These men in love with mining companies and pickup trucks: Moralities and knowledge practices of the deserts and movements of the economy

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Abstract:

This article's protagonists are traders and small businesspeople who express their enthusiasm for the start-up of a mining company while admiring the pickup trucks that such an enterprise circulates in a city in the north of the Brazilian state of Goiás. I place the perspectives of these men in a story organized by the fear that this locality becomes a 'desert', then consider how they have been relating to recent transformations in the 'economy' of this city. I thus bring to the foreground certain moral dimensions of their lives and occupations and the role of pickup trucks as signs and operators of the knowledge practices to which they resort to situate themselves in the face of both long-standing anxieties and these new realities. Finally, I show how this 'economy of the city' is outlined by an interweaving of certain branches and productive activities with practices, stories, circulations, rivalries that are markedly masculine, and which are updated in those places and paths where pickup trucks are present.

Key-words: Anthropology of the economy; Mobilities; Socio-environmental conflicts; Mining; Masculinities

Esses homens apaixonados por mineradoras e caminhonetes: Moralidades e práticas de conhecimento dos desertos e movimentos da economia

Resumo:

Esse artigo tem como protagonistas comerciantes e pequenos empresários que manifestam seu entusiasmo pela entrada em funcionamento de uma mineradora enquanto admiram as caminhonetes que tal empreendimento faz circular numa cidade no Norte de Goiás. Situo as perspectivas desses homens numa história organizada pelo medo de que essa cidade vire um "deserto", considerando então como eles vêm se relacionando com transformações recentes na sua "economia". Trago assim para o primeiro plano certas dimensões morais de suas vidas e ocupações e o papel das caminhonetes como signos e operadores das práticas de conhecimento a que eles recorrem para se situar diante tanto de ansiedades de longa data quanto dessas novas realidades. Mostro por fim como essa "economia da cidade" se delineia por uma imbricação de determinados ramos e atividades produtivas a práticas, estórias, circulações, rivalidades marcadamente masculinas, e que se atualizam naqueles lugares e caminhos onde estão presentes as caminhonetes.

Palavras-chave: Antropologia da economia; Mobilidades; Conflitos sócio-ambientais; Mineradoras; Masculinidades

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André Dumans Guedes

In September 2022, I returned to Minaçu, a location in the north of the Brazilian state of Goiás where I have been carrying out fieldwork for years. I booked a room in the same hotel as always, located in the most upscale area of the city, just a few meters from the fence and gate that delimit the area of the asbestos mining company that, as they say there, 'created' that place. Although I have always been interested in what is going on in those parts, the most significant part of my research has been carried out a few kilometers away, on the other side of the city, in the outlying neighborhoods where my main interlocutors live. I met most of them at the office of the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB) there. From that place, since 2008 I made friends, created strong bonds with some families, and started going to their homes. The lives, struggles and reflections of these people are the privileged themes of practically everything I have written about this universe to date.

But in this small group of men who used to meet daily in front of my hotel, I also had some long-time acquaintances. On previous visits I had become accustomed to finding there, sitting on the sidewalk in woven wire chairs, in the late afternoon and morning, the owner of this establishment and some of his neighbors and colleagues - all of them middle-aged white men, belonging to the local middle class, usually presenting themselves as traders or small business owners. That September 2022, it didn't take long for me to realize that participating in conversations in circles like this would be a little more complicated than on the other occasions I had been there. We were on the eve of the presidential election, and it was quite quickly that we all realized that we had divergent preferences: they would vote for Bolsonaro, I would vote for Lula. Concerned about maintaining some cordiality, we avoided this topic in our conversations. Even so, despite our efforts to avoid controversies, the political polarization of that moment was also felt when we approached other issues, making explicit and spicing up certain disagreements that I had known existed between us for a long time.

They were aware that I had come to the city to work with people linked to MAB. In addition to its political-electoral affinities with the left and Lula's Workers Party, this is a social movement that organizes and operates from a critical perspective on large projects and economic enterprises like dams. A scholar and activist of this cause since my master's degree in urban and regional planning, I arrived in Minaçu (and to my doctorate in social anthropology) precisely to do research on the social and environmental effects caused by the construction of three large hydroelectric plants in the limits of this municipality, between 1980 and 2010. Minaçu also interested me because there these dams coexist with projects of a different nature, but which, like them, are characterized by the immense damage that their operation causes to the communities and ecosystems in their neighborhoods (and to the planet): large-scale mining companies. For their part, and in their capacity as businessmen and traders, these men are staunch defenders of these activities, and of the 'movement' that, in their perspective, they bring and ensure for 'the economy of the city'.

In those days, one issue was capable of competing with the election for the attention of these subjects: the arrival of a new mining company in the region—a firm called Serra Verde—and the beginning of work to install what would be, according to them, the largest mine in Brazil dedicated to the exploration of rare earth metals. These men and I remembered, in different ways, Bolsonaro's speech at the United Nations in which,

arguing why he would not demarcate new indigenous lands, the then president made it his priority to explore this 'great abundance of gold, diamonds, uranium, niobium and rare earth metals' (El País 2019). Writing for anthropologists, I don't think I need to explain here why this statement bothered me so much.

More important for my argument in this text is the mention of certain entities that, in this context, are also evaluated by me and them in opposite ways: the 4 x 4 trucks and pickup trucks that seemed to be the only vehicles consultants, managers, directors and engineers involved with this venture used to move around those parts. Pointing them with their fingers, looking for them, talking about them all day long: that's how the men at the hotel door talked about the mining company and the future exploration of rare earths metals. From my point of view, the attention they paid to these vehicles seemed obsessive, or on the order of veneration. Since my doctoral thesis, I have been clear that in country interiors like that, people have, in general, an interest in machines and engines that is at odds with my ecological sensitivity and my own lifestyle (resident of the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro and with easy access to public transport, it is without any major complications that I can live without having a car, and be proud of it). What displeased me in those conversations in 2022 is that this 'generic' passion for automobiles seemed to me to manifest itself in a particularly violent way: because there it would appear intrinsically linked to a pioneering and conquering truculence that, in those parts of the Brazilian Central-West region and in the proximity of projects such as dams, mining companies and agribusiness, would be brought to a paroxysm. After all, we know that the occupation of these backlands [*sertões*] - from the March to the West of the first Getúlio Vargas government, through the emergence of Brasília and the development and colonization plans of the military dictatorship - was associated with incentives to the automotive industry and the construction of large highways[1]. Symbols par excellence of this industry (which is itself a pedagogical metonymy of capitalism), pickup trucks speak to us of a civilization structured both by the opening of roads and the burning of fossil fuels, and thus stand to be emblematic icons of colonialist violence and environmental crises. This truculent power of these vehicles is constantly and proudly evoked by those who drive them, and is expressed in these terms that are often inlaid or stickered on their bodywork: 'all terrain', 'attack', 'frontier', 'power', 'ranger', 'storm'[2]. It is undeniable that in this case we are faced with singular conceptions of how someone can relate to the environment, the landscape, the land: faced with this power, the resistance and possible obstacles offered by the paths would be easily overcome; the very idea of a path, or the characteristic specificity of this or that place would, at the limit, be relativized—any terrain can be traversed and transformed into a path; over any savannah, bush or forest (and over whoever or whatever was there) you can go over it.

My discomfort with these men became even more acute because of the sexist and elitist comments that frequently appeared in these conversations. Over time, I began to realize that these were not just anecdotal diversions from the topics that most interested them, but crucial elements in the constitution and explanation of that 'economy of the city' that so obsessed them. Later, I will present a comical narrative that I heard from one of them, at the hotel door. For now, I will limit myself to highlighting how the prejudiced approach of

1 A central native category for my doctoral thesis and the book that came from it (Guedes 2011, 2013a), the '*tract*' [*trecho*] mentioned in the title of these works has its origins in the experience of the workers on these projects. This term 'comes from the major highway building projects where it is common practice to divide the total volume of work into lots, contracting these out to various companies (...) [who assume responsibility for different] sections, or *tracts*, of the project. Workers on the same road when they meet may often ask each other: 'What tract are you on?' followed by a reply identifying the construction firm responsible for the tract and the kilometre points delimiting their stretch of highway. The term *tract* escaped its initial boundaries and – as though Brazil were one immense construction site – came to designate all the large-scale construction projects and the men who work on them, the *tract* labourers [*peões do trecho*], nomads par excellence and by necessity.' (Corrêa 2007:11).

2 The fact that all these terms are in English makes the 'Goiás edition' sticker, particularly popular in Minaçu in 2022, even more suggestive. And all this brings us to this immense problem that, without the space or competence to address adequately, I will only mention here: the 'influence' of the conquest of the North American West on the social and historical formation of the worlds constituted by the colonization of the Brazilian 'backlands' (such as, for example, the Central-West Region that I discuss here). Beyond the imaginary surrounding the figures of the 'cowboy' (Pimentel 1996; Machado 2022) or the 'pioneer' (Heredia, Palmeira & Leite 2010; Marques 2012; Cordeiro 2018), let us remember how this influence materialized in public policies that were decisive for the contemporary structuring of these areas (Minaçu included): for example, in the already mentioned March to the West of the first Getúlio Vargas Government. A recurring theme in Brazilian historiography and social thought, this influence (or the comparison between the Brazilian and North American cases) was a topic widely discussed in the ethnographies that, in the 1970s, focused on 'Central Brazil' (Esterci 1972; Velho 1979; Ribeiro 1980) - but which, later, seemed to disappear from Brazilian anthropological production.

two of the characters in this story - the 'scam worker' [*o peão golpista*] and the 'woman in the motel'—made me feel quite uncomfortable. Even more so because, in addition to offending the egalitarianism of my political values, this story did so through humiliating references to the residents of the outskirts and rural areas of the city, where my long-time interlocutors and friends in this municipality live. From the perspective of the men in these conversations, these interlocutors and friends of mine are the people who potentially and ideally occupy the roles of those characters in the story. By establishing a significant connection between these two relatively separate worlds in which I was doing research (the hotel door and the outskirts), this story of bad taste interests me doubly here. This occurs because my relationship with these 'uncomfortable alterities'—the theme of this dossier—also offers a promising entry for a renewed reading of the problems and constituent entities of all these worlds of Minaçu with which I have been working for so long.

I express these discomforts from the start because of the analytical approach they offer to my focus in this article: these men's 'obsession' with pickup trucks and mining companies. Or rather: I want to show that what, from my perspective, took the form of an 'obsession,' may appear in another way for these merchants and small business owners: as practices whose reasonableness can be understood if we make explicit some of the concerns, reflections, and values that constitute their lives. In an article focused on the challenges faced by ethnographers who set out to study Bolsonaro voters, Pinheiro Machado and Scalco (2021) remind us that nuance—the consequence of an analytical effort aimed at understanding the cognitive complexity of these people, as well as the situated nature of what they say and do—is part of the 'anthropological responsibility' of those who set out to describe them. As other authors in this dossier argue, we are not far removed from objectives that have long guided our practice in the discipline: attempts to 'interpretively understand social action' according to the 'subjective meaning' (Weber 2009: 3) that it has for this or that agent; or the effort to achieve that 'final goal, of which an ethnographer should never lose sight (...) [-] to grasp the native's point of view, *his* relation to life, to realise *his* vision of his world' (Malinowski 2002: 19, author's emphasis).

In general terms, my argument is based on an ethnographic description of what these men do in these conversations: paying attention to the circulation of these pickup trucks around Minaçu, they seek to map out the agencies and subjects that are becoming relevant in this town, debating—amidst gossip and dirty jokes—the 'economy of the city' and seeking ways to position themselves within it. The knowledge practices, expectations and anxieties that I had access to in these circles prove to be interesting not only for explaining these 'economic' dynamics and transformations—but also for understanding the values and worldviews that define them as men. Through these values and visions, the native meanings of what the 'economy' of this place is also what emerges[3].

In the next section, I present, according to a perspective shared by the population of Minaçu in general, a description in which the history of this locality is organized by reference to the old mining company (the asbestos mining company) and the fear that such place will become a 'desert.' In the following two sections, the focus shifts to the present, and to the way in which the men mentioned in this introduction relate to recent transformations in the 'economy' of the city. If these transformations cannot be exclusively linked to the arrival of this new mining company (the rare earth metals mining company), this event intensifies and symbolizes them in a very relevant way. First, I discuss this relationship in terms of the knowledge practices that these subjects resort to in order to situate themselves in this new reality, which helps us understand why these pickup trucks are so important to them. Second, I dedicate a section to some moral dimensions and questions of belonging emerging in this recent context. In conclusion, I quickly reconsider the data presented throughout the article based on the interpretation of that comical narrative I mentioned before

3 I would like to draw attention to the quotation marks that indicate a native category. I am following the approach suggested by Neiburg (2010) regarding what would be at stake in a shift from an 'economic anthropology' towards an anthropology *of* the economy. Thus, instead of assuming the existence of a domain of social life characterized by a certain peculiar type of phenomenon (the 'economic'), it is up to the ethnographer to map and describe what, in a given social world and from the perspective of those who inhabit it, can be found associated with the *economy* - hereafter in italics - as a native category.

A mining company that is the mother of a city

Although expressed in a particularly enthusiastic manner by those men who gathered in front of the hotel, this 'desire' for mining companies is something that is widespread throughout Minaçu. What is disconcerting at first sight is that this manifests itself so vehemently in people whose personal and family histories are often marked by violence and oppression that these people themselves clearly and critically link to these same enterprises. This is particularly explicit with regard to SAMA Minerações Associadas, the asbestos mining company that was responsible for the emergence of Minaçu in the 1960s and 1970s, and which is still known today as 'the mother of the City'.

This company gained some national renown due to the political conflicts and legal disputes that, over the last decades, have arisen due to the illness and death of workers who were exposed to the fibers of this mineral (for a more up-to-date discussion of the subject, see Amaral 2019). Throughout the years that I have conducted field research there, I have heard countless references to the 'asbestos disease' and the suffering it has caused.

> Back then, there were no rights, no, there were so many who died from asbestos, which is harmful... This is an ugly, tiring suffering. When a person coughs, when asbestos disease appears in a person, oh, there's no way. Cancer takes over... I remember when it happened to the woman who worked as a caretaker at the workers' house. A cleaner (...). They removed an asbestos tumor from her, but there was no cure for it. When this thing appears, there's no cure. And back then it was like that we ate asbestos... We were having lunch and asbestos kept falling into the plate. So we ate it. It was that white powder everywhere. When we went to work there was no support to hold the asbestos. Only later did they line people's houses, they lined them with plaster. And in the morning we would sweep the door of the house, so it wouldn't get in the cracks. The loose dust... I lived there [in the mining company] for 26 years. And I think I'm very lucky not to have anything until today... (Guedes 2011: 68).

Dona Clementina was already quite elderly when she told me this story in 2010, and she remembers how the problem was even more serious in the first years of SAMA's operations, when she was young and worked and lived in the company's restricted area. Despite the filters and technical innovations that would have—in the company's arguments—solved the problem, the controversy continues to this day. In 2017, the Supreme Federal Court (STF) banned the extraction, production, sale and use of asbestos throughout the country, due to the risks that this substance poses to human health. But the mining company gained extra momentum during the Bolsonaro government, especially after a law enacted by Governor Ronaldo Caiado authorizing the return of the extraction of this mineral. In November 2022, however, a decision by the STF ordered the immediate suspension of this activity. The legal battle continues to this day.

During all the years I worked in this city, I heard few people deny the facts or reject the arguments presented in statements like Dona Clementina's. Even in a small group like the one on the sidewalk of my hotel, involving small business owners and middle-class people, there is a kind of consensus regarding the environmental damage and harm to the health of workers and residents caused by the mining company's activities. This acknowledgement was usually accompanied by an adversative clause, in a formula I heard over and over again: 'Yes, the company has harmed a lot of people, and that's not right... But if it closes, Minaçu will end!' It is therefore to examine this fear - that Minaçu will 'end'—that I now pay attention.

The Fundão and Brumadinho tailings dam failures have put mining companies even more in the spotlight, alerting a wider audience to something that experts, activists, and communities living near these projects have long been denouncing: the vastness, diversity, and multidimensionality of the risks and harmful socio-environmental effects associated with these economic activities (Zonta and Trocate 2016; Zhouri 2018). In January 2024, as I write this text, we are watching on television the drama of the residents of Maceió who are witnessing—literally—their world falling apart due to the subsidence of the ground resulting from the collapse of mines where rock salt was extracted underground. Scenarios like these make the efforts of

authors like Acselrad et al. (2021) even more relevant in mapping some of the strategies through which these mining companies seek to deal with their critics and build consensus, anticipating potential objections and authoritarianly restricting the political debate regarding their activities. According to this line of investigation, these mining companies use their economic resources and political power to try—through innovations in their governance and social responsibility practices (Gaviria 2015) or appropriations that resignify the languages and discourses of their opponents (Kirsch 2014)—to 'socially stabilize the terrain in which they operate' (Giffoni 2019: 13) and prevent discussions about other, less predatory modalities of relating to the environments from happening. By naturalizing mineral exploration as an inexorable destiny, these companies would resort to what philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2015: 66) called 'infernal alternatives': if communities want to benefit from the jobs, income or taxes generated by these companies, they would have to tolerate some environmental pollution, or resign themselves to the fact that 'accidents' like those that occurred in Mariana, Brumadinho or Maceió could eventually occur. In the case of mining, these infernal alternatives would structure true 'socioeconomic blackmail devices' (Acselrad & Bezerra 2010), in which supposedly scientific studies would convey the idea that a region that does not exploit the available natural resources (those associated with its 'economic vocation') would be making its 'development' or 'progress' unfeasible.

Consideration of these policies and strategies used by mining companies is necessary—but it is not enough to understand what is happening in Minaçu. We also need to take into account certain singularities of its history, as well as the ways in which people narrate and reflect on what their lives are like there, so that we can understand why, in this place, these 'socioeconomic blackmail devices' can prove to be even more powerful. When expressing their fear that Minaçu will end, the reference of local residents to this 'end' cannot be seen only in a figurative or hyperbolic sense. For my interlocutors, the cities do in fact end, disappear, become 'deserts'. Right there in the north of Goiás, references to places like Campos Belos, a neighboring municipality that saw its population fall by half after the depletion of mining in the area, are common. Stories about what happened in this region during the gold rush of the 18th century are also popular today. In this period, in the space of two or three decades, villages and settlements lived their days of prosperity only to be abandoned or almost entirely depopulated, some of these locations literally disappearing from the map. Other former mining centers in the region did not suffer such a drastic fate, and still exist today. Cavalcante, a municipality neighboring Minaçu that enjoyed a short-lived prosperity in the past, is, according to my interlocutors, one of the smallest and poorest cities in the state.

When they refer to SAMA as the 'mother of Minaçu,' this is also what the residents of Minaçu are talking about. Obviously, this epithet is used to express the power and 'paternalism' (or perhaps it would be better to say 'maternalism') of these large companies that, as is the case in countless other corners of the country (Dias Blanco 2022), are capable of determining and commanding the existence of certain locations as if they were their parents (invariably, as authoritarian parents). But something else is being said here: this expression also lends itself to a comparative analysis of the different ventures and investments that, since the city's emergence in the 1960s, have driven the *movements* of the city's *economy*—and here the italics indicate natives categories. Like the other municipalities in the north of Goiás mentioned above, Minaçu's history is also marked by the emergence of 'fevers': activities that suddenly and temporarily promise opportunities for extraordinary profits, attracting outsiders and making life in the locality where they erupt turbulent and busy [*movimentada*]—whether due to the 'sudden waves of superficial modernization' (Martins 1998: 690) triggered by investments in infrastructure or development projects, or due to price fluctuations in the commodities markets, making certain extractive practices, both legal and illegal, particularly attractive at certain times. From the 1970s to the first decade of the 21st century, Minaçu experienced the 'cassiterite fever', the 'gold fever' and three 'dam fevers'—the large hydroelectric plants whose construction led me to choose this area as the field of a doctoral thesis in anthropology.

It is also in contrast to these fevers that the SAMA mining company is thought of as the 'mother of Minaçu'. To make this clear, it is necessary to evoke a certain specific meaning of the term 'mother', one that signals the stubborn rootedness of those people who - in a universe where everything seems to be in motion *[em movimento]* - insist on remaining in the same place. The reference here is to so many of these women who remain in the city while their husbands, daughters and sons go out 'into the world', 'trekking through the tract' *[correndo o trecho]* in search of adventures or better living conditions elsewhere. By remaining, these mothers make their houses and lands persist, as fixed reference points; persisting this way, the latter not only mitigate but also enable those wanderings, movements and circulations. In the short history of Minaçu, the waves and fevers, and the turbulence and *movements* associated with them, have passed. On the other hand, for decades on end the asbestos mining company remained there. Having remained—residents argue—it was also the city itself that was able to continue existing.

In her ethnography of a quilombola family whose territory is located in Nova Roma—a neighboring municipality of Minaçu—Peruti (2022: 137) tells us about this

> perception largely shared by the residents of Nova Roma that the existence of that municipality is sustained by a tenuous thread. Sayings such as 'this is almost a desert', 'only the old and the children will remain', 'this place is a hole' or even 'a hiding place', express the idea of the near end of a city that has barely begun.

It is this 'imminence of the desert'—this heavy premonition that the place where one lives can or will 'become a desert, with no prospect of employment, no people, no movement' (Perutti 2022: 25)—that I want to bring to the forefront. This *movement*, as a native category, refers to the circulation and to the comings and goings of money, employment, wealth and income—to what these people claim that firms are capable of attracting to a city. But this meaning is often subordinated to the idea of *movement* as the very 'movement' of life, and of life in common. Places with no prospect of employment and improvement are places that become depopulated, that have fewer and fewer people and less *movement*. Fewer people generate less *movement*, less *movement* brings fewer people. And when *movement* ceases, life fades away—in the sense that it is the maintenance and creation of relationships and encounters what is at stake. Hence the concerns of the quilombola family studied by Perutti (2022) about ways of 'inhabiting the desert': how to live in these places that are often on the verge of disappearing, places transforming into cities that are ending, cities of retirees, dead cities. Hence also the importance they attribute to this 'weaving of friendship', which evokes a whole set of practices and knowledge related to the production and maintenance of certain bonds with relatives and neighbors, with the living and the dead, with humans and non-humans, since 'in a place conceived as a 'hole', about to end, maintaining and creating relationships appears as a matter of life or death' (Perutti 2022: 26).

Following pickup trucks and engineers as a knowledge practice of the *economy* and its *movements*

Let's go back to the sidewalk in front of my hotel. There we find those shopkeepers and small business owners telling stories, debating and arguing, claiming to be the ones who know the most about this or that productive activity or who best understand what's happening in the city and its *economy*. But while they talk and listen, they also scan, with their eyes wide open, the *movements* around them. With his finger raised, Miltão points out, emerging from the corner, the compact and solid metal block whose whiteness, almost always reflecting the sun, blurs our vision for a moment. 'And look at that Hilux from Barro Alto I was talking about, look at it coming over there!' As he speaks, a 4x4 double-cabin pickup truck (another one!) passes by us, fresh from the factory, stickered with the alphanumeric code that authorizes its entry into the construction site in the area where, in the near future, the new rare earth metals mining company will operate.

Like their human occupants, these pickup trucks indicate, instruct, confirm and provide information. But if the former do so more explicitly, through stories or the news they bring with them, the latter provide only clues, suggestions and hints, through signs that are often subtle and only arouse interest in those who know how to identify and interpret them—identification and interpretation which often occurs in conversations like the one I am considering here. 'Look at that dented door. That was the truck which, that afternoon during the storm, almost overturned there on the corner of the courthouse, after work...' The close examination of the bodywork, the wheels, and what is damaged or dirty (or dirty in this or that way) provides these men with signs that evoke events and occurrences, incidents and accidents. We are dealing here with certain specific modalities of 'education of attention' and the ways of narrating related to them (Ingold 2000): articulations of details, signs, modes of movement, people and things that elicit and feed gossip, stories and explanations. Such articulations interest us here because they actively engage these men in their environments, while at the same time connecting that reality within their reach with other spaces and situations—such as a road or construction site, the streets of this or that neighboring municipality, the yards and garages of a specific company, the lodgings of another, the industrial plant under construction of a third one. In this way, knowledge is produced about what is happening in Minaçu, about what is happening elsewhere, and about the passages, connections, and relations between that specific place and 'the world' *[o mundo]*.

In these stories and assessments, these men are particularly interested in the trajectories of these pickup trucks; they are interested in knowing where they came from and where they are going—and the ways in which they moved. Did the vehicle come in a hurry, or did it accelerate? Was it traveling slowly, with someone at the window, the driver concerned about pedestrians or the speed limit? Was it zigzagging, out of balance, driven by a drunk or show-off driver? It is the circumstances and places where these trucks stop, however, that offer opportunities for a more calm investigation of these signs, and for less hurried stories to take shape. This also explains the tendency for conversations like the one I am considering here to take place in front of hotels and mechanic shops—establishments that are often neighboring each other, both of them places for stopping, pausing, resting; for mechanical repairs and human sleep, for care, cleaning and refueling of bodies and vehicles. Because of this, it is the mechanical knowledge itself—the expertise or skill of mechanics and tire repairmen, and which to a lesser extent any lay driver possesses—that, in these conversations, seems to have gone beyond the garages and gas stations, translating and transforming itself into the surveys, reports and narratives that interest us in this section of the text.

It is no surprise then that, in circles made up almost exclusively of male individuals, spicy details and sexual references grease the wheels of these stories. At the door of my hotel, I heard the following account:

> The engineer picked up a woman and took her to a motel. A worker at the company *[um peão]* already knew that the engineer liked to get up to mischief, and had been keeping an eye on him for a while. The worker sent him a message on WhatsApp. 'I'm here at the motel door, and I saw you come in there with the company's pickup truck. Send me some money, send me a pix, or I'll film you leaving and send it to the boss and your wife!' But the worker didn't count on the engineer's cleverness, who had been through similar things before. The engineer then took some hand sanitizer and removed the tag from the truck, rubbing it with his shirt until the sticker came off. Then he put the woman to drive the car, hiding in the back seat. Without the tag, the worker didn't even realize that that was the pickup truck he wanted to film. And the engineer managed to escape...

A key element in this story, the tag is a colored sticker stuck to the side of the automobile containing an acronym for the name of the company that uses it and a number that identifies each of the vehicles that, in a given project, that company has in operation (See photo 1). The tag thus brings together, at the same time, information that identifies a particular pickup truck (just like the license plate of any vehicle) and the company that uses it (which a company logo also does). At Minaçu at that time, the tags were justified to control

and restrict access to the closed area where the construction site of the rare earth metals mining company's industrial facility was located, and immediately identified the machines that had them affixed as engaged in this project. From the perspective of the company responsible for each particular vehicle, the tag is essential for planning and controlling its maintenance, registering information about its history in the management systems: who drove it, the tasks and objectives for which it was used, the places where it circulated and stopped, how its review and supervision have been carried out, idiosyncrasies and problems in its operation.

Photo 1: a pickup truck and its tag, in yellow and black

Photo by the author.

The story told above is also interesting because, in addition to its narrator and his listeners, one of its protagonists—the worker *[peão]* who had been 'keeping an eye' on the engineer for some time—is himself paying attention to the pickup trucks and their signs, and seeking to use the knowledge resulting from this surveillance. We are not far removed here from those 'modalities of movement and mutual observation of everyday life' that Comerford (2014: 109) talks about when examining how, in small communities in the interior, 'attention to the displacements, absences and presences of others, and knowing oneself to be the object of this attention to one's own displacements, transforms such movement into the focus of narrative, of moral judgment, of subject matter'. These curious glances watching what is happening in other people's lives generate gossip and stories about the movements and antics of an engineer like the one caught in the motel. But without any detriment to these tittle-tattle and obscenities—rather feeding them and feeding off them—such curious glances elicit ways of speaking and knowing the *movements* of the *economy* of a place. It is this other type of knowledge that I am dealing with now.

Didactic and using images that I discovered were common there, Roberval, the hotel owner, explains to me:

> A project like this from the mining company really helps the city, it gets things *moving*. Just look at the streets, those more than two hundred pickup trucks driving up and down. Just think about what this means for the tire repair shops and garages in the city, in terms of work, of the income generated... Look at Edvelton's repair shop. The pickup truck is there, the three boys have a job, and they'll earn a little money. The oldest took the course on Maranhão Avenue (and isn't there a job being created there too?). Look at the crane removing the engine from there, which will be sent to a reconditioning shop on Amazonas Avenue. There will be work for these people too, just as there will be orders for the auto parts store...

This is a kind of popular Keynesianism[4]: a way of following and narrating a productive activity in terms of both the flows of money and income that made it possible and those that it generates. The work, activities and *movements* on a mining construction site or in a workshop are thus evaluated by mapping the trickles and chains that connect what happens within these specific spaces with other sectors, businesses and places.

This way of knowing and assessing wealth is far from being a novelty in the lives of these men, but it is particularly important in those circumstances, when various companies were swarming around the city. This occurred due to the specific procedures and work required in the installation phase of the rare earth metals mining company (roughly speaking, the moment in which the machinery and infrastructure of this enterprise are still being assembled). But also because, like any mining company nowadays, the one being installed there has its operations guided by outsourcing and subcontracting processes that distribute the tasks and stages of production along an extensive chain - something that culminates in this multiplicity of different companies and businesses, of the most varied nature and size, crowding the city. Over the last few decades, the old asbestos mining company had also been undergoing this 'economic' or 'productive restructuring'[5]. But it was the arrival of the new project that radicalized this process, increasing the number of agents involved in mineral extraction activities in a staggering way.

In order to make their assessments and judgments about the rare earth metals mining company, these men had to take this plurality of agencies into account. They mapped out opportunities and measured the benefits brought by this mining company trying to follow some of the circuits through which its activities went beyond its strict or formal domains, seeking information about some of the channels through which the wealth it produced trickled down to other subjects and agencies. For this purpose, they monitored these pickup trucks. Among the multiple vehicles involved in this dynamic, the latter were particularly common on the city streets (unlike, for example, large machinery, which was relatively restricted to the construction site and the mining area). Furthermore, it was the pickup trucks that transported daily, from the construction site to the city and vice versa, those whom my interlocutors seemed to hold most dear: the senior employees and the engineers, those primarily responsible for the enterprise. Monitoring the pickup trucks and the monetary circuits they activate thus makes it possible to map out which subjects, agencies, flows and opportunities come to the forefront when this new mining company arrives in the city. In Comerford's terms (2014: 110), we deal here with how such observation and narration practices contribute, in this new context, to a certain knowledge of 'the relations at play in this social universe' - who and what becomes, in this scenario, a protagonist, or a relevant subject or agency worthy of interest.

Having learned with these men to pay attention to the tags, I conducted my own survey, following vehicles that I saw on the city streets. Like my interlocutors, I never even got close to the construction site, nor did I engage with the companies through institutional channels. Over the course of a week in January 2023, I inventoried 31 different companies, each with its own tag, and was able to identify the line of business

4 A central concept in economic theory, the 'Keynesian multiplier' refers to the idea of the British economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) that when an entity spends money it becomes income for other people or companies that provided the purchased good or service; by spending this money, these latter will generate more demand and income and benefit other people and companies, and so on, in a virtuous cycle that multiplies spending and income.

5 I employ the terms used by economists and sociologists to describe more general transformations in the way companies and institutions operate over the last forty years, designating this 'flexible form of capitalist accumulation, based on reengineering, on the lean company, (...), [which] had enormous consequences in the world of work: (...) a growing reduction of the stable factory proletariat (...), flexibilization and deconcentration of the physical productive space; an enormous increase in the new proletariat, the factory and service subproletariat, [of] 'outsourced workers', subcontracted workers, part-time workers (...); an increase in middle and service wage earners (...); an expansion of what Marx called combined social labor where workers from different parts of the world participate in the production and service process' (Antunes 2005: 28-29). In the scope of anthropology, we are faced here with what Anna Tsing (2008) called the 'supply chain' or 'logistics chain capitalism'. 'Supply chain capitalism here refers to commodity chains based on subcontracting, outsourcing, and allied arrangements in which the autonomy of component enterprises is legally established even as the enterprises are disciplined within the chain as a whole' (Tsing 2008: 149). Although I disagree that bringing these 'supply chains' to the forefront is sufficient to understand the 'constitutive diversity of contemporary global capitalism', Tsing's (2008: 148) effort seems interesting to me because it focuses on transformations in the forms of production (and in the ways of analyzing these forms) that, having already been well worked out by other social scientists - for example via the concepts of 'global commodity chains' (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986), 'global value chains' (Sturgeon 2008) or 'global production networks' (Santos 2010) - have received little attention from anthropologists. For Tsing (2008: 149), on the other hand, 'questions raised by supply chains are the key to deliberations on wealth and justice in these times' (2008: 149).

in about half of the cases. I thus came across a world populated by companies that offered environmental engineering consulting services; equipment supply and local support; construction and civil engineering; engineering and infrastructure solutions; electrical services; bus, truck, equipment, and vehicle rentals; unmanned construction machinery and equipment rentals; garbage collection; open-pit mine implementation and operation; infrastructure works for industrial and commercial sectors; foundation and containment engineering; catering; drilling and blasting; explosives; and heavy machinery maintenance. The tag's numerical codes gave me a good approximation of the number of vehicles used by each company, and a reasonable estimate of their varying sizes: some had only 1 or 2 vehicles; most had less than 10; others worked with dozens; and two 'contractors' *[empreiteiras]* (the term comes from my interlocutors) had more than 100. With the exception of a few companies that do rental and maintenance, most of these tag-carrying companies were from outside the city—usually from Goiânia or other cities in Minas Gerais and Goiás where there is also mineral exploration. In approximately half of the cases, the vehicles in question were 4x4 pickup trucks. In addition, there were a few buses (which, like the pickup trucks, also circulated around the city to transport workers) and the rest were specialized vehicles receiving some repairs in tire repair shops and garages in the city.

Some small local businesses have achieved the 'honor' of being able to identify their vehicles with a tag. The only one whose owner I knew personally was the buffet restaurant I used to frequent, which expanded its kitchens and started to have five or six vehicles distributing lunch boxes to hotels and the project area. More modest, the participants in the conversations in front of my hotel had not achieved this 'trophy', and were content with other opportunities to 'be part of this supply chain' (a common expression among them): providing services to these 'tagged' subcontractors (which two of them, owners of a hotel and a mechanic's shop, managed to do) and selling goods to those who worked there (one of them had a grocery store; another arranged with his wife and maid to wash uniforms and do small sewing and repairs on clothes).

The efforts to monitor these trucks and the attention paid to these partial flows of income and money find a kind of synthesis in a local formula that, present in my fieldwork since its beginning, counts the total number of jobs created by a company. In 2008, for example, it was common to hear people saying that SAMA created 'eight hundred direct jobs, plus two thousand indirect ones'. At that point, the jobs of outsourced and subcontracted companies (the 'indirect ones') appeared to prevail over those provided by the company itself ('the direct ones'). In the most optimistic forecast I found regarding Serra Verde—and which coincides with the numbers published in a local newspaper (O Popular 2020)—this company would generate 1.5 thousand direct jobs and 6 thousand indirect ones. From the perspective of our protagonists, these numbers are exaggerated. But more relevant than this or that numerical estimate is the formula that expresses them, the emphasis on these indirect vacancies indicating the way in which these people are familiarizing themselves—resignedly and pragmatically—with the way in which mining companies and their 'offspring' have been experiencing, over the last few decades, their 'productive restructuring'.

In a conversation: expectations, anxieties and desires

In this section, I explore the expectations and anxieties that these men harbor regarding this new enterprise and the opportunities and problems that emerge from it. I emphasize from the outset the need to approach these expectations in the plural, so as to recognize their variety, complexity and ambivalence, as well as the diversity of contexts, conceptions, experiences, and situations that elicit and reproduce them. Seeking a way to try to do some justice to this 'plurality of concrete worlds [and] perspectives' (Bakhtin 1988) that shape them, I draw inspiration in this section from Carneiro's (2015) descriptive experiments: I combine first-person statements (recreated by me and therefore distinct from the testimonies present in the previous sections of the article) with the use of free indirect discourse, 'the kind in which the distance between the native's word and

that of the ethnographer tends to a minimum' (Goldman 2015). To this end, I rework and group data produced during field trips in 2022 and 2023 with information I have been collecting since 2008 in order to present them in the form of a fictional chat involving precisely the men I discuss in this article. This type of description has an additional advantage: the alternation of voices and themes within the same conversation helps to translate into written text some of the dialogical dynamism, intellectual complexity and hubbub (the 'plurilingualism', 'heteroglossia' or 'polyphony', as Bakhtin would say) characteristic of this type of interaction.

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Roberval is satisfied with his business, since all these firms and outsiders have actually made it possible to expand his hotel. Carlão continues to operate the same little shop as always, located beside the Roberval establishment, offering groceries, personal hygiene products, sweets, drinks and cigarettes and everything else that may be necessary to the guests of this hotel, the truck drivers at the entrance of the asbestos mining company and those who frequent the nearby tire shops and gas stations. Edvelton worked at SAMA in the past, and after leaving there he opened a mechanical workshop on that same avenue. Miltão also worked at SAMA, and is now grinding and packaging coffee that he grows on his farm; he recently got a stall at the city fair, which is at least helping to make his product a little better known. Tiquinho does a little bit of everything: fixes pressure cookers, sells the lettuce and carrots he grows in the garden, sells fish bait and alcoholic drinks to neighbors, travels around the city with his tamales cart, prepares medicines with homemade roots.

With the arrival of the mining company, everyone had, at some point, some expectation of making some money. With so many people at his hotel, Roberval remains optimistic. The others participants in these conversations, today, are more skeptical. But even in the case of those who already benefit from new customers or from an increase in sales of the goods they offer, the certainty that a deal will be closed coexists with other emotions: some anxiety, some revolt, some pride, some resignation, some concern for those for whom one is responsible.

Anxiety to make the most of a situation that everyone knows is temporary—to make the most of it for as long as possible. You do have to be in a hurry, there is some urgency to get something extra, some extra money while the construction site is there. This turmoil they are witnessing, these people from abroad coming to work in Minaçu, these accommodations for them sprouting everywhere, these loads of workers and the mess they make *[peãozagens]*, this will only last a year—at most, two. The time needed to build the industrial installation necessary for the mine to operate. When that happens, there are only a few people needed at the mine. Then it's all about modernities and modernization, machine machine machine and a only a little bit of man—and qualified ones. And doesn't this current situation remind one of what happened when the Cana Brava and São Salvador dams were built? The works in this case were completed with a speed that surprised many people. And many people went bankrupt, because these unsuspecting people thought that those construction sites, that bunch of pedestrians and engineers on the streets, that demand and consumption, that all of this would stay in the city for longer, as had happened in the almost fifteen years it took to build the first hydroelectric plant, Serra da Mesa. Of course, over these fifteen years things varied a lot, there were some periods of greater movement, others where everything was somewhat at a standstill—but in any case the works continued and for fifteen years there was movement, there were opportunities. Wasn't that when you filled your pockets with money, huh, Roberval?

— ... but this all makes us revolt. Don't you? Because it is the riches of this land, of our soil, our nature, that is going away. Forever. These people come, explore, extract, build pipelines, lines, paths, wires, and the energy and ore flow. Our riches go away like this, and the profit goes elsewhere. And how is Minaçu? There's a little bit left, a crumb. There is one job or another left for the city's mechanical workshops, an engine to rectify, a burner to repair, a new accessory to install, a pickup truck to wash. And let the little ones compete for those crumbs among themselves, let them compete to see who gets the job, who gets the service, the

opportunity. Have you noticed the increasing number of automobile repair shops popping up? Have you seen how competition is increasing? And only half a dozen jobs emerged. All this is rubbish.

—Ah, but leave this revolt aside, this bitterness! You have to overcome sadness and take advantage of the opportunity to work, and try to be part of such an impressive project. And be proud to be part of the chain. Didn't you hear what the mayor said? 'The supply chain will extend, it will be regional.' Weren't the president, the governor, together the other day, talking about Minaçu? This will be the largest rare earth metals mine in the country. Look how many people from abroad are watching, look how many people from all over are coming here. The geologists coming from Minas Gerais, the engineers coming from Rio de Janeiro. The Chinese. The Americans. Have you ever been to the construction site and seen the size of the machines, the amount of knowledge and technology gathered there? It is a privilege to be involved in such an important undertaking. They say that they have now brought a jumbo like never before seen in Goiás. A drilling machine like this can only be found in subway works in large cities, in the largest cities in the world...

—... was there cruelty, was there exploitation? Yes, there was. Did anyone die with hardened lungs because of the asbestos? Yes, they did. Are there those who are still in court today seeking compensation, and have received nothing? Yes. SAMA thought she was the owner of the city, did she want to rule everything? Did the company want to boss the mayor, the councilors? She did. But look on the other hand, she was a presence, and that was a way of being present here. She had a certain commitment, the company was involved in the life of the city. Was it not SAMA who emancipated Minaçu, which was previously part of the municipality of Uruaçu? And we would find SAMA on the radio, in Diário do Norte[6], in teaching materials in schools. Everywhere. In sponsored teams, parties, shows, bands, in the traditional horseback rides *[cavalgadas]*. It had centrality, visibility. She was everywhere. It was part of everyday life in the city. Did she control the worker? Yes, she controlled. In the beginning, were the Kalungas, the quilombola people who lived on other side of the river, almost forcibly dragged to work at the company? Yes, they were. Deceit was used by the company against those who were coming from Maranhão? It was. Is there a lot of nonsense about the company being a mother? Is it a pretext to control the people? Of course. But the company had its doors open to those who were willing to get involved with it, to become part of the family. Are all companies the same? Yes, they are. But are they different? Yes, they are. Look at the difference between Furnas, the firm that built the Serra da Mesa dam, and Tractebel, the one that built Cana Brava and São Salvador. One was state-owned, the other was a private company. Ask those affected by dams if there has been any difference in dealing with them. Was there a difference? There was. Here Serra da Mesa had, and still has, a little bit of a presence. Every end of the day, just see the two buses full of people arriving back, those that this firm still employs. The people notice, stop, watch the workers returning home. This Tractebel... It doesn't even have an office here in the city - or does it? Do you know anyone who works for her? Two buses full of sweaty and tired males at five in the afternoon (people notice, stop, watch - you can see): is it little, nothing? Yes, it is almost nothing. But does it make a difference in the way people evaluate a firm, and feel treated? It does indeed.

—And listen to what my boy came to tell me the other day. What boy? My oldest, the one who got his D driver's license last month, the one who is already driving a truck to Serra Verde. That's my pride. Yes, he has already been formally hired *[fichado]* in Serra Verde. In Serra Verde, the firm that really runs the project, the owner! The real mining company - not just any contractor *[empreiteira]* or outsourcer *[terceirizada]*. Yes, it makes a difference. In Serra Verde there are more rights... Working there, my boy could start seeing the psychologist. The firm pays. And you can also exercise at the gym, for free. (What gym? Don't you know that Serra Verde is now occupying that weight room that previously existed at SAMA? They are taking up a lot of space that was just sitting there, abandoned). But I don't really agree with what my boy said... He said

6 A regional newspaper.

that Serra Verde is a mother, and that the contractors and subcontractors are just old whores *[putas velhas]*. That's an exaggeration. Nonsense of a boy, who doesn't know the stories, who has just started working, who is easily impressed by these benefits, who wants to boast an advantage—he who got this better position (in Serra Verde!), he boasts all the time he is better than his colleagues who are all in outsourced companies or in contractors. But do you think is there really that much of a difference? Because I don't think that Serra Verde is a mother - or at least like SAMA was a mother. Did Serra Verde build a workers' village? Did Serra Verde invest in the city's infrastructure? Did she leave something for us, for the population? Did she build a hospital? No. I know, this SAMA hospital wasn't for everyone, it was inside SAMA, inside. But still, in emergencies, it saved the lives of many people here in Minaçu. I remember when...—Yes, I know, you're right, of course: who built the municipal hospital, the one that still works today, the one that serves everyone, was Furnas. Furnas, the firm that built the first dam, Serra da Mesa and which was a government, state-owned company. Furnas you can say she was a mother. Furnas also built a workers' village. So, don't we still have two neighborhoods today named after these companies which were real mothers? At this end of the city, we have Vila da SAMA; at the other end, we have Vila de Furnas. A company that builds villages *[vilas]*, houses, hospitals, that provides stable employment; a firm that establishes someone, that allows someone to stay firmly in the same job, in the same profession, in the same place: that's what I call a mother.

—And all of us here are fathers, family men, right? We have to take care of those who depend on us. As fathers, as bosses, as citizens concerned with helping the people *[ajudar o povo]*... The guards here at the hotel, these boys that I employ, who are like my children, who I helped raise, who I finished raising...

Conclusion (or the outline of some partial syntheses, which open up new problems)

Let's go back to that story about the worker *[peão]* and the engineer at the motel. Considering it as a kind of myth, and interpreting it as such, will help us think about the dismay that pervades this 'economic' sagacity of those who focus their attention on what is happening in the streets and mechanic workshops of Minaçu.

The structure of this story evokes other narratives I heard there, where subjects in unequal social positions face each other in conflicting interactions whose outcome contains a comic effect and/or a moral lesson. In an inversion of traditional hierarchies, in these narratives the weakest reveals itself to be more clever and quick, and, cunningly, prevails over the most powerful in the end[7]. The small scale gold miner triumphs over the geologist, the illiterate hillbilly *[jeca]* triumphs over the doctor, the well-travelled *[corrido]* triumphs over the well-read *[lido]*[8].

But in the plot I presented here there is something like an inversion of this inversion of traditional hierarchies: and the one who gets along well and has the last laugh is the engineer, who leaves the worker *[peão]* disappointed and deceived—or to wait, in vain, for a pickup truck that, stealthily, passed by him without him noticing. This inversion of the inversion seems to suggest that these men I deal with identify not only with the engineer, the hero-protagonist of the story that entertains them; but equally with the worker *[peão]*.

It is also the discomfort generated by this identification with the engineer's antagonist that drives these men I consider here, in other records and narratives, to try to highlight the difference between themselves and these workers *[peões]*, reinforcing the dividing lines that reaffirm good distances - those that regulate, for example, class distinctions—which, they hope, still exist. Conversations like the one we consider here also make this

7 Around the same time that Da Matta (1997 [1978]) wrote about Pedro Malasartes—'a traditional figure in popular tales from the Iberian Peninsula, as an example of an invincible, cunning, cynical trickster *[burlão]*, inexhaustible with devices and deceptions, without scruples and without remorse' (Cascudo 1988: 536)—and most likely in dialogue with him, Velho (1979) intuited the relevance of this character for the sociological analysis of patronage dynamics (in the sense that Mediterraneanist anthropologists attributed to the term and which guides me in the interpretation of our 'myth') in the same Tocantins basin that I discuss here.

8 A common opposition in the region where I work, it contrasts those who obtained their knowledge through travels around the world with those who acquired it at school—and who, usually, arrive there from metropolises and capitals, generally with the aim of carrying out a 'research' *[pesquisa]*.

possible, as spaces where they, proclaiming their success as traders and businesspeople, affirm their ability to 'participate in the supply chain' of the mining company. In these men's efforts to distance themselves from the workers *[peões]*, as relevant as a closed deal is the performance of the ability to do so (albeit as a subcontractor of a subcontractor of a subcontractor etc. of the mining company). I will deliberately use the image of the game to highlight the 'agonistic' taste for dispute and competition that permeates this situation, where an 'art of fighting' is combined with a 'dimension (...) of spectacle or public dramatization' (Comerford 2003: 23). In this fight, there is a kind of youthful rivalry that manifests itself through displays of virility that concern not only performance in the game itself—but also someone's ability to position himself as a real competitor; as someone who is not a mere pawn *[peão]*; as someone who is (still) powerful and gifted, and equipped with the necessary conditions to enter the field—or a motel room. Therefore, not everyone will be able to 'compete' in this 'market'. Framed in this way, the chances of obtaining income within the scope of the arrival of the new mining company appear as something restricted to a selected few—those who are capable or blessed with the possibility of 'being part of the supply chain'. The attention and importance attributed to tags also resides in the fact that they act as emblems or trophies, visible and public indicators of this potential participation—in the game, in the chain—and the prestige associated with it.

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Both in this story of the engineer in the motel and in the knowledge practices that I described there is a crucial role played by the spectator: the one who, on the sidelines, tries to retain something from plots in which he knows he is a supporting player, yearning for a fuller participation in this 'chain' of events. This spectator's attention to the *movements* in front of him is also justified by the fleeting nature of what passes before his eyes, quickly heading to the scenes where the relevant actions of those who are in fact the protagonists will take place: the construction site where the mining company's facilities are located or the inside of the motel room. Paradoxically, the viewer only has access to the behind-the-scenes and preparations of these scenarios; and the value given to this that is out of their sight suggests to me that this situation bears a resemblance to those 'occult economies' that the Comaroffs (1999) speak of.

From this outsider conqueror of other people's women and lands—the engineer—all that the worker *[peão]* thinks it is possible to extract is a pix. But even this limited and easily transferable amount of money does not seem assured, and it is also the efforts and cunning necessary to 'magically' capture something of these elusive beings and flows that are at stake in these observation practices. Significantly, the worker *[peão]* acts by resorting to blackmail. Let us remember then that this term already appeared in this article, when I made reference to those 'socioeconomic blackmail devices' that, in the argument of Acselrad and Bezerra (2010), help to explain the acquiescence of the local population to the operation of enterprises whose polluting and harmful effects are famously known. With this I want to suggest the relevance that, in this universe, these blackmail, scams and illusions assume, as well as the value attributed to these types of extortion that, with their 'magical allure of making money from nothing', bring with them the promise of 'delivering almost preternatural profits, yield[ing] wealth sans perceptible production, value sans visible effort' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 281). I remember that, in this story, the worker *[peão]* and the engineer are far from their places of work, and it is in these other places that the worker's opportunity to obtain exceptional financial gains arises. The way the engineer gets rid of the extortion (using alcohol gel to remove the tag from the truck) is also indicative of the latter's trickery, and suggestive that blackmail such as this is not rare in that world (chances are he had already gone through this and knew exactly how to solve the problem). In the view of Comaroff and Comaroff (1999: 281), these 'occult economies' are also characterized by the proliferation of stratagems like these—'schemes that put a *con* in e*con*omics'.

Despite the fact that we are in a situation where everyone seems to resort to blackmail, scams and extortion, the engineer's chances—compared to the worker—of being successful in resorting to these schemes and stratagems are relatively greater. Let us also remember that, contrary to what normally happens in narratives and jokes of this genre, in the story we consider here, the one who wins is the most powerful. What, above, I called 'the inversion of the inversion of the traditional hierarchy' characteristic of our myth seems to indicate some changes occurring in the correlation of forces between the subjects in question, as well as in the strategies they resort to in their interaction. In the same way that, over the last few decades, mining companies have known how to appropriate the discourses of their critics, subverting them and putting them to work in their favor (Kirsh 2014; Gaviria 2015; Giffoni 2019; Acselrad et al 2021), the interpretation I present here points out that they and their representatives have also been making a consistent use of these tricks and trickery that we usually see as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985).

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Daily and meticulously monitoring the news and signs indicating that the asbestos mining company will soon effectively close its activities, these men are witnessing the slow death of the 'mother of the city'. They thus seem to suffer and regret this more than other residents of the municipality (for example, those friends of mine affected by dams living on the outskirts). The company's continuous functioning from the 1970s onwards was decisive for their small businesses to sustain themselves, for the acquisition of the status they acquired in local social life and for the relative stability they were able to experience throughout this time. The value of all this becomes even more evident when we remember the ephemeral and feverish nature of the comings and goings and the ups and downs of those *movements* that have always shaped the history and the *economy* of Minaçu.

But what the imminent death of this mother generates is not only suffering and lamentation—but also helplessness: like that experienced by an orphan who, finding himself alone in the world, and in the absence of his family references, becomes disoriented or bewildered. Here we find yet another manifestation of the anxieties generated by this 'imminence of the desert' that Perutti (2022) talks about, when this author evokes these many places (real and imaginary) that are dead, still, forgotten; these 'holes' where no highway passes nearby, where there are no companies—where there is no *movement*. This bewilderment permeates and stimulates the economic knowledge practices that I described in this article. As I indicated, the attention to the pickup trucks and the mapping of the movements that are related are associated with the efforts of these men to situate themselves in this new reality that is unfolding before them. In this recent scenario, the authoritarian, perennial and visible (omni)presence of the asbestos mining company gave way to a configuration where the 'new' mining company - that of rare earths metals—materializes (and disguises) in other ways. The latter is being installed in a remote area dozens of kilometers from the city, and is only accessible to vehicles with authorization to enter there—the tag. Furthermore, this new venture takes place via this multiplicity of outsourced and subcontractors that greatly complicates the identification of relevant agencies and subjects. It is also the effort to gain some knowledge 'of the relationships at play in this social universe' (Comerford 2014: 110) which explains my interlocutors' obsession with those trucks.

Just above I compared the anxieties of my protagonists, adult men who are fathers, to the restlessness and rivalry of young people who, fearing being excluded, do their best to participate—or to pretend to participate—in a game where there is no place for everyone interested in playing to compete in it. Now, I bring these anxieties closer to the bewilderment and disorientation of an orphan. Such analogies also interest me to sketch a synthesis of the anxieties and desires that circumscribe the dynamics of these conversations, thus allowing us to glimpse both the 'economic' scenario emerging recently in the city and some of the elements that, in a more perennial

way, structure certain images of masculinity for the subjects I deal with. I emphasize that this association between the *economy*, on the one hand, and the practices and moralities of men like these, on the other, is far from being circumstantial, or merely analytical: because as a native category, this *economy* is delineated by this substantial and markedly gendered imbrication of practices, knowledge, stories, circulations, games and anxieties. And here I return to the approach that promotes a shift from an economic anthropology towards an anthropology of *economics*, the latter considered as a native category. Coming into existence in automobile repair shops, garages, mines, roads and construction sites, *the economy of Minaçu* is what takes shape and begins to exist in these masculine places and paths that smell of ore and diesel oil, and that are marked by the dirt of grease, of the mud (Guedes 2013b) and of the filthy jokes told there.

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The orphan's helplessness, the child's revolt against his erratic mother, the youthful desire to participate in the game, the countryman's fear of being forgotten in the desert—all these weaknesses are articulated with the virile attributes embodied in this 'cultural hero': the engineer of that story. I suggest here that the latter's position and qualifications allow him to act in accordance with this 'provider ethic' whose central value is the 'ability to generate income to support the family' (Fontes 2018: 86; cf. Zaluar 2000). In line with this ethic, work is seen as something painful, in itself not a source of satisfaction, pride or identity, appearing more as a means than an end in itself. Our engineer, in fact, is presented to us far from any office or industrial installation, and at work time he is enjoying carnal pleasures that are available to him due to his social position (and, as my interlocutors insist, also because of the pickup truck he drives). His cunning and trickery, and this ability to simultaneously be a stud and a 'providing' husband and family man, represent an ideal that is indisputably valuable to all the men in those conversations. The valorization of this 'provider ethic' and the disregard for the concrete means through which such earnings are obtained (let us remember those blackmail and 'schemes that put a con in *econ*omics') seem to equally correlate with the centrality of pickup trucks in this world, and the environmental consequences resulting from all this. Their vast truck beds and their strength in transporting heavy loads suggest that what counts, ultimately, is what you take 'home'. This lack of importance attributed to how what is carried was obtained is the other side of what, in the opening pages of this article, I called the 'truculent power' of these vehicles: demiurgically and childishly, the pretension they claim to go over any obstacles and resistance, of overcoming the singularities of environments, turning all terrains, grounds and landscapes into paths and tracks.

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