had since died. Nonetheless, in the elaborations that followed, Tau linked different dimensions of mobility and, especially, questions of voluntariness and coercion to her perception of her changing social status and self-perception within her early family life.

While I tried to block out the background noise and sipped my iced coffee, her mind traveled back to her childhood, which she described as a time of extreme poverty, a time without access to regular food, good education, or, above all, parental care. Her parents' third daughter, Tau was born in 1995 in T., a small town in northern Angola not far from the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. In her attempts to provide an adequate picture of the years of her upbringing, Tau concentrated on the permanent neglect by her mother, who would have preferred to have had a son as her third child to fulfill her husband's desires. To escape her mother's frustration and violence, Tau spent most of her time after the age of five with her maternal grandparents, who lived close by. In her description, voluntary and involuntary forms of mobility – between different individuals, households, and places – produced changing understandings of her own social status:

I was still young, but it was as if I were not in my own family, as if I were someone, a stranger [French: un étranger] in my own family, I did not feel at ease in my own family. [...] Because, for my father, I was like a child of sin, because he always wanted a boy, but my mother gave him a girl. Hence, my grandfather took me, and I lived with [my grandparents]. Later, in 2005, I returned to live with my mother, because she had given birth to my younger sister, and I was obliged

to help her. [...] But then I decided to leave my mother to return to my grandparents. But I had no option. My mother wanted me to stay, she needed me to do the dishes, to care for my younger sisters.

In this part of our interview, Tau described how different types of voluntary and forced mobilities were part of her childhood as a result of the constellation formed by sibling order and gender preference, which – according to her interpretation – stigmatized her. Moving to another household, that of her grandparents, was an ambivalent experience. As she continued to explain, she perceived her moving both as punishment from her neglectful mother and as a liberating opportunity. Previous scholarship has approached the circulation of children mainly as a cross-household care practice through which women, usually belonging to different social classes, support one another (Leinaweaver 2008) and only in rare cases as part of an inner-city, transregional, or internal form of children's migration (Coe 2016; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Tau's childhood memories allow us to see her movements from a child's agentive perspective as an early form of hyper-local migration between poorer and better-off households, between less and more affection, between onerous work obligations and the liberating promises of autonomy. Given the fact that spatial distances are experienced differently by children than by adults and that moving to another city can be sensed as movement into an entirely unfamiliar life and cultural milieu, we can identify comparable mechanisms of categorical adaptation within regional and cross-border forms of children's migration (Drotbohm 2013; Farmer 2016).

In terms of how mobility-related categories are interpreted during key biographical transitions, Tau provides insights into the constantly shifting constellations between a changing social environment and the process of her own subjectification. The external evaluation of her gender, age, and position in the sibling order was transformed by the transition to her grandfather's household, where she, as the only child, experienced a high level of care and esteem for her individual talents. In this new environment, where her status was less clearly determined by her previous self-perception within the nuclear family setting, she succeeded in developing a conscious, verbalized, and positively connoted view of herself. Recalling these later childhood years (in another section of the interview), she said, "I was very intelligent. I liked to tinker with the electronics and wanted to be an engineer. It wasn't typical for girls, but I knew what I wanted from that point on. [...] I was always the best at school". For encouraging her education, her grandfather some years later paid her the fees for a tailor training that was provided by Catholic nuns in a small town across the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she then lived for several years.

Evidently, a child's mobility between relatives, households, towns and even countries can by no means always be seen as a liberating process.

Earlier research on foster care repeatedly points to the devaluation and outsider position of foster children, who are often assigned a high level of chores and eventually enter into rivalry with the other children living in the household, especially the offspring of the principal woman (Bledsoe 1990; Christensen and Cortés-Morales 2016). More important, however, is to understand the meaning of key institutions of socialization, such as family and schooling, and their impact on subjectivation and orientation. When moving to another place – whether voluntarily, as a privilege, or by force – the individual's status position and role ascriptions shift in relation to others (relatives, peers, authorities, etc.). In different constellations, individuals get in touch with newly emerging categories, potentialities, and conditions of life via a multitude of impressions and experiences. In Tau's description, her understandings of key transitions occurred on the level of modes of attention, corresponding to the observations of Roberto Gonzales (2011) concerning the "learning" of illegality among 1.5-generation undocumented Latino young adults in California, who must understand the crucial changes to their status under the law at the moment they change from adolescence to adulthood. In a comparable way, the paper by Escamilla García (2024) reveals the impact of legal categories on the perception and navigations of violence during migrant trajectories. While we might assume that the law operates on a clearly articulated level of understanding, these studies confirm that young Latinos must interpret the signals and become aware of their entry into a stigmatized category. In this case, (il)legality evidently has important implications for not only the identity formation, friendship patterns, and future aspirations but also their social and economic mobility. As Tau's biographical transitions makes clear, individuals – long before being recategorized through border crossing – learn to identify the malleability of categories across the life course. Having to identify the power of the law regarding their position in society, Tau understood that she was not fixed as the third daughter within her family, but that moving (in space) implied a changing status in relation to others.

Regarding the question of what kind of power mobility-related categories acquire in which social and spatial constellation, it is interesting to note that my interlocutor attached almost no importance to crossing the national border from Angola to the DR Congo. While research has confirmed the blurriness of the Angolan-Congolese border, especially from a historical perspective (Chico 2020), this fact can also be explained by the uncomplicated bureaucratic procedure of border crossing at the time. Nonetheless, Tau moved from a Portuguese-speaking context to one in which French and Lingala dominated. Still, it becomes clear that Tau learned to interpret her movement at that time as enabling, marked by the shift from a restrictive and abusive family household, where her status was classified using body- and birth-based distinctions such as age, gender, and position within the

sibling order, to a new social and spatial context that characterized her in terms of, for example, her personal interests and her newly acquired skills. These insights confirm the results of several papers included into this special issue which point to the changing meaning of categories, depending on context and differentiating authorities (see Mezzanotti et al. 2024, Gezahegne Wotere 2024).

Tau's early movements between individuals, households, regions and countries confirm what Cresswell (2006) understood as alternatives to places, boundedness, foundations, and stability. Indeed, from her perspective, mobility-related categories achieved meanings within contexts of social and cultural power. So far, I have focused on key transitory moments that can be viewed as more or less ordinary or stressful or more or less confining or liberating. At the same time, these moments constitute a regular part of every person's life course and the emergence of a social status within a given social setting. However, other, much more radical transitions must be evaluated differently and in terms of the speed and effectiveness of a person's capacity to interpret, adapt, and contest the ways that they are categorized under changing conditions. The next section discusses such categories, which often emerge in a person's life under conditions of rupture and crisis.

### **Categorizations changing pace under conditions of (protracted) crisis**

One day in April 2015, Tau and her family took the car and drove for many hours further south, where they met other members of their evangelical church. This was nothing unusual, nor was it unusual that Tau was forced to go, although she did not want to – she was often expected to look after her younger siblings during church services. However, the horrific events that unfolded in the early afternoon were anything but ordinary: Tau, along with about one hundred others, was forced to witness a shocking massacre. Governmental reports would mention 13 dead civilians, with human rights groups in Angola reporting that the attack by the country's security forces had resulted in 100 casualties (Machado 2016). Tau was not physically harmed, being at some distance from the killing site at the time. However, in the frenzy, she lost contact with her mother, stepfather, and younger brother, never to regain contact or learn of their fate. With the support of one of her mother's half-brothers, who lived in the region, Tau and her two younger sisters managed to exchange some money for passports and plane tickets two days later. On the advice of several acquaintances, they chose not to go to Congo, where they would have been easily menaced as witnesses of these events. Instead, they turned to the Brazilian embassy, which at this time was known to issue visas through relatively uncomplicated bureaucratic procedures.<sup>4</sup>

Comparable to other catastrophes that see those affected leave their lives behind from one moment to the next, this kind of mass killing produces and represents an existential crisis that splits a life into almost irreconcilable parts, a before and an after. Even more than a disaster like an earthquake or a flood, an intentional killing by political actors also questions earlier assumptions of political legitimacy, social belonging, and the moral contours of collectivities, which need to be revised in radically new ways (Barrios 2017). The “confusion”, as Tau named these events retrospectively, referred not only to her own psychological processing of the extreme forms of human violence experienced but also to the transformed understanding of a moral collapse and the perception of a new, existential openness in life that called for her to redefine her own position and social role, especially as a care-provider for her sisters.

On the day of their arrival in São Paulo, they asked for support from a humanitarian organization about which they had heard along the journey. I was working as a volunteer at that organization and was present for their registration procedure at the center’s reception, where they were informed that the place would take care of “refugees”, not “migrants”. About half an hour later, we, alongside about 15 other recent arrivals, were introduced to the bureaucratic logic of an asylum application in Brazil and the various governmental and humanitarian organizations involved. The volunteer’s slideshow presentation included the crucial meaning of the reasons for escape, which should, if possible, center on a key event, not a general sense of misery or poverty. The advice also encouraged them to document such an event, recognizing identification using some form media coverage as ideal. About an hour later, I accompanied Tau and her sisters to their first official interview, which was conducted by one of the employed lawyers<sup>5</sup> who registered their key data and the motives for their escape. Another hour later, I was at their side as the organization’s social workers tried to arrange a suitable place for them to sleep. In the weeks that followed, during which they were housed in a rudimentary emergency shelter, as they dealt with numerous other administrative challenges and gradually found their way into the city’s daily life, I met the three sisters regularly in the attempt to understand how they understood their new environment.

Regarding the cognitive appropriation of those categories that become effective at a newly reached place, humanitarian organizations act as catalysts or teaching machines (Besteman 2016; Cabot 2014). By making explicit the required knowledge about forced migration, political persecution, and asylum, as well as the conditionality of institutional aid, the different professional groups – including volunteers, lawyers, social workers, and psychologists – implicitly concentrate on and sharpen those categories that are assumed to be effective during this phase of the migration trajectory,

drawing on support from diagrams and forms available in numerous languages. The refugee determination process (RDP) works worldwide as a standardized apparatus for recording, consulting, and decision-making, the individual elements of which must be learned by the employees of the relevant organizations to then be passed on to the organization's clients, whether asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants (Glasman 2017). Tau described the challenges of this process:

When we reached Brazil, [...] I had no idea what this would signify, the life of a refugee. I did not even know what that was, *refugiado*. I thought that if they say you're a refugee, you have to leave your place, you live in a camp, they accommodate you, they provide for you and protect you. But the situation was, I mean, you saw us, we had to sleep under a bridge. It was disgraceful. They put us into a place in which we all got sick. We did not have any choice. We went to [the central humanitarian organization in São Paulo]. We tried to get our papers done, they explained many things, we participated in these meetings, they explained: a refugee is someone who leaves their country of origin to find a better life. But there were too many people like us. After some time, I began to do some research to understand what I can do. I took some lessons to get us out of this trap, to understand how immigration works in Brazil. After some time, I learned that Angolans are not well received in Brazil, because nobody had told them that there is a war in Angola. They have been shown a picture of Angola as a rich country, but that is not true: there is a war, there are massacres, families are torn apart. But our government shows another kind of picture, which makes everything complicated over here. The Congolese receive a lot of support, even money; we don't. [...] They gave us raw food. Uncooked rice. I was always sick. I did not receive anything. It was me who found out about everything. They promise a lot, but in the end, you remain on your own.

In this section of an interview recorded two years after our initial meeting, Tau remembered the ordeal of her first few weeks after arriving in São Paulo, when she and her sisters circulated within this "teaching machine" of humanitarian aid, receiving not only support, information and advice but also control and coercion through multiple actors. During this early process of interpreting the city, the three constantly acquired new classificatory knowledge. They learned to distinguish between "refugiado" (refugee), "solicitante" (asylum seeker), or "permanência" (permanent visa), as well as to recognize the corresponding bureaucratic system, such as the "CPF" (Cadastro de Pessoas Físicas, Natural Persons Register). They learned that their registration as asylum seekers provided them with a new legal status that was accompanied by new (and promising) opportunities that differentiated them from members of other national groups, who were informed about the improbability of an eventual application, as in the case of migrants coming from Senegal or Ghana. They also learned to understand the scope of action of kinder or stricter individual aid workers, who might interpret their claims differently. In the end, they understood that even after obtaining a permanent residence

status through the one of the most important and functional legal categories, the “Registro Nacional de Estrangeiros” (RNE), the entitlements going along with it – such as access to the general health care system and the official job market – nonetheless assigned them to a condition of dependence. This condition was again complemented by humanitarian assistance in the form of basic care packages (“sesta básica”) and rudimentary but still insecure accommodation.

While the legitimacy of their claim for protection seemed intuitively justified from an overall humanistic perspective, given their gender and age, these facilities nonetheless demonstrated great difficulties accommodating them appropriately. This unsatisfactory condition of reception (a perspective shared by the employees of the relevant organizations) was due to various coincidences, with the war in Syria and other international crises at the time (in 2015 and 2016) demanding that Brazil manage a particularly high number of refugees. This resulted in the preference system and the facilitated administration of certain national groups within the Brazilian humanitarian system. Furthermore, women are generally disadvantaged in terms of the allocation of public sleeping spots because most shelters traditionally cater to male migrant workers, who are (or can be) required to leave in the morning and return in the evening. Women’s shelters, considered administratively and legally more complex, are smaller in number, meaning refugee women compete for space with homeless Brazilian women. Apart from the question of their accommodation, Tau and her sisters also confronted a new type of stigma associated with their Angolan origin – Angolan migrants in Brazil were constantly negatively stereotyped due to a widely assumed economic prosperity (Bertolucci 2016).

Much research has focused on the powerful role of humanitarian organizations in sorting and segmenting people according to their escape histories, national origins, and perceived vulnerabilities. “Refugee” is a crude administrative category, supplemented by historical circumstances and the sophisticated fine-tuning of humanitarian aid, that evaluates and hierarchizes a person’s plight in relation to the suffering of others, complemented by categories such as gender, age, religion, and nationality, which facilitate counseling and decision procedures (Hyndman 1998; Kweka 2022). That a person is not simply a refugee – but becomes or is even made into one following lengthy and opaque legal and bureaucratic procedures – is an idea repeated with striking frequency, capturing the subjectivation executed by different authorities (Besteman 2016; Kumsa 2006; Suerbaum 2018). As Bialas also makes clear with her reflections of the “classificatory multiplicity of the state” (Bialas 2024) in the context of age assessments, multiple (state) actors are involved in these contentious categorizations. In the case presented here, it is notable that the chaotic and accelerated arrival phase gave way, several weeks later, to a long phase of waiting which Tau perceived

as a lingering crisis of protection. Comparable to situations of protracted uncertainty described by Brun (2016) and Papatzani et al. (2022), Tau and her sisters still managed to move beyond the feeling of stasis in their daily routines and developed “agency-in-waiting” (Brun 2016) by negotiating, transcending, and contesting the socio-spatial configurations of immobilization within this porous humanitarian system of reception, protection and control. Although in a rather different setting, Mezzanotti et al. (2024) report similar contradictions in the reception of indigenous peoples on the move in Brazil, who state that their situation improved when the shelter stopped being coordinated by international agencies.

Contrary to what might be expected, Tau experienced the refugee category in the course of this process by no means as solid and functional, but as a highly contradictory and fragmented composite state comprised of, on the one hand, concepts, legal texts, and political measures and, on the other hand, supplementary markers such as compliance and neediness, which either strengthened or weakened the efficiency of the category. Furthermore, national or age categories could reverse the outcome of the refugee category, producing or closing windows of exception. The refugee category also changed in meaning during their transit. Perceived as a distant promise of protection for those particularly disadvantaged in the destination country, it lost its power during their urban transit in Brazil. Hence, parallel to the cognitive reorientation acquired through the explicit lessons received via encounters with the humanitarian organizations and via self-organized knowledge, on an emotional-affective level, Tau and her sisters constantly struggled with scarce resources, new and hitherto unfamiliar forms of social exclusion, competition between refugees of different nationalities, and the opacity of the administrative apparatus.

### **Citizenship, race, and interrupted forms of belonging**

The problematic and precarious transit between different shelters, counseling institutions, legal statuses, and social networks lasted almost a year. When Tau found an apartment in one of São Paulo’s favelas, she began dating a man from Angola who had similarly fled their country of origin several years earlier. At the legal level, things improved considerably. After waiting for nine months, Tau was officially registered as guardian of her two sisters, and administrative issues, especially regarding their education, became less complicated. In 2019, Tau gave birth to a son. Her relationship with her son, a Brazilian (“Brasileiro naturalizado”), enabled her to avoid the usually long and uncertain transition to permanent residency and obtain Brazilian citizenship immediately. Over time, Tau also managed to stabilize her professional situation. Thanks to a personal donation from a wealthy Brazilian woman, she was able to start her own small tailoring business, which was

particularly meaningful to her. The creation of innovative fashion based on African patterns and cuts allowed her to expose her understanding of her African identity at the level of aesthetics. While she was inspired by the Afro-Brazilian fashion industry, she often wore her hair open, without braiding it, a temporal habit she developed only after arriving in Brazil.

However, despite all these rather positive and enabling developments, Tau continued to struggle on several fronts. Because her business did not provide enough revenue for the family, she started to work at a label factory at different levels of production. It was in this context of her work life that experiences of racism dominated, often becoming explicit on the grounds of her hairstyle:

In my work, where I work, if I braid my head, if I made braids, I arrived at work, and it was my own boss who said that my appearance was like a “medusa”. I did not know this word. Then he even showed me pictures to show me, that’s a medusa. So, everyone was there to laugh at me. Like, it was a joke for everyone, but me, every time I changed my [hairstyle], I was really embarrassed. I didn’t feel good at all; everyone called me medusa. When I work ... I [felt] African; at that time, I was not Brazilian.

Tau remembered several other incidents of explicit racism. Sometimes her work shift was moved to satisfy the desires of her co-workers, and sometimes her lunch break was assigned to a time when everybody else was still working. Being called names, never receiving a promotion, feeling isolated – Tau reflected frequently on these confrontations and also on her own position within Brazilian society during these months. At a certain point, she decided to wear a headscarf, at least temporarily, comparing herself to the “the people who do Macumba”. She explained:

The hijab, I take advantage of it, especially during the month of Ramadan, to say my prayers. I really like to wear the hijab. Even though I’m not a Muslim, no, I’m not a Muslim. But it gives the impression of being simple, not complicated, like: You are simple, honest, you wear your scarf, that’s it.

To understand how categorical perceptions of self and other transformed during this phase in her life, it is essential to also consider the impact of the specific milieu in the favela, with the three sisters and (especially) Tau’s partner constantly exposed to the violent dynamics between different neighborhoods and social structures within the city. During these latter years of her stay in Brazil, it was often complicated for us to meet, not due to a lack of time but because Tau clearly avoided any meeting at her home or any other place in her favela in the city’s Southern Zone. When we met, Tau was often in a hurry, unfocused and apparently trying to avoid following up on certain topics from our earlier conversations. The little that I understood was that Tau’s partner had found himself in a particularly dangerous situation due to his continuing contact with Angola and his connections with the drug

trade and arms trafficking, which had led to threats of violence. The central gang in this favela, the “Primeiro Comando da Capital” (PCC), had threatened to withdraw its support unless he agreed to collaborate. This threat increased over the course of several months and ultimately resulted in an attack on his life in which he was seriously injured. The family’s sense of insecurity and intimidation remained when he returned several weeks later from hospital. When they went to report the situation at the police station, Tau’s partner felt he recognized one of the gang members among the policemen. In the fall of 2022, the two hastily bought plane tickets and together with their son flew (without taking any personal belongings) to Montréal, Canada, where they are now still living.

During this period in Brazil, Tau confronted new, completely different forms of stigmatization, and racialized attributions of belonging that denied her own self-determined way of life. Although she was now legally equal to other Brazilian nationals and had managed to establish her own professional business, she experienced forms of social exclusion and dispossession, which she shared with other Black Brazilians living in those parts of segmented and highly gentrified Brazilian cities considered “Black”. The socio-spatial divisions of these spaces both protect and expose to violence in highly stratifying and racialized ways (Alves 2018). This exposition can be understood as a reification and structural sedimentation of postcolonial and global forms of othering that assign Black Brazilians to the (spatial, political, and social) margins of society (Håndlykken-Luz 2020). Although Tau and her family had become part of the favela’s ordinary everyday life and hence, were absorbed by a spatial community that self-identified as “Black”, in the event of a conflict, they were automatically assigned a migrant (in their case, Angolan) background, implying that they pertained to a network of people lacking Brazilian kin relations and thus unable to claim protection from the gangs controlling this territory. “As Angolans in the favela, we’re at the margins of the margins”, Tau said at one point. “Brazilian citizenship does not change much; we learn that this is still not our place”. Tau’s interpretation of those categories that decide between inclusion and exclusion, choice and coercion reveals that gangs in the favela – especially those with bureaucratic and hierarchical structures like the PCC – claim the responsibility of distributing not only punishment and control but also care and justice (Alves 2016).

In the context of these ongoing cross-border trajectories that first brought them to Brazil and then into the Black space of the favela, Tau and her partner had become part of the self-reinforcing cycle of symbolic, structural, and enacted violence that exercises a regime of governance intertwined with racialized police practice, spatial segregation, and the economic dispossession of the favela residents. As in other highly diverse societies, racial prejudice and discrimination have spatial and territorial dimensions in Brazil and

permeate all facets of social life. The connection between race, otherness, and territoriality doesn't only change between different regions that have attracted migrants from different world regions throughout the country's history, but also within regions, cities and even neighborhoods, in which racial classification depend on context and social practice (Hasenbalg and do Valle Silva 1999; Lukate and Foster 2022; McCallum 2005). What becomes obvious in Tau's reflections is that all fuzziness and openness of racial classifications get swallowed through the duplication of othering via their persistent status as "foreigners" – irrespective of the newly acquired citizenship status. Moving into the favela, a space considered Black, somehow isolated this form of migranticizing classification. In addition to being Brazilian and Black, their African, or Angolan, origin, fixated an outsider status within the Black space of the favela.

While Tau and her partner had actually addressed the Brazilian state and its asylum regime as a protective (asylum-granting) authority against the background of their violent experiences in Angola, their experiences of subtle, everyday racism demonstrated how much the recently gained status of formal protection, as well as Brazilian citizenship, had already lost meaning, especially given that the Brazilian state had apparently turned out to be entangled with local structures of (racial) violence. What becomes most obvious here is the slippery nature of citizenship, which can be used by state actors to lure migrants along slow and incremental administrative so-called naturalization procedures that hide the sustained risks of dispossession and social exclusion. Ultimately, just as not all migrants are subject to mobility control and the attendant coercive measures, not all citizens are equally enabled and protected (Anderson 2021). The affective dimensions of Tau's interpretation of the threat pinpoints the ways that mobile, othered, stigmatized, and devalored actors learn to distinguish their own positions, options, and room for maneuver under such conditions of diffusely distributed power. In the end, it was not the othering terms and attributions, not the law and its coercive measures, not the sensing of racism and social exclusion, but the internalization of mistrust, suspicion, and fear that led to their departure and thus, again, to life under conditions of forced displacement.

### **Concluding remarks**

Categorization processes are part of life-long social encounters that involve numerous actors in shaping, affirming, or questioning the power of categories, whether uttered and performed in speech acts, fixed and operationalized through policies and law, internalized and incorporated through subtle affirmations. Tau's learning trajectory reveals different levels of contestations, which, as also stated in the introduction to this issue, is not only expressed

through her navigations and readjustments, but also through the mode of her biographical narrative, which repeatedly raises disagreements and points to the violence inherent in the experienced categorizations. At the same time, Tau's understandings of the self remained open to the change and transformation of mobility-related categories. Like many other migrants before her, Tau experienced a long transition from early phases of mundane mobilities to a singular and exceptionally dispossessing event and again to subsequent forms of cross-border and regional migrations. This prompted her to deal with the categorization processes of different types of power structures and authorities over and over again. Through the lens of one key individual actor, we understand how ongoing spatial trajectories relate to the continuous experience of human subjectivation and differentiation that accompany denied access and geographically dispersed forms of discrimination and racism.

Tau's learning experience occurred not only along these spatial trajectories and situated encounters but also at different levels of cognitive experience and (re-)acting practice. Her learning took place, for example, in her early childhood, through the perception of categories like age and gender experienced as forms of discrimination that compelled her to leave her mother's household. At the same time, however, this transit was associated with an experience of liberation and revaluation, when she changed the position from "a third daughter" to a technically gifted main-grandchild. Thus, both coercion and empowerment were both linked to spatial mobility from an early stage. In the cross-border context, new and different authorities entered her life. While those categories shaped by the state and state-like structures in the new country of residence (in this case, Brazil) were felt as a promising relief, in the contrastive encounter with a country of origin that was perceived as both negligent and violent, reality proved to be a painful corrective in Tau's confrontation with the absence of support. In this phase, the conscious acquisition of alternative categorical knowledge was crucial to be able to deal with both the existing aid structures and their unexpected failure and to turn herself into an eligible recipient of support instead of remaining an unlawful stranger. Agency and tactics of submission went hand in hand when learning took place as a kind of self-formulated daily task in the context of confrontation with legal liminality and the constant possibilities of administrative conflict. In subsequent phases, when legal questions of residence were less relevant, Tau experienced the apparent inevitability of othering in everyday confrontations with racism and stigmatization. This prompted her to elaborate more on her own racialized self-perception and concentrate on her competences of a working wife instead of remaining a second-class Black Brazilian. In these latter phases, especially after moving into the favela, her ongoing mobilities can be understood as forms of spatial contestation between diffusely distributed power structures.

Over the course of this life-long and still ongoing learning process, Tau came to not only understand herself as an aged, gendered, racialized, African subject. Her critical attitude towards the meaning of mobility-related categories at the intersection with kinship, gender, race and urban territoriality, demonstrates her questioning of the legitimacy of power positions, whether that of her parents, the state, humanitarian organizations, other kinds of experts, or the favela's gangs, all of which promised protection and care in different ways before refusing or denying it. Through her intricate mobility experiences and life transitions, Tau emerges as a figure challenging established structures and hierarchies, navigating the complexities of belonging and identity in dynamic ways. Here, Mimi Sheller's notion of "mobility justice" (Sheller 2018) captures how power and inequality inform the governance and control of all forms of movement. This approach helps us understand how Tau's experiences of neglect during her early childhood, the abandonment in the humanitarian setting, and the violence faced in the Brazilian favela stand in continuity with inner-city, regional, and transnational experiences of stratified mobilities. In the end, this individual mobility experience offers a narrative going beyond conventional frameworks of understanding different dimensions, scales, and processes of migration categories as these are constantly in flux, both in space and time.

## Notes

1. Tau is a self-chosen pseudonym.
2. Tau and I usually communicated in French but often switched to Portuguese when necessary.
3. Methodologically, I combine direct, in-situ ethnography in Brazil with biographical interviews referring to earlier periods of Tau's life and with online ethnography conducted later mainly via social media. Of course, the emotional involvement, possible strategic interests, and cognitive distancing from categorizations vary between these very different reflective occasions. A shared attempt to make sense of configurations and encounters of categorizations was central to all of these different types of encounters and dialogue.
4. During these months, Brazil was getting prepared for the Summer Olympics (2016) and facilitated visa processing in its embassies to recruit foreign workers (Gama Gato and Salazar 2018).
5. I had Tau's and the lawyer's consent to be present at this interview.

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### Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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