

**GRINGO LOVE:  
AFFECT, POWER, AND MOBILITY IN SEX TOURISM, NORTHEAST BRAZIL**

by

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M.A., Concordia University, 2005

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
(Anthropology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

April 2012

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## **Abstract**

My dissertation is a feminist ethnography of global sex tourism in Ponta Negra, a tourist area in the coastal city of Natal, Northeast of Brazil that has become the site of important forms of mobilization against sex tourism. It critically examines the ambiguous relationships of love and money between (white) western male tourists and (mixed-race or black) Brazilian women. My methods for the project (conducted 2007-2008) focused on in-depth interviews with Brazilian women, European men, and various stakeholders such as business owners, residents, Non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, feminist activists and state agents; I also conducted participant-observation in bars and at beaches. I theoretically situate these global 'sex tourism' relationships within contemporary political economic structures, historical processes of inequality in Brazil, gendered patterns of mobility and affect, as well as sites of global desire

A major theme in my thesis concerns the politics of the rescue industry as articulated by Brazilian NGOs and through campaigns against sex tourism, which typically locate the problem of sex tourism in the individual (i.e. women as victims; foreign men as deviants). This approach fails to address the complex structural inequalities and global forces that shape the lives of these women, and negates several important aspects of Brazilian women's and foreign men's experiences. My research shows that both are invested in ambiguous intimacies that blur affect and interest in complex ways.

My main argument in the thesis is that Brazilian women in Natal capitalize on the ambiguities of sex tourism and put their femininity to work in order to establish long-term, legitimate ties with foreigners in the hope of migrating to Europe and marrying up,

something they find hard to imagine, much less experience, in Brazil. The appeal for foreigners further reveals a profound sense of dissatisfaction with their social locations. Thus, love with foreigners acts as both an escape and a catalyst to remake themselves as modern subjects in projects of mobility, whether social, spatial or economic.

## **Preface**

The ethics review for this research was approved by the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (certificate number H09-03261).

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## Glossary

### ***Portuguese***

### **English**

*Ajuda*

Help

*Amar*

To love

*Apaixonado(a)*

In love

*Assumir*

To assume

*Barracas*

Improvised kiosks

*Branco(a)*

White

*Brasileiro(a)*

Brazilian man/woman

*Cafuzo*

Colloquially refers to ‘cheap’ men

*Cavalheiro*

Gentleman

*Colegas*

Peers

*Companhia*

Company (also used in the sense of escort)

*De graça*

Free of charge

*Discoteca*

Disco/Nightclub

*Embranquecimento*

Whitening

*Essa Vida*

This life

*Estrangeiro(s)*

Male Foreigner(s)

*Experto(a)*

Skilfull; smart

*Exploração*

Exploitation

*Favela*

Shantytown

*Fazer Amor*

To make love

*Filha/fihlinha de papai*

Daddy’s girl



<i>Fora</i>	Outside
<i>Garota(s) de programa</i>	Prostitutes/escorts
<i>Garota(s)</i>	Diminutive of garota(s)de programa; means girl
<i>Gostar</i>	To like
<i>Gringo(a)</i>	Foreign man/woman
<i>Là</i>	There
<i>Lesbica</i>	Lesbian
<i>Melhorar de vida</i>	To improve one's life
<i>Morenidade</i>	Brownness
<i>Moreno(a)</i>	Brown
<i>Mulata</i>	Mulatto woman; a polysemic category mostly referring to women of mixed origin, including African descent.
<i>Mudar de Vida</i>	To change one's life
<i>Namoro</i>	Courtship
<i>Namorado(s)</i>	Boyfriend(s)
<i>Namorar</i>	To court, to date
<i>Negro(a)</i>	Black
<i>Necessidade</i>	Necessity
<i>Nessa vida</i>	In this life
<i>Paquerar</i>	To Flirt
<i>Patroa</i>	Boss, employer
<i>Pousada</i>	Guesthouse

<i>Praça</i>	Central place
<i>Profissional do sexo</i>	Sex worker
<i>Precisar</i>	To need
<i>Programa(s)</i>	Explicit arrangement(s) to exchange sex for money
<i>Prostituição</i>	Prostitution
<i>Prostituta(s)</i>	Prostitute(s)
<i>Putas(s)</i>	Whore(s)
<i>Real (reais)</i>	Brazilian currency
<i>Roça</i>	Fields
<i>Sair dessa vida</i>	To escape this life, to get out of this life
<i>Telenovelas</i>	Soap operas
<i>Travesti(s)</i>	Literally transvestites; the term used to refer to male-to-female transsexuals
<i>Turismo sexual</i>	Sex Tourism
<i>Vergonha</i>	Shame
<i>Vício</i>	Addiction, vice

## Acknowledgements

Writing my dissertation has been a more challenging project than I could have ever anticipated. Indeed, my PhD began with a sudden loss – the death of my mother – and was punctuated by it, as well as by other obstacles along the way. I am not sure whether I would have completed this project without the emotional, intellectual, institutional, and financial support of countless individuals and institutions. I would like to acknowledge this support here, but my words cannot express fully the extent of my gratitude, or do justice to the tremendous help I was given.

This project originated, to some degree, with my first encounter with anthropology, while an undergraduate student at Concordia University. It is there that I met Sally Cole, my ‘anthropological mother’, who truly ‘birthed’ me into anthropology. Sally hired me as a research assistant and introduced me to Brazil, gender, and feminist anthropology. She even brought me to work with her and conduct fieldwork in the Northeast of Brazil, an experience that deeply changed me and rooted in me the desire to pursue anthropology; I cannot thank her enough for that. Her trust and mentorship have profoundly shaped my trajectory, and to this day, Sally remains an inspiring role model in my life. *Minha companheira*, thank you for bringing me on this path along with you.

At the University of British Columbia, I have received enormous support from faculty, staff and students in the Department of Anthropology and I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of those who have helped me in one way or another. I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Alexia Bloch, for her trust, inspiration, and guidance all along my doctoral studies. When in doubt while crafting my research project, she offered sound advices and trusted the decisions I made. Alexia read, edited, and commented upon several rough drafts of this dissertation, offering invaluable feedback, providing intellectual challenges, and making sure to keep me on the right track when necessary. Beyond the dissertation, she mentored me in countless ways, from grant writing to publishing to applying for jobs. I am greatly indebted to her for helping me landing a tenure-track position in Anthropology at Carleton University while still an ‘ABD’. My heartfelt thanks to you Alexia, for your fabulous mentorship and trust, and for believing in my potential to accomplish this project and much more.

My committee members, Gastón Gordillo and Becki Ross, were strong pillars and constant source of inspiration at all stages of my doctoral studies. I am deeply thankful to Gastón for the critical insights, intellectual stimulation and thorough engagement with my doctoral work, as well as for constantly pushing me to think further! *Muchísimas gracias Gastón por toda su ayuda!* Becki’s commitment to a critical feminist sociology profoundly influenced me and shaped this dissertation in countless ways. I want to thank her for her intellectual rigor, for her careful, meticulous and engaged reading of my dissertation, for her invaluable and inspiring comments, as well as for the fabulous opportunity to teach in Women’s and Gender Studies. My warmest thanks to you Becki, I have learned so much while working with you!

I would like to extend my gratitude to Jennifer Chun and Alejandra Bronfman, the university examiners, and to Sealing Cheng, the external examiner, who all engaged so productively with my work, offering their clever critics and inspiring comments. I will certainly carry their insights beyond the confined of this project. Special thanks to John Barker who kindly acted as a temporary supervisor during my comprehensive

examination, and to Bruce Miller, always eager to exchange with me about Brazil and my doctoral work. I am also grateful to Bill French, Juanita Sundberg, Lynne Phillips and Sally Cole who all have read an early version of Chapter 3 and generously offered critical feedback on it.

The research for this dissertation was made possible by generous funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and from the University of British Columbia (UBC). My sincere gratitude to these institutions, as their financial support allowed me not only to conduct fieldwork in Brazil, but also to imagine and realize this entire project. I also want to express my deepest thanks to the Liu Institute for Global Issues at UBC, which provided me with both institutional and financial support in the form of office space and grants to realize workshops and reading groups. A special thanks to Sally Reay for the institutional support! At the Liu, I would also like to express my thanks to Geraldina Polanco, Sara Koopman, Lara Rosenoff, Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, and Erin Baines for the words of encouragements, helpful tips, and intellectual support.

Perhaps the greatest outcomes of the support received from the Liu Institute are the many intellectual communities that have emerged from it; I will for long treasure the rich discussions of the Research Group on Gender and Sexuality in Latin America, especially with Manuela Valle and Oralia Gómez-Ramírez, two bright and inspiring women I truly feel privilege to have meet, and whom I admire for their political views as much as for their intellectual engagement with the world. Manuela, thanks for the fabulous, engaging conversations of the last few years and for all the emotional and intellectual support. Oralia, we have gone through so much together since I began my PhD in 2005, and you were there, for me, in so many ways, both intellectually and emotionally... We have engaged in countless discussions, workshops, talks, conferences, etc., and your insights have made it into this thesis in so many ways! Thanks for being in my life, my dear Oralia, as both a generous friend and a like-minded anthropological companion!

To the members of my ‘writing group’ at UBC – Rachel Donkersloot, Robin O’Day and Susan Hicks – my deepest thanks for creating a safe space to share both our writings and our experience with the writing process. It definitely helped to alleviate the sense of isolation and loneliness that comes with writing! Susan, you have been a close intellectual companion during all those years, and I am deeply indebted to you for your insatiable desire to discuss and debate almost anything and everything with me! Thanks for the intellectual and emotional support all along, and for the many critical insights that you so kindly offered throughout my doctoral studies. My sincere thanks to Ana Vivaldi and Rafael Wainer, for their friendship and support during difficult times, and for being such engaged intellectual companions, and thanks to Natalie Baloy for her friendship and for the many momentarily escapes away from my dissertation!

A special thanks to Natasha Damiano Paterson who translated segments of interviews from Italian to English. I would also like to thank Julien Henon for his hard work on making the map of Ponta Negra that appears in this dissertation. *Julien, milles mercis pour ton aide généreuse et pour cette fabuleuse carte!* To all the students in my ANTH 312, ANTH 303B and WMST 425B classes at UBC, thanks for engaging so deeply with my doctoral work and for being so inspiring!

In Natal, I would like to thank the Coletivo Leila Diniz –Ações de Cidadania e Estudos Feministas, for the institutional support provided during the field research that led to this dissertation. In particular, I would like to thank Joluzia Batista and Analba Brazão Teixeira for their kindness, hospitality, friendship and generous assistance in the field. Their feminist work linking theory to praxis – however imperfect or difficult to achieve – is a great source of inspiration. I would also like to thank the Department of Anthropology at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte for inviting me to present my research findings, and especially Elisete Schwade for the general assistance in Brazil, the intellectual support, the helpful feedback, and the friendship that further developed when she came to live in Vancouver. Special thanks to Adriana Piscitelli, Thaddeus Blanchette, and Ana Paula da Silva for sharing their precious knowledge of Brazil and sex tourism, for the invitation to present my work at workshops they organized in Brazil, and for their insightful comments on excerpts from my doctoral work. My sincere thanks to Lita, my field companion for six weeks in August and September 2007, and with whom I shared many conversations that deeply enriched my fieldwork and this dissertation. For their friendship and support while in the field, thanks to Flávio, Carol and Lucas, Maria da Lucia and Mácia.

I am extremely grateful to all the people and organizations in Natal who have agreed to participate in the research that led to this dissertation and to share with me on a topic fraught with such tensions and stigma. I hope that I have done justice to your words. And to the Brazilian women depicted in these pages, I am profoundly grateful for your willingness to share with me – a gringa – about your difficult lives. I cannot express enough how much it means to me. My warmest thanks to the women I have called Bebel, Ana, and Laila for welcoming me into their lives with such openness, sincerity, warmth, kindness, and generosity.

Over the course of writing my dissertation, many friends outside academia have offered their generous support in countless ways. My warmest thanks to Marie-Claude Asselin and Frederic Amyot. Your insatiable intellectual curiosity blows me away! Thanks for your incredible emotional support, for the innumerable questions asked about my dissertation, and for being such unconditional fans of my work... *Merci Marie et Fred d'être dans ma vie, et de m'avoir fait le plus cadeau au moment où j'en avais tellement besoin: être la marraine de votre premier fils, Laurent...*

Pascale, you are my hero. I cannot express the extent of my admiration for you, Dr. Hatcher, or say enough of how much it meant to me knowing that you had been there before... Your words of encouragements had more impact that you can ever imagine, for they came from someone who knew the pain and isolation from undertaking such a project. *Merci du fond cœur, Pascale*, for your constant emotional support throughout the years in spite of the distance.

My long time friends in Quebec, *les filles*, Mélanie Normand, Isabelle Côté, Mathilde Côté, and Karine Blouin, *vous êtes comme mes soeurs*. You were there, in so many ways, during all these years, despite the distance. It felt great to be able to come back to Quebec and feel 'at home' with you. I am lucky to have you all in my life, and to count on such a supportive and loving group of friends –always there, even managing to make a (virtual) appearance at my defence! *Du fond du cœur, merci, les filles, d'être dans ma vie*. And special thanks to Alexandre Vigneault, who has also been there for me

during these years. *Merci pour les milles et une conversations inspirantes qui ont parsemées ces dernières années, et pour ton accueil chaleureux à Montréal!*

My family took a big blow when my mother died; and being away in Vancouver or in Natal, as well as working intensely on my doctoral research, added to the difficulty. I want to thank my whole family, for their unconditional love and unquestionable trust in my ability to accomplish this project. Their emotional support helped me to carry on at times of hardship. My father, John Moisan, encouraged me to pursue my PhD despite his terrible loss, and reminded me that my mother would have preferred to see me keeping with my path. *J'avais besoin de ces mots pour continuer.* I would like to thank him, as his resilience and courage are such an inspiration for me. *Merci John, d'être si vivant.* His wife, Danielle, has had her own battles too, and to see them both living their life to the fullest of possibilities was the best inspiration for my own hardships (even if mine were quite modest in comparison!). *Merci Danielle, d'être si vivante aussi, et d'être une si belle présence dans la vie de mon père et dans la mienne.*

I would like to thank my two brothers, two strong forces in my life, David Carrier-Moisan and Philippe Carrier-Moisan, who have been there for me during all those years in their own distinct ways. David has generously welcomed me into his home during my repeated visits to Quebec City, showed great interest in my doctoral work, and along with his partner, Julie Paquet, and their two daughters, Léa-Maude and Maïka, provided a space to forget about my doctoral work! *Un gros merci à David, Julie, Léa-Maude, et Maïka, pour la généreuse hospitalité lors des mes visites répétées, pour tout le soutien et les douces attentions, pour les milles et un mots d'encouragements... vous avez su, au fil des ans, me distraire, me faire rire, et me faire oublier la lourdeur de ma thèse... Merci d'être des fans aussi dévoués!* Philippe, his partner Annie Moisan, and their son Émile are also avid, devoted fans. They have been, over the last few years, a constant source of regeneration and inspiration, giving me strength to continue with my own challenges. Thanks for the incredible emotional support! *Merci Philippe et Annie, pour votre si belle présence dans ma vie. Vous m'inspirez! Je suis tellement choyée d'être si bien accompagnée par vous malgré la distance. Et puis, avec le beau Émile, vous m'avez si souvent amené à me sauver de ma thèse! Du fond du cœur, un grand merci!*

I have an extended family of keen supporters who have been, for all those years, encouraging of my projects and unquestionably believing in my capacity to accomplish this task. To Lise Carrier, Pierre Carrier, Jacques Carrier, Claire Labrie, Julie Carrier, Guillaume Ouellet, and Luce Frenette, thank you for the words of encouragement and for welcoming me with so much warmth in your life!

Special thanks to Léa-Maude Moisan, my beautiful godchild and niece, who has grown up so much during the time it took me to carry this project to its completion, and who has suffered the most from my departure to Vancouver, which coincided with the loss of her *Mémé Jojo*. *Belle Léa-Maude, je sais que tu as trouvé ça difficile que je parte pour Vancouver. Je tiens à te remercier d'avoir été si patiente avec moi ... Je te dédie cette thèse de doctorat, en signe de mon amour pour toi. Merci d'être dans ma vie, Léa-Maude! Je t'aime!*

To my late mother Jocelyne Carrier, or Jojo, thanks for letting me pursue my own path and passions. I wish you were here to share this moment with me. I know you would be proud of me. And among all, you would understand the sense of accomplishment that comes with the end of such an endeavour. Thanks for passing onto me your incredible

determination. *Si j'ai enfin terminé, c'est en partie grâce à toi. Merci de m'avoir encouragé dans mon désir de poursuivre mes études, et d'avoir semé en moi cette soif de justice sociale et de savoir.* I wish you were here to see that in the end, things are working right for me... *Merci Jojo!*

And last but not least, from the deepest of my heart, thanks to my love, my husband, my life companion, William Flynn. Billy has been an incredible force for almost the entire duration of this project, and I know that I would not have completed my dissertation without him. He's been there, for me, in so many ways! Billy was in Brazil for parts of my fieldwork, and revealed to be a fabulous field companion and co-researcher. During the last few years, he has heard about my doctoral work countless times and patiently offered his critical reflections and insights. But more than that, Billy has been extremely supportive in the day-to-day writing process, knowing what to say, and how to say it: when overwhelmed with work, he showed tremendous patience; when in doubt, he reassured me; when needing sympathy, he comforted me; when discouraged, he cheered me up, and when in need of some teasing, he playfully and lovingly made fun of me...

If I am writing these lines now, having come full circle, it is because Billy is in my life. Thanks, my love! We went through this together, and now, at last, we can have a life without thesis. It feels like my life begins anew, and I am delighted you are on this path with me. Thanks for being in my life, Billy. I am truly lucky to have you as a companion, *tu m'apportes tellement! Je t'aime...* And thanks to Billy's daughter, Lauren Kearney, for putting up with the many constraints that writing my dissertation may have had in her life. I hope you'll join us in Ottawa for this new chapter of our respective lives...

*To Jojo.*

*And to Léa-Maude,  
who bore the weight of this project perhaps more deeply than anyone else.*



## Introduction

It is perhaps the image of mixed-race, 28 year-old Bebel<sup>1</sup> waiting for her flight to Italy in the Northeastern Brazilian city of Natal that best captures the issues I address in this dissertation. Full of expectations and anxieties, she was mostly delighted at the thought of eventually succeeding in her goal: “*sair dessa vida*” (to get out of this life). I had met Bebel the previous September (in 2007) in Ponta Negra, a tourist neighbourhood in the city of Natal. She was among the women who had made strategic use of the sex tourist economy to migrate and marry. After entertaining simultaneous transnational relationships, blurring love and money with three different Italian men she met in the bars and beaches of Ponta Negra, Bebel was on her way to Italy to live with (and later marry) one of them. She had achieved what many other women sought – *sair dessa vida* – something seen attainable only by traveling to a European elsewhere imagined as better than Brazil.

Or is it, after all, the best image? As I write these lines, I also have a flashback from about the same time as I had met Bebel: four researchers in a bar (a male

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<sup>1</sup> I have opted to use pseudonyms for all my interviewees to protect their identity and preserve anonymity, with the exception of those who spoke to me in their capacity as members of an organization. Thus, I have kept the real names of heads and members of NGOs as well as of the association of sex workers, ASPRO-RN, and the associations of residents and business owners. All other names were changed. While Ponta Negra is a real place and this ethnography an attempt to capture some of its spatial tensions and struggles, I have opted to change the names of the different bars, restaurants, hotels, and other businesses I refer to in order to avoid potential identification of the owners I interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I have opted to use several words in Portuguese, in order to provide the readers with the original words people used. Translation is an act of transformation, and at times, meaning is lost in the process. Some Portuguese words are particularly difficult to translate or do not have an equivalent in English. Therefore, I decided to include the original words used, and sometimes, to adopt the Portuguese word throughout, such as in the case of the phrase *garota de programa* because of its lack of any equivalent in English. When using a Portuguese word for the first time, I italicize it and provide the reader with a translation in parenthesis, then I simply use the word in Portuguese, without italicizing it further. All words are listed in the glossary in order to help readers navigate these words further in the dissertation.

Portuguese anthropologist, a female Brazilian student assisting him, a female Spanish sociologist and myself, a female anthropologist) observing women like Bebel and the foreign men who had traveled miles away from their home countries to encounter Brazilian women they imagined as “exotic others.” Strange indeed: the foreign men, mainly from Europe, gazing at the Brazilian women and vice versa, while the ethnographers, in turn, gazed at their interactions. This shift from sex object to object of knowledge was particularly notable, since just a few weeks prior to this night, a film crew was also in town, making a documentary film on sex tourism (Araújo 2008). When the film, *Cinderelas, Lobos e um Príncipe Encantado* (Cinderellas, Wolves, and a Prince Charming) was later released, it was a success and even played at the second Brazilian Film Festival in Vancouver, Canada in July, 2009. I went to see the film there, while I was writing this dissertation, and I recognized many of the women I had myself interviewed or spoken with. Why were there so many of us trying to document sex tourism in Ponta Negra at the same time, I thought? And what would the women themselves think of this global circulation of their images?

At about the same time as my encounter with the three other researchers, a well-respected professor argued during a public debate at the Federal Public University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) that the concept of sex tourism was “an invention of the state” and that what was happening in Ponta Negra should be seen as the expression of mutual, consensual sexual desires. This argument stayed with me, as I sought to make sense of the recent shifts in Ponta Negra and the many campaigns opposing sex tourism. Business owners would have certainly found this position laughable, whether they cashed in on sex tourism’s lucrative benefits or vehemently opposed it. Furthermore, the term “sex

tourism” was a particularly loaded one in Ponta Negra and everybody had an opinion on the phenomenon that had, according to local residents, transformed their landscape. If it were an invention of the state, why was sex tourism generating such inflamed discussions, polarized debates, rescue missions, and movements of opposition from both state and non-state actors?

There are many layers through which sex tourism may be approached and understood. My dissertation is an attempt to navigate the different webs of relationships and articulations that constitute sex tourism, including those that participate in making it an object of knowledge and a site of rescue intervention. In *Design for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*, the authors propose that what is needed in anthropological writing is not more tales of fieldwork but more tales of research design (Rabinow et al. 2008). They invite anthropologists to reflect more critically not only about the field, but also in terms of research design, that is the conceptualization of the research and the analysis following field research. They also suggest a shift away from studying “people” (e.g. migrant workers) to the study of “attributes” (e.g. work, migration) and invite a consideration of the complex assemblages that participate in the making of these attributes (2008: 77-79). Thus, they argue, since anthropologists have abandoned the project of “writing culture” (i.e. writing about timeless others) and have turned to the study of the contemporary,<sup>3</sup> they need to emphasize the design of their projects, rather than their experiences in the field.

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<sup>3</sup> As Rees summarizes it, the contemporary refers to the process whereby emergent phenomena are decomposed “into different elements that are assembled into one form constitutive of the phenomenon in question” (Rabinow et al. 2008: 58). And, as he continues, “the task of an anthropology of the contemporary is to choose – or find – an appropriate field site and to document and analyze such assemblages in the course of their emergence, to name them, to show their various effects and affects, and to make them available for thought and critical reflection” (Rabinow et al. 2008: 58).

My doctoral work follows their invitation, in that my project is partially motivated by an attempt to understand the attribute that is “sex tourism” in Ponta Negra. One could argue that I trace assemblages, that is the different nodes of power that are connected through sex tourism (Rabinow et al. 2008), especially when I engage various stakeholders and their different relations to sex tourism. Yet in other ways, my approach remains influenced by the tradition of long-term anthropological fieldwork, where the field occupies a central place. In other words, if my approach is predicated upon grasping this attribute called sex tourism, I still find value in seeking to also understand the experiences of those involved in what is called “sex tourism” and thus in studying people.

My overall goal in this dissertation is to challenge the mainstream meanings associated with sex tourism and the ways in which the concept is deployed both theoretically and politically. I critically examine sex tourism and its assemblages in both the scholarship concerned with the issue and the activism surrounding its eradication. The organizing principle of this thesis is that the term “sex tourism” as currently used in scholarship and activism fails to capture the complexity of the experiences of those who engage in its practice. In this introduction, I briefly present the theories informing my approach to sex tourism, in an attempt to elucidate the theoretical lenses that guide this ethnographic study of sex tourism in Ponta Negra. The next chapter will provide further insights into the ethnographic context and the methods used to carry out this project.

### **From “Sex Work” to the Ambiguous Nature of Sex Tourism**

When I initially designed this project, I imagined it as a follow-up from my previous work in the same region (Carrier-Moisán 2005). In 2004 I conducted six months

of fieldwork in the industrial town of Cascavel, in the neighbouring state of Ceará, a town reflecting regional patterns of rapid industrialization and intrastate migration led primarily by women. Migrant women's narratives pointed to their sense of empowerment following the transition from agricultural work to factory work, as they had achieved what they described as a level of economic independence and decision-making they had not experienced prior to migrating. They often contrasted the hard work in the *roça* (fields), including the drought and the hunger they had experienced growing up, with their stable wages in the factory.

I noticed, however, that there were important generational differences, as these women were, for the most part, in their thirties, forties, or fifties. Young women in their teens or twenties tended to imagine a very different future for themselves; fuelled by images of a global youth in which consumption, money and mobility were central, they identified more strongly as consumers, rather than as workers as their mothers had. Younger women described factory work as slave work, and commented on the meagre wages and exploitative conditions their mothers faced in the factories that employed them. They often aspired to a different life, talking about Cascavel in negative terms and commenting on the lack of possibilities in their hometown. Some of them frequented the beach towns not too distant from Cascavel, hoping to work in the tourism industry, and at times expressed their desire to live in Europe or North America.

When I returned for follow-up research a year later, in 2005, I noticed a shift in local discourses about tourism; sex tourism was on everybody's lips. While there, I read a series of articles in one of the local newspapers on sex tourism in the city of Fortaleza (Diário do Nordeste 2005) and later through Internet research learned about campaigns

against sex tourism in the cities of Fortaleza and Natal. I could easily imagine some of the young women I had spoken to in Cascavel as transitioning into sex tourism rather than following the lead of their mothers into factory work. I decided that I would study sex tourism, in line with my previous work on migrant factory workers. Thus, I initially conceptualized the project in terms of labour, and located my study within the richly textured scholarship on sex work that had emerged in the last few decades. I was particularly interested in the efforts of scholars and sex workers who challenge misguided preconceptions about sex work as a pathological activity and who situate sex work as a form of labour that has shifted historically and geographically (e.g. Brock 1998; Delacoste and Alexander 1987; Hubbard 1999; McClintock 1993; Nagle 1997; Ross 2010). This approach to sex work as a form of labour is an important shift away from the polarized victimization/liberation debate and it allows for a consideration of both the processes through which sex workers are subjugated and those through which they exert control. Scholars of sex tourism commonly locate their work within this scholarship, considering global sex work as mediated by global forces of production and consumption (Kempadoo 1998; Wonders and Michalowski 2001). This approach allows “to shift the attention from individual ‘prostitutes’ as social problems to ‘sex tourism’ as a form of global commerce that is transforming sex work, cities and human relationships” (Wonders and Michalowski 2001: 546). Scholars of sex tourism commonly recognize the ambiguity of sex tourism, starting with the early work of Cohen (1986) in Thailand referring to sex tourism as “open-ended prostitution” to Brennan’s discussion of love as “rational process with serious material consequences” (2004: 96) for Dominican female sex workers.

When I began the field research that led to this dissertation, I was thus attentive to the ambiguous nature of sex tourism and yet, I was still looking for “sex workers” and considering love as something strategically deployed by sex workers. It became particularly difficult, over the course of my fieldwork, to identify practices as belonging to the realm of “sex work” and to identify with certainty who was and who was not a sex worker, or in the local parlance, a *garota de programa*.<sup>4</sup> Like Cabezas (2009) in her research on sex tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, I eventually realized that *garota de programa* is a rather ambiguous, evasive, unstable subject. Intimate encounters between Brazilian women and foreign men exceed the realm of labour and rely deeply on what Cabezas calls “intimate interdependencies” (2009: 10) that cannot be easily characterized as “sex work.” For instance, several *garotas de programa* had long-term, transnational interactions with foreigners they referred to as their boyfriends but who also sent them remittances; other women who did not identify as *garotas de programa* blurred material interests in similarly subtle ways.

In this dissertation, I connect the scholarship on sex work as a form of labour with the insights of feminist scholars linking the affective to the economic (e.g. Cabezas 2009). The concept of “strategic intimacy” as developed by Alexia Bloch (2011) is particularly useful in grasping the ways that women make strategic use of their intimate ties with foreigners in projects of social and economic mobility. Bloch borrows the concept from Yukseker who uses it to describe the strategic use of flirtation by post-

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<sup>4</sup> The term *garota(s) de programa* literally translates as ‘program’s girl(s) but means prostitute(s). It is sometimes translated as ‘escort’ or ‘high class prostitute’ (Rohter 2006). I prefer to use the term *garota(s) de programa* and its colloquial diminutive, *garota(s)*, in its original language, given that a) it bears a slightly different meaning than *prostituta* (prostitute) or *profissional do sexo* (sex worker), b) it does not have an equivalent in English, and c) it was the term most commonly used by the women themselves. I will discuss the ways in which women make distinction between *garotas de programa* and *profissional do sexo* in Chapter 5.

Soviet women who buy merchandise in Turkey and capitalize on their image as alluring in order to secure good prices from their Turkish male suppliers. Bloch proposes a slightly different interpretation of strategic intimacy, closer to the meanings I intend to convey here. She uses the term to describe the practices of low-income post-Soviet women who are marginalized in Turkey as undocumented labour migrants, and who negotiate various forms of intimacy to secure more than favourable prices. These labour migrants have long-term aims; they seek to secure longer stays in Turkey through forms of intimacy blurring instrumentality and emotion. “These intimacies” Bloch proposes, “can lead to secure housing, permanent residence and substantial benefits for dependents (...) but they can also lead to long-lasting relationships” (2011: 508). This concept is at the core of my discussion in Chapter 6, in which I engage the intimate practices of women courting or marrying foreigners in attempts to secure their future.

### **Affect, Gender and Mobility**

My thesis takes up themes central to feminist ethnography more broadly, specifically insights into the intersections of affect, gender, and mobility in a world characterized by intensifying processes of global capitalism, contributing to a growing body of scholarship (e.g. Bloch 2011; Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2009; Cheng 2010; Constable 2003; 2005; 2009; Faier 2007; Frohlick 2009; Patico 2009; Parreñas 2001; Wilson 2004). A significant part of this scholarship has been dedicated to reasserting the agency of women positioned on “the receiving end” of mobility (Massey 1994) and complicates understandings of the working of global power. For instance, Brennan (2004) describes love as a “performance,” while Cheng (2010: 142), drawing on Scott



(1985), proposes that love may be a “weapon of the weak.” My thesis expands on these studies, pointing to the ambiguous nature of the intimacies formed in sex tourism and the significance of ‘love’ as a mobilizing force – whether performed, professed, or felt. My interest also lies in understanding love beyond its performative aspects, in order to consider how it operates as a form of affect that, to paraphrase Cheng, mediates, rather than erases, power differentials (2010: 133). I thus hypothesize that intimacy with foreign men on the part of young, mixed-race or black Brazilian women may be a catalyst to express discontent with their social locations and with the forms of power structuring their life (see also Cheng 2010:10; Faier 2007; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). I also draw on the work of feminist ethnographers who have documented how women re(make) themselves as modern subjects through transnational love (Constable 2003; Cheng 2010; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). Thus, if Brazilian women essentialize Brazilian men as macho and reify foreign men as gentlemen, it is because they are critical of the local patriarchal order and see in foreign men, signs of cultural capital and mobility (Bourdieu 1977; Kelsky 2001). One of the main arguments I seek to make in this dissertation is that Brazilian women in Natal strategically utilize their relationships with tourists as sources of social mobility and capital (both economic and cultural), while also aspiring to form romantic relationships with men they commonly imagine as more ‘civilized’ than local Brazilian men. These women are invested in various forms of affective labour and ambiguous intimacies rooted in projects of mobility, citizenship and capital.

“Gringo love” thus refers to a new form of affect that I see as deeply constitutive of women’s experiences in sex tourism. Affect here is not meant to denote what scholars elsewhere discuss as an unmediated and prediscursive form of embodied power (e.g.

Massumi 2002; Beasley-Murray 2010).<sup>5</sup> Rather, my engagement with affect derives from a different genealogy of scholarship; I follow the work of feminist scholars who have long engaged with the affective dimension of human experiences, and who have shown how the ‘affective’, including feelings and emotions, is shaped materially, discursively, and through gendered bodies (e.g. Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Bloch in press; Cheng 2010; Cabezas 2009; Hochschild 1983). My purpose in using the term “affect” is to engage with what I see as a collective dimension of women’s affective experiences in sex tourism. Gringo love is thus a particular, historical affective state; it refers to both women’s collective reification of foreigners, and to their widespread narratives and experiences of love with them. Gringo love is thus a new form of affect that is discursive, embodied, and grounded in material relations.

I also draw inspiration from the work of Cabezas (2009) and Zelizer (2005), and consider the ways in which spheres that are usually understood as separated come together in sex tourism. In Ponta Negra, there is a blur of affect/money, work/leisure, public/private, authenticity/performance, among other binaries. Feminists have for long problematized the public/private or work/leisure distinction, with their claim that the “personal is political,” and their attention to reproductive, unpaid, undervalued labour (e.g. Ortner 1972). They have also shown that the distinction between marriage and

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<sup>5</sup> There is an important body of scholarship engaging theoretically with “affect” as a modality of power. In this scholarship, affect is commonly understood as bodily experiences that are not yet coded or as sensations that are not mediated by discourses or narratives (Massumi 2002; Beasley-Murray 2010). Emotion is thus distinguished from affect, as it is seen as discursively produced and representable. Yet, not all agree that affect, as a modality of power in late capitalism, is unmediated, pre-discursive, or forms of experience not yet coded. For instance, Beverley Best argues that rather, affect is “produced by hyper-ritualization – the playing over and over and over again – of certain social and cultural narratives” (2011: 77). It is hyper-signification rather than the absence of discourse or narrative that thus produces affect, as she explains, these “narratives are internalized by individuals to the point where their affective responses to the stories can be solicited with only a fragment or icon of, or a vague reference to, the story in question” (80). Thus, there is no consensus on whether affect is unmediated. In any case, my aim here is not to discuss affect as a new modality of power in late capitalism, but instead to engage the ways in which new forms of affect are constituted in sex tourism.

prostitution, or between love and money, is not as entrenched as commonly assumed in Europe and North America (e.g. White 1990; Zelizer 2005). If I am highlighting these binaries, it is because they remain particularly entrenched in Western thought. Indeed, the notion that money corrupts intimacy was central to both foreign men and Brazilian women, as I discuss in Chapter 4 and 5; it is because of their understandings of romantic love as devoid of material interest that both foreign men and Brazilian women sought to reconfigure the money exchanged as a form of ‘help’. And yet, as we shall see, both Brazilian women and foreign men also disrupt these binaries in unique ways.

### **Spatializing Ponta Negra**

Anthropologists have also argued that borders and contact zones (Pratt 1992) are simultaneously spaces of exploitation and opportunities, and they have pointed to the ways in which those moving across borders or engaging transnational spaces negotiate and mediate new forms of powers while encountering new prospects (Brennan 2004; Padilla 2007). My dissertation draws inspiration from this scholarship, and especially from feminist anthropologists who have engaged the gendered dimensions of Appadurai’s global ethnoscap (1990) and produced compelling ethnographies of “sex-scapes” (Brennan 2004) and “marriage-scapes” (Constable 2005) – the suffix ‘scape’ pointing to the fluidity, irregularity, and diversity of newly imagined landscapes resulting from global flows that build on differences in power and inequalities.

The issue of love across borders has given rise to an important scholarship examining the imagined geographies of love and the “cartographies of desire” (Manderson and Jolly 1997) that are implicated in the production of global sites of desire.

While these scholars recognize the critical importance of economic factors, they point to the equally significant role of the imagination – especially processes that exoticize and eroticize Third world ‘others’ (Kempadoo 1998: 10; Piscitelli 2005). In her ethnography of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, Brennan coined the term “sexscape” to refer to a “new kind of global sexual landscape” (2004: 15) drawing on Appadurai’s use of the suffix ‘scape’(1990). In a sexscape, Brennan proposes, “there are differences in power between the buyers (sex tourists) and the sellers (sex workers) that can be based on race, gender, class, and nationality. These differences become eroticized and commodified inequalities” (2004:16). Ponta Negra fits with this image of a sexscape; predominantly mixed-race or black, impoverished, young, Brazilian women engage in commodified sex with predominantly white, European (and few North American) men, wealthy enough to travel to Brazil. Ponta Negra has thus become a global sexual landscape, in Brennan’s sense, where both male desire and female bodies are intensively commodified.

Interestingly, in parallel to the emergence of the global sex trade in Ponta Negra’s bars, beaches, and nightclubs, a new transnational marriage market has also emerged. In other words, while Ponta Negra has become a sexscape of sorts (Brennan 2004), it could also be characterized as a marriage-scape (Constable 2005). As Constable (2005: 3-4) proposes:

such marriages are especially interesting because they do not represent a global free-for-all in which all combinations – regardless of class, nationality, ethnicity, or gender, for example – are possible. Rather, they form marriage-scapes that are shaped and limited by existing and emerging cultural, social, historical, and political-economic factors.

Drawing on Constable and Brennan, I thus consider Ponta Negra as both a sex-scape and a marriage-scape, and I analyze the global processes that participate in their production.

However, it would be rather insufficient to consider this space exclusively in these terms. Ponta Negra is also the site of many spatial tensions. I draw inspiration from anthropologists who consider spaces not as given but as the product of social relations and thus, as constantly in the process of being made and remade (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Gordillo 2002; 2004). These scholars have shown that conflicts, contradictions, and political processes participate in the production of place and that it is through spatial practices that these tensions become articulated. In his work on notions of civility and incivility in Brazil, James Holston argues that “inequity persists palpably in Brazilian social relations not only because the privileged insist on maintaining their special treatment rights. It also persists because it continues to structure the embodied habits and spatial practices of everyday life” (2008: 278).

Drawing on his insights, I pay attention to both everyday spatial practices and embodied habits that structure Brazilian social relations and that are (re)produced in the context of sex tourism. Prior to the early 2000s, Ponta Negra was a space of middle class leisure; many residents and business owners in the area thus resent the presence of tourists and *garotas de programa* in what they consider as “their space.” They articulate their opposition through campaigns against sex tourism that are deeply spatialized, practices that I analyze (in Chapter 3) taking inspiration from scholars of sex work attentive to exclusionary spatial practices affecting sex workers and the processes of gentrification that accompany these practices (Hubbard 1999; Ross 2010).

Gaston Gordillo proposes that places are always constructed in opposition to other geographies – whether these are real, imagined, or remembered (2004; 2002). This is another lens through which we can grasp Ponta Negra spatially. Gordillo argues that the

Toba in the Argentinean Chaco inscribed wealth to their past work in sugar plantations and poverty to their present-day foraging practices in the bush. This is further complicated by the feeling of estrangement that accompanied their memory of the sugar plantations, and the sense of control they experience in their current foraging practices in the bush. Thus, he analyses this process “as the contradictory spatial expressions of a single historical practice” (2002: 4).

The women I interviewed spoke about their lives in deeply spatialized terms and used expressions that bespeak the spatiality of their experiences and that reveal the contradictions to which Gordillo alludes. “Sair dessa vida” as discussed more extensively in Chapter 6, was a phrase commonly used by the women I interviewed to talk about the reasons for their engagements with foreigners – whether dating them or going on *programa*<sup>6</sup> with them. This formulation alludes to a sense of estrangement they experience in their daily lives. Brazilian women commonly imagined a better future as lying elsewhere, *là fora* (there, outside) in an imagined or remembered Europe they opposed to Brazil. Building on Gordillo’s insights, I consider the ways in which Brazilian women describe *both* their present-day lives in the bars, nightclubs, and restaurants of Ponta Negra and their imagined future lying in a European elsewhere as part of *a single historical practice*. Sair dessa vida is thus an expression of both women’s embodied experience of alienation in Ponta Negra and their aspiration to enjoy the fruits of global capitalism in Europe.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Piscitelli, “the word *programas* [plural of *programa*] designates explicit agreements to exchange sexual services for money, including prices, practices and lengths of encounters” (2007: 491). It is sometimes used interchangeably with *prostituição* (prostitution) but it also may connote middle class prostitution, including prostitution in nightclubs (Gaspar 1985) or even high-class prostitution such as escort services (Rohter 2006).

## Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation has six core chapters, in addition to this introduction and the conclusion. In the next chapter, I introduce the research setting and discuss the methods used in this project. I first consider the ways in which Brazil has been imagined as a tropical paradise, an aspect that significantly shapes the fields of power in which Brazilian women in Ponta Negra operate. I then consider the complex notion of race in Brazil and engage readers with the specificities of race in my field site. I also briefly examine tourism development in the Northeast of Brazil, before finally turning to a discussion of my methodological approaches.

In Chapter 2, I engage with the scholarship on sex tourism and suggest that studies of sex tourism need to emphasize further the ambiguous nature of sex tourism. I begin with a critical examination of the concept of sex tourism, suggesting that sex tourism remains an important analytical tool, albeit one fraught with conceptual problems and limitations. Drawing on my ethnographic materials, I examine how affective and monetary relations intersect in Ponta Negra, and I challenge common understandings of sex tourism as exclusively synonymous with paid prostitution in tourism. I also question current perspectives on sex tourism that posit women as *exclusively* exploited in sex tourism, and I thus bring important nuances to approaches that negate the complex subject positions of the women who are involved in affective and/or commercial relationships with foreigners. I also “queer” sex tourism in an effort to interrogate the heterosexuality of sex tourism, albeit only partially.

Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of a street march in Ponta Negra with a notable symbol of sex tourism: a 2-meter, papier-mâché sculpture of a white phallus, with several

flags representing different North American and European nations. The chapter uncovers how the street march and other campaigns against sex tourism in Natal are entangled in local micro-politics and its regional, national, and international articulations. Facing mounting international pressures (especially from the United States) to take anti-trafficking measures, Brazil adopted a tougher stance on sex tourism. In Natal, like in other locations, this translated into the conflation of sex tourism with both the sexual exploitation of minors and sex trafficking. This chapter also examines various stakeholders and their mobilizing strategies to fight sex tourism, including: the state policing of this place (through surveillance cameras at the beach and police raids in bars); the city's advertisement campaigns at the airport; public signs opposing sex tourism on businesses' entrance doors or websites, and street protests. I argue that these exclusionary spatial practices reveal middle class anxieties over the social mobility of mixed-race or black working class women. These campaigns, I suggest, have had the effect of further entrenching the marginalization of the women they were meant to rescue: the predominantly impoverished, black or mixed-race women, who engage in commercial sex with foreigners. As the symbol of the white, giant phallus sculpture reveals, they are also predicated upon anxieties over the potential threat of neo-colonization, globalization, and mass tourism.

In Chapter 4, I delve into the tensions between (paid) sex and the conquest for Western foreigners who imagine women as endowed with a tropical sexuality and who come to think of themselves as good men 'helping' these women. I draw on Gregory's notion of imperial masculinity (2007) – a form of hetero-normative masculinity he observed in the Dominican Republic among tourists from North America and Europe – to



explore what I call “gringo masculinity.” My use of the term *gringo*, rather than imperial, points to the historically grounded yet dynamic and dialogical construction of the relations between the West (or the North) and Latin America (see Adams 1999; Nelson 1999; Veissière forthcoming). I suggest that there is more than imperialism to the form of collective, western masculinity enacted in Ponta Negra. In addition to the exoticization/eroticization of Brazilian women, these foreigners seek intimate relationships that affirm their desirability as men and that transcend the commercial nature of sex. They seek what has come to be popularly known as the “girlfriend experience” a form of commercial sex involving money, but also intimacy and authenticity (Bernstein 2007). This chapter thus explores the tension between othering (an erotic/exotic other) and intimacy (with a woman). This chapter also documents the co-construction of idealized otherness between European men and Brazilian women, and points to how Brazilian women imagine foreigners as gringo (not macho like Brazilian men) and read in them signs of cultural capital and social mobility.

In Chapter 5, I propose that women in Ponta Negra are engaged in various practices of distinction that result from the tension between the stigma associated with sex with foreigners, and the potential for social mobility that comes with it. While their engagements with foreigners may be a site for further marginalization, they may also potentially pave the way to achieve cultural capital and social mobility. Feminist scholars have documented the ways in which racialized women put their “hypersexuality to work” in the global sex industry (Miller-Young 2010). In this chapter, I build on these claims to argue that women in Ponta Negra are putting their ‘femininity to work’ in the ambiguous context of sex tourism. They thus capitalize on both their hypersexuality and

respectability, drawing on foreign men's search for a potential girlfriend or wife. This is not without paradoxes and tensions, as women negotiate ways to signal both their sexual availability and respectability. Thus I explore the various processes of (dis)identifications and distinction women rely on in order to establish their respectability and negotiate ascriptions of stigma. Yet these processes are more than attempts to resist stigmatization – albeit certainly serving that aim too. Indeed, these processes are closely tied to women's projects of social, spatial and economic mobility. Femininity is thus a form of embodied capital, one of the few resources women have at their disposal (Skeggs 1997; 2001).

My analysis of femininity as a form of embodied cultural capital – while illuminating complex discursive strategies – would be incomplete without a consideration of the role of affect in mediating women's engagements with foreign men. In Chapter 6, I argue that while rational considerations definitely shaped women's transnational mobility, the decision to marry and migrate was rarely the result of a straightforward calculation. Indeed, it was often times in the name of love that women made the decision to move across transnational borders. In this last chapter, I seek to make three main interrelated arguments. First, I propose that to understand women's intimate engagement with foreign men, it is necessary to locate their practices within what scholars have termed the "political economy of love" (Padilla et al 2007: xii; Rebhun 1999b). I engage with the work of scholars who consider the complex ways love coexists with interest and I borrow from Bloch (2011) the notion of "strategic intimacies" to grasp this complex intertwining. My second argument is that transnational love provides an important cultural script to make sense of one's mobility, and thus acts as a productive force. I draw

on the work of feminist anthropologists who have documented how women (re)make themselves as modern subjects through transnational love (Constable 2003; Cheng 2010; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). Finally, I hypothesize that intimacies with foreign men may also be a catalyst to express discontent with their social locations. Although couched in a language that essentializes all Brazilian men as machos, the appeal of western foreigners reveals a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the patriarchal state and with the organization of gender, race, and class relations.

## Chapter 1: Natal, the City of Pleasure

The *city of pleasure* (...), then, is thus the product and basis for the production of *city marketing* policies through which Natal disputes dollars and tourists. But it (*the city of pleasure*) is also the result of practices of social spatialization by its social actors. It is an image, and a “desired place,” a production and a social construct.

Edmilson Lopes Júnior 2000: 173-4

In order to understand further sex tourism in Natal, and especially the fields of power in which the Brazilian women in my study operate, it is necessary to engage with the research setting, both historically and ethnographically. This chapter thus introduces the reader to significant aspects shaping sex tourism in Natal, also known as the ‘city of pleasure’ (Lopes Júnior 2000). I thus now turn to the research setting, starting with the ways in which Brazil has been imagined as a tropical paradise, with important implications for the ways in which Brazilian women are in turn imagined within and outside the nation. I then engage the question of race in Brazil and Natal, before turning to tourism development in Brazil, and the production of Natal as a city of pleasure. I finally shift to a discussion of my fieldwork, methodological approaches, and ethical considerations as I researched sex tourism in Ponta Negra.

### **Brazil Imagined: Tropical Eden on Earth**

The process of exoticization/eroticization of Brazilian women has a long history, and does not originate in sex tourism. Since early European colonization of Brazil by the Dutch, French, and Portuguese, Brazil’s indigenous women have been imagined as drastically different from European women, while Brazil itself has been seen as significantly distinct or opposed to Europe. In what follows, I explore the trope of Brazil

as a tropical paradise and the ways in which its women have occupied a particular space in imagining this new Eden on Earth throughout various historical periods.

The trope of Brazil as a tropical paradise is rooted in early colonial representations of Brazil as an “earthly paradise, a kind of tropical Eden” (Parker 1991: 9) in which Natives appeared as animal-like, lascivious, and sexually insatiable. These depictions found their earliest expression in the first known written account of Brazil’s ‘discovery’ in 1500, when Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral reached the shore of what would come to be known as Brazil (Parker 1991). His scribe, Pero Vaz the Caminha, sent a missive to the Portuguese monarch Dom Manuel in which he described Brazil as a tropical paradise, an Edenic vision of Brazil that would be long-lasting. In the letter, the scribe Caminha provided detailed descriptions not only of this newfound land, but also of its inhabitants. He was especially fascinated by the innocence and nakedness of the Native, especially the women:

There walked among them three or four maidens, young and gracious, with very black, shoulder length hair, and their shameful parts so high, so tight, and so free of hair that, though we looked at them well, we felt no shame. And one of those maidens was completely dyed, both below and above her waist, and surely was so well made up and so round, and her shameful part (that had no shame) so gracious, that many women of our land seeing her countenance, will feel shame in not having theirs like hers (cited in Parker 1991: 10).

Although officially published only in 1817, the letter, written in 1500 was, as Sadlier notes (2008), a sharp example of *ufanismo*, a literary genre born out of colonialism, “characterized by glowing and often highly exaggerated descriptions of New World lands and peoples” (14). Importantly, the 1500 letter also “lays the foundation for subsequent descriptions of Brazil as a tropical Eden – an idea that would become a major trope in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century representations of Brazil” (Sadlier 2008: 14).

In subsequent colonial writings, Brazil was depicted as a tropical paradise on Earth, albeit one fraught with its opposite, a hell made of savagery and cannibalism (Parker 1991; Sadlier 2008). Painters, writers, and colonizers were captivated by what they described as the sexual promiscuity of the Natives, their nakedness, lack of pubic hair, and apparent absence of incest taboo (Parker 1991: 9-13). For instance, plantation owner and colonizer Gabriel Soares de Sousa wrote in 1587 in the important and influential *Tratado Descritivo do Brasil* (A Descriptive Treatise of Brazil):

The Tupinambás are so lecherous that there is not a lascivious sin that they do not commit. Even at a very young age they have contact with women, because the old women, not highly valued by the men, attract these boys, offering them gifts and favors, and teach them to do what they do not know, and do not leave them by day or night. These heathens are so lustful that seldom do they have respect for sisters and aunts, and as this sin goes against their customs, they sleep with them in the forest, and some with their own daughter; and they do not content themselves with a single woman, but have many, as is indicated by the fact that many die worn out. And in conversation, they know of nothing to speak about except these filthy acts, which they commit constantly (cited in Parker 1991: 13).

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these representations were revived by the Dutch when they occupied almost half of Brazil between 1630 and 1654 (Sadlier 2008). Painters, poets, and novelists depicted the natural wealth of Brazil, its fauna and flora and eventually the gold diamonds found in the backland of what came to be known as Minas Gerais (General Mines) at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The image of Brazil as a tropical Eldorado contrasted with portrayals of the harsh treatment African slaves received while working on mines and sugar plantations – representations that lasted well into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, earlier representations of Brazil as a tropical paradise were revived by various Brazilian intellectuals as they sought to make sense of their identity as Brazilians in the aftermath of both the abolition of slavery in

1888 and the independence of the Republic in 1889. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while theories of racial purity had found much resonance in Europe and North America, especially with the Eugenics movement, the intellectual elites of Brazil expressed ambivalence toward the racially mixed populations that composed most of Brazil. At that time, the idea of degeneration was quite popular among European intellectuals, as they strongly believed in the idea of ‘pure race,’ in the superiority of the white race, and in the unavoidable degeneracy of the non-white races. *Embranquecimento*, or the whitening ideology, was adopted in Brazil as a means to solve the problems posed by newly freed African slaves and by a predominantly mixed-race population. The whitening thesis derived from Eugenics, but took a particular twist: since most of the population in Brazil was not racially ‘pure,’ racial mixture was encouraged to achieve a whiter nation. Racial mixture “was not a cause of degeneracy but (...) a biologically adaptive process that would allow a true civilization to develop in the tropics” (Stepan 1991: 160). It was believed that the ‘white race’ would eventually triumph over the ‘black race,’ and thus, racial mixture was imagined as the path to join other modern nations.

A drastically different position, however, was presented by Gilberto Freyre and soon became extremely influential in Brazil. Freyre, a social historian, was trained in cultural anthropology under the guidance of Franz Boas at Columbia University, but he was also influenced by his own biography, growing up on a sugar plantation where the legacy of slavery was very much palpable (Needell 1995). In his famous book *Casa Grande e Senzala* published in 1933 and later translated as *The Masters and the Slaves* (1964), Freyre describes miscegenation as a positive force and defining feature of the Brazilian people. The main argument of the book rests upon the assumption that modern

Brazil has a distinct character resulting from the “union of cultures” between the Native, the Portuguese, and the ‘Negro Slave,’ which took place during colonization and slavery (1986: xii). Freyre emphasized the central role of the sugar plantation and its Big House in the process of forming the Brazilian nation, which he described as a “polygamous patriarchy” (xxiii). He also depicted relationships between masters and slaves as “milder in Brazil, it may be, than in any other parts of the Americas” (369) due in part to their sexual promiscuity. Freyre insisted on the erotic as a constitutive element of the Brazilian nation, such as in the following excerpt which evokes his own experience while titillating the presumed male reader: “The female slave who rocked us to sleep. Who suckled us. Who fed us, mashing our food with her own hands ... and the mulatto girl ... who initiated us into physical love and, to the creaking of a canvas cot, gave us our first complete sensation of being a man” (1956: 278).

As several authors have pointed out, Freyre romanticizes colonization, slavery, and the relations between masters and slaves and sets forth the myth of a racial democracy in present-day Brazil (Goldstein 2003; Needell 1995). Freyre also emphasizes the lascivious character of women in tropical environments, depicting both Indian and African women as naturally endowed with a tropical sexuality, thus eliding the more violent sexual-colonial encounter that occurred. His writings also celebrate the mulatto woman (hereafter *mulata*), who appears as the perfect embodiment of racial mixture. Freyre’s vision was central to subsequent nation-building processes. As Edmonds aptly notes:

The eroticization of race became a central dimension of the colonial enterprise in many regions. But the situation in Brazil – which gained independence in the early nineteenth century – is different. Here the objectifying gaze is internal, pressed into the service of a nation-building project, directed ‘defensively’ against



advocates of racial purity, segregation, and “Apollonian” whiteness. Freyre’s celebration of *mestiçagem* [miscegenation], though, functions as a kind of compensatory nationalism. It establishes a national identity that offsets negative comparison to Europe or the United States made according to a liberal yardstick” (2010: 134)

Freyre’s vision remains extremely powerful in contemporary Brazil. As Pravas proposes: “Not only do Freyre’s texts ‘explain’ Brazil anthropologically, with its tendencies, preferences and desires, but also constitute those very tendencies, founding a certain discursivity (...) that has become hegemonic in local understandings of both *mulatas* and the nation” (2003: 125). The eroticization of Brazilian women is not a new theme in Brazilian historiography and does not begin with sex tourism. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I discuss this trope and the ways in which it becomes articulated anew in sex tourism.

### **Thinking Race in Brazil and Natal**

Since Freyre, different generations of scholars from a variety of theoretical orientations and disciplines have agreed that Brazil is not a racial democracy (Hanchard 1994; Harris 1964; Fry 1996; Goldstein 2003; Skidmore 1993 [1974]; Twine 1997; Winant 1992). These scholars have deconstructed the myth of the friendly master and showed that interracial sex was not a proof of Brazil’s racial egalitarianism. Yet the idea that ‘Brazil is different’ is defended by many because of the fluidity, ambiguity, and context-dependent nature of race relations in Brazil. For instance, Degler (1971) has identified what he refers to as a “mulatto-escape hatch” (224), which marks Brazil as different racially speaking. According to him, the mulatto, neither black nor white, can escape the “handicap” of being black in some instances because “class mitigates color”

(106), or said differently, because money whitens. This interpretation still has some resonance in contemporary Brazil (e.g. Fry 1996). One could suggest that in Brazil, the system of racial classification is both fluid – with gradation such as white (*branco*), light-brown (*moreno claro*), light-skin black (*moreno escuro*), dark-skin black (*preto*) or black (*negro*) – and bi-polar with the categories of white and black (Fry 2000).

This is particularly important given that *morena* was the most common racial category used by the women I interviewed in Natal, reflecting the way most Brazilians identify both nationally and in Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>7</sup> While the Brazilian census gives the choice of five words for “colour” terms, in everyday speech over 130 terms have been identified, with *moreno* and its variation being the most common (IBGE 1999). Yet *moreno* does not figure in the census, and in 2010, inhabitants of Rio Grande do Norte identified as follows: 59.2 % *pardos* (brown) followed by 36.3% as *branco* (white), 4.4% as *pretos* (black) and none as *amarelo* (yellow) or *indígena* (IBGE 2011).

Williams (2010) argues that “*morena* is often used as a euphemism for *negra* in a society that still devalues blackness” (36). While this is certainly the case in Salvador and elsewhere in Brazil, the term *morena* is indeed a polysemic category that is used throughout Brazil and transnationally to refer to a wide range of phenotypes (Edmonds 2010; Maia 2009). Despite its widespread use, the scholarship dedicated to understanding it in its own right is rather recent (Maia 2009; Piscitelli 2007b) and because of a Rio-centrist focus on the *mulata*, this scholarship has remained relatively absent from attempts to grasp how this racial category intersects with discourses on Brazilian hypersexuality (Williams 2010: 37-38).

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<sup>7</sup> As well, a couple of my interviewees identified as *branca* (white), a few as *negra* (black) and a woman identified as *mulata*.

Contrary to *mulata*, the term *morena* is not necessarily associated with African ascendance nor always sexualized. In some contexts it may indicate other racial identifications, including aboriginality (Piscitelli 2005) and refer to a light-skinned brunette (Edmonds 2010:132). It is also a racial category that is closely associated with the middle class (Maia 2009). Nonetheless, as a racial category, it was first celebrated in Freyre's writing about "brown women." And in the Brazilian imaginary, to be "brown" is, in many ways, to identify with the national narrative on hybridity. As demonstrated in Edmonds's ethnography of plastic surgery in Brazil, hybridity (i.e. being brown) becomes beauty: "brown is beautiful partly because it avoids 'Africanoid exaggerations'" (2010: 134). Blackness thus remains a stigmatizing force. The *morena*, then, is a complex racial category, and one that was particularly elusive among my interviewees. Some women even shifted between identification as *morena* to *negra* depending on the context. A few women used the latter when expressing the stigmatization and discrimination they suffered as racialized women in Ponta Negra, while describing their skin colour as *morena* when explaining why foreign men were attracted to them.

The fluidity with which these women self-identify poses problems as I try to grapple with women's shifting identifications in a transnational space such as Ponta Negra. While racism prevailed locally and racial discrimination was a recurrent theme in women's narratives, *morenidade* (brownness) seems to be a source of positive valuation in light of foreign men's racial desires for "brown" women. In other words, the identity "black" appeared to be more politicized, while *morenidade* was seen positively in the context of foreign men's search for a typical Brazilian woman, as well as in accordance with local views on brownness as better than blackness. For analytical purposes, I

decided to use the terms “dark-skinned women”, “mixed-race women” or “black women”, in addition to the terms *morena* and *negra* in Portuguese. My use of these different terms is an attempt to reflect the local idiom. It would be misleading to exclusively use the term “black” or “negra,” as it would negate the indigenous heritage that contributes to most of the racially-mixed population in Rio Grande do Norte. Furthermore, neither does it reflect the complex, shifting, and at times ambiguous racial positionings that operate in Ponta Negra, nor does it account for the ways most women identified (i.e. as *morena*). Now that I have traced the racial context in which the women in my study operate, I turn to the political economy of tourism in the Northeast of Brazil, in order to grasp the significance of sex tourism economically.

### **Tourism Developments in Tropical Northeast Brazil**

Like its neighbours in the Northeast of Brazil, the state of Rio Grande do Norte (see figure 1) began focusing on tourism as a strategy of economic development in the 1980s. At the time, Brazil faced a severe economic crisis, and the International Monetary Fund had identified tourism as an important sector that could help redress the economic recession. The Brazilian federal government thus identified the Northeast as a region that could develop tourism infrastructure, and initiated a program called PRODETUR-NE that would incorporate the Northeast region in the global market of tourism.<sup>8</sup> This program resulted in the development of major tourist infrastructure in the Northeast, including the

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<sup>8</sup> The first tourism policies in Brazil emerged in 1958 with the creation of COMBRATÚR (the Brazilian Commission for Tourism) by then President Juscelino Kubitschek. In 1962, a division for Sports and Tourism replaced COMBRATÚR, until the creation of Embratur in 1966 (and which still operates today). During the military regime of 1964 to 1985, the federal government used tourism as an important “national strategic industry” (Diegues 2001: 59) and thus engaged in marketing campaigns promoting domestic tourism and put forth various financial incentives for tourism infrastructure.

construction of the *Rota do Sol* (the Sun Road), a highway which links various beach towns and villages in Rio Grande do Norte and provides access to the 410 km of beaches along the state coastline.

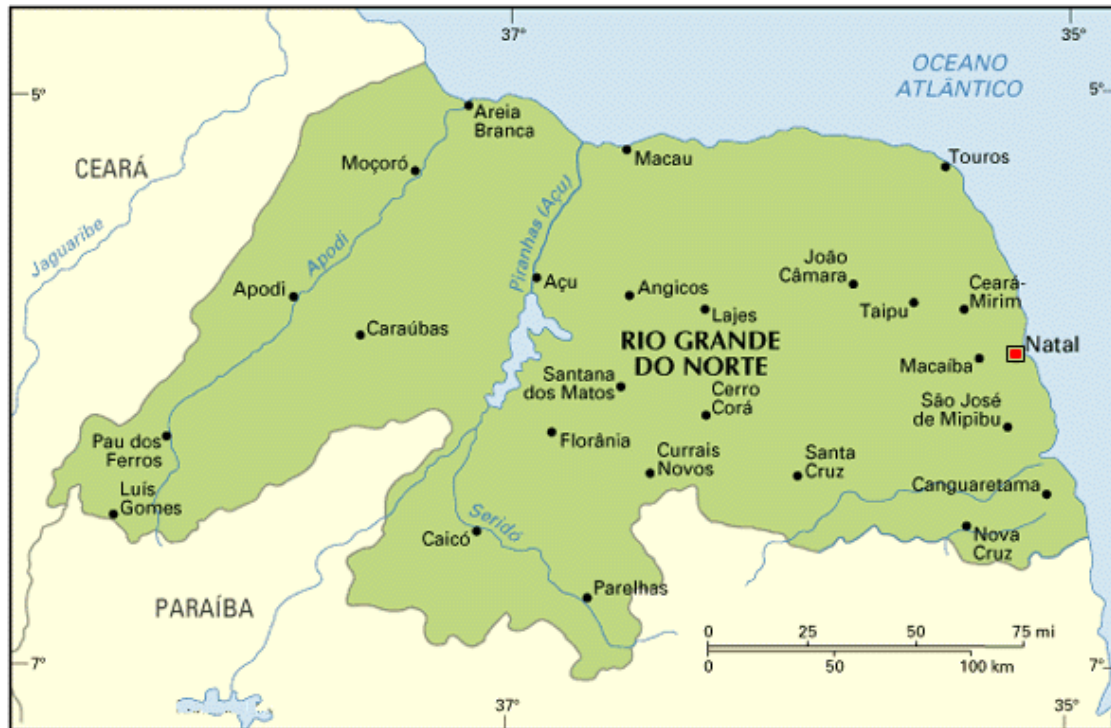


Figure 1: Map of Rio Grande do Norte<sup>9</sup>

The Northeast region currently occupies the top position in the country for tourism development and in 2007, 74% of tourism investments was located in that region (Ministério do Turismo 2007). Prior to this moment, the Northeast was reputed as a “problem region” in the national imaginary and was associated with images of drought, poverty, and out-migration (Silva and Gomes 2001). From the 1980s onward, the image of the Northeast shifted to that of a “tropical paradise” (Silva and Gomes 2001), especially given tourism development focused along the coast. In 1978, the state of Rio Grande do Norte implemented the Plan for Urban Tourism. Natal played a central role in

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://www.guiagnet.com.br/rn/maparn.htm>

this development as it came to be promoted as a tourist destination, initially intended as a sort of “local Copacabana” (Lopes Júnior 2000: 39). The construction of the *Via Costeira* (Coastal Highway), which linked the city center to the southern beach of Ponta Negra, constituted an important marker of tourism development as it was during this period that Natal gained notoriety as a domestic tourist destination (Silva and Gomes 2001).

### **Natal: A City of Pleasure**

The city of Natal (see figures 1 and 2),<sup>10</sup> also known as Sun City because of its reputed 300 days of sun a year, played an important role in tourism development. Situated in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal is relatively small compared to other capital cities in Brazil, with 803,811 inhabitants (IBGE 2010), and it is known for its low crime rate and quietness.<sup>11</sup> Natal was long considered a provincial town, dominated by the local elite. In the 1920s the city began a process of urbanization that continued through the 1930s, especially in the neighbourhood of Ribeiro by the Rio Potengi, which is now the city centre.

Natal played an important role during World War II due to its strategic location as the closest point between South America and Europe. In 1942, a new military naval base was built, leading to an increase in the presence of Brazilian military and the selection of Natal to serve as a base for the U.S. military (Lopes Júnior 2000). The

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<sup>10</sup> Natal translates as Christmas and takes its name from its foundational moment on the 25 of December 1599, when the Portuguese took possession of the land more than sixty years after their initial attempts to combat the Potiguar (an indigenous group that populated the region) and their French allies. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1633-1654) the Dutch occupied Natal and renamed it New Amsterdam. Then the Portuguese took it back but settled slowly. By 1805, it had 6393 inhabitants, and at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than 16,000 inhabitants (Casado 1999; 1968).

<sup>11</sup> In effect, in a study by the Research Institute in Applied Economic (IPEA), Natal ranked as the quietest capital city in Brazil with a rate of criminality of 18,59 per 100 thousand inhabitants, compared to 66,38 per 100 thousand inhabitants for Recife, widely considered the most violent (Clemente 2005: 74).

presence of the U.S. military in the city altered the provincialism of Natal as new urban infrastructure was built and the presence of both Brazilian and American soldiers was felt in the city. During the 1940s, the *Cabaré Maria Boa* opened and prospered. This famous, almost mythical cabaret, catered to both Brazilians and Americans and rapidly acquired fame. The cabaret greatly contributed to the development of the sex industry in the city (Santos 2010) and was a precursor to both the contemporary fascination for things foreign and sex tourism. Ironically, the cabaret, which closed in the mid 1990s after years of decay, is unknown to most present-day tourists visiting the city.

Economically, the city, much like the state, was initially reliant on fishing and agricultural production. Like other states in the Northeast of Brazil, Rio Grande do Norte was long considered impoverished and was characterized by deeply entrenched oligarchy, severe droughts, and out-migration led primarily by men to the industrial South and Southeast regions of the country. The discovery of petrol in the 1970s resulted in important development in this sector. The state of Rio Grande do Norte currently leads the national production of oil: it occupies the first position inland, and the second at sea. The service sector is considered the most lucrative, accounting for 50.2% of the state economy with tourism as its main industry (Governo do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte 2011; Portal Brasil 2011). Tourism (both domestic and international) represents the most significant source of revenue and employment for the state of Rio Grande do Norte (Governo do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte 2011).<sup>12</sup> Tourism is thus particularly important in the region, especially when considering the sharp inequalities that characterize the Northeast region and the state of Rio Grande do Norte. The index of

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<sup>12</sup> While agricultural production has dropped to 5.6% of the state economy in 2004, the industrial sector is responsible for 44.2% of the state economy and includes a vibrant textile industry as well as 95% of the national production of salt.

poverty for Rio Grande do Norte was 52.27% in 2003, and in 2005 the state ranked 21st out of 27 states for its Human Development Index, which measures income, education, and longevity (IBGE 2011; PNUD 2008).<sup>13</sup> In Rio Grande do Norte, the growth of tourism infrastructure was also accompanied by massive foreign-investment; as of 2011, the Ministry of Labour and Employment ranked the state of Rio Grande do Norte as first in the whole country in terms of foreign investment, with its US\$24 million, in contrast to US\$17 million for the state of Rio de Janeiro, in second position (Governo do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte 2011).



Figure 2: The City of Natal (with a view of Ponta Negra, located south)<sup>14</sup>

Edmilson Lopes Júnior (2000) analyses the production of Natal as a “city of pleasure” for the local middle class and documents the social changes that led to its

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Brazil is unequally divided geographically as exemplified by the Human Development Index: the 11 best ranking states are located in the South and Southeast and 16 worst ranking states in the North and Northeast, the Northeast region occupying the worst position.

<sup>14</sup> Map drawn by Julien Henon © 2012, used with permission.



particular, unique socio-spatial configuration as a tourist city in the Northeast of Brazil. The district of Ponta Negra, the primary site of this research, played a significant role in this development (see figure 2). Ponta Negra is, indeed, a very small place but it constitutes, in the city landscape, a place of its own. Situated about 14 kilometres south of the city centre, Ponta Negra is famous for its beautiful beach and its unique sand dunes, the *Morro do Careca* (the Bald Hill), and attracts both domestic and international tourists (see figure 3). For many tourists, Ponta Negra is defined by its beach and the nightlife in its hill area known as the *Alto de Ponta Negra*, but the district is also a residential neighbourhood, divided into the *Vila* (or the village), the oldest and poorest part of Ponta Negra, and the *Conjunto*, a middle-class residential area comprised of a shopping mall and gated, privatized, and secured residences (see figure 2).



Figure 3: The Beach of Ponta Negra, with a view on the *Morro do Careca* <sup>15</sup>

Ponta Negra was long a peripheral area of the city. It was initially a fishing community that developed up the hills by the Morro do Careca with houses facing away

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<sup>15</sup> Source: <http://sospontanegra.blogspot.com>

from the beach view. During the 1960s and 1970s, Ponta Negra became one of the privileged sites in the region as a second residence for Natal's elites, who built houses by the shore and left them largely uninhabited. During those years, the beach was also the meeting point of a privileged but alternative youth who opposed the military dictatorship (Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006). An important change transforming the spatial configurations of the city occurred in the early 1980s when, as explained above, a 12-km road, the *Via Costeira* (Coastal Highway) was constructed to foster tourism development by connecting Ponta Negra to the city centre (Lopes Júnior 2000: 39). Urbanization of the southern part of the coast for tourism came with drastic changes; hotels, bars, and restaurants replaced the summer residences of the local elite, who then moved to more distant and secluded beaches south of Natal to get away from the hubbub. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ponta Negra was also marketed for tourism as a "different" place, and came to attract the local middle class in search of distinction. The residential *Conjunto* was then built and alongside the city expansion and tourism development, Ponta Negra transformed itself into an urbanized beach. With its sand dunes and protected areas, with its nightlife and nice restaurants, chic nightclubs, fancy bars, and finally with the development of a new residential area and shopping mall, Ponta Negra became associated with a middle-class lifestyle (Lopes Júnior 2000: 55).

By 2000, Natal had symbolically become a city of pleasure for leisure and local tourism, and Ponta Negra, its "postcard" (Lopes Júnior 2000: 56). Further significant transformations, however, contributed to even more drastic changes. In 2000, following the construction of a new terminal, the airport of Natal inaugurated its first international flights, connecting Natal to several major European cities. Given its strategic location as

the closest capital city to Europe from Brazil, Natal quickly became a major destination for European tourism. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of visitors almost doubled, with the number of international tourists increasing 100%, and international flights rising from 5 per week in 2002 to at least 23 per week in 2007<sup>16</sup> (Infraero 2010; Chiquetti 2007). In 2007, Natal was the third most visited city by international tourists in the Northeast of Brazil and the sixth for the whole country, after São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Porto Alegre and Fortaleza, an impressive position given the relatively small size of Natal in contrast to these major state capital cities. In 2007, 98.93% of the tourists arriving by air or sea to Rio Grande do Norte came from a European country, with Portugal as the most frequent country of origin followed by Italy, Holland, Spain and England (Ministério do Turismo 2008).

Ponta Negra is the chosen site for this research because of its close association with sex tourism; while it is not the only tourist site in the city of Natal, it is the most important. As the privileged site of tourism in the city, the neighbourhood was drastically transformed by this rapid influx of tourists and foreign investment. In addition to foreign tourists, foreign-owned businesses came to be situated next to locally owned businesses, and major skyscrapers became a common feature of the landscape. Ponta Negra became a transnational space marked by the presence of foreigners, mostly Europeans. Many restaurants, bars, hotels, travel agencies, shops, and real estate agencies are now owned by foreigners and/or take their names from foreign languages, including Italian, Spanish, English, and French. In the last decade, the beach of Ponta Negra in Natal has become a site of global sex tourism where both (white) male desire and (black or mixed-race)

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<sup>16</sup> The flights mainly depart from Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, England, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Argentina (Governo do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte 2011).

female bodies are intensively commodified. Foreigners – mostly white, European, and middle-class – and Brazilian women – predominantly dark-skinned, lower-class, and young – form an important part of Ponta Negra’s landscape and their presence is notable in the hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, shopping malls, and at the beach, where both groups seek to encounter one another. Once seen as the site of *gente de família*,<sup>17</sup> Ponta Negra became associated with sex tourism due to the visible presence of gringos (foreigners) and garotas de programa, generating spatial tensions, which I explore more closely in Chapter 3.

In recent years, the beach of Ponta Negra has become infamous in Brazil as a site of sex tourism and is even colloquially referred to as the *Putá Negra* (Black Whore) of Brazil. This play on the word Ponta Negra reflects the widespread conflation made in Natal between black bodies and prostitution. Given the stigma associated with prostitution and the racial tensions already existing, this generates exclusionary spatial practices. Ponta Negra is thus also a contested space, where different tensions are articulated along lines of gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and nationality. It is, at once, a transnational space offering new opportunities – for foreign investors, for migrants, for the local residents – and a space of inequalities and exclusions. It is, indeed, an interesting case in point of the ways in which inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality find new expressions. While the privileges of transnational mobility are usually restricted to foreigners, an increasing number of young, lower-class, predominantly dark-skinned women imagine in Ponta Negra the possibility to transform their lives through sex, marriage, and migration. Both contested and transnational, Ponta

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<sup>17</sup> *Gente de família* does not have a direct English translation but it has a class connotation and alludes to people from well off families.

Negra is also an ambiguous space, where what is commodified, and who is involved in this process, is not always clear.

## **Methodology**

### *Participant observation*

This dissertation draws upon ethnographic research conducted in the tourist district of Ponta Negra. From July 2007 to June 2008, I lived in this neighbourhood and conducted participant observation in various places frequented by tourists, including restaurants, bars, nightclubs, Internet cafés, shopping malls, and beaches. In these spaces, I interacted with a wide range of people, not only with male tourists and Brazilian women seeking to meet tourists, but also with travel agents, tourist guides, local residents, surf instructors, street or beach vendors, owners of hotels, hostels, restaurants and bars, as well as service workers in these establishments. It was also where I lived, as I rented an apartment in between the bar/nightclub area in the Alto de Ponta Negra and the beach.

Living in Ponta Negra, I came to realize that the topic of sex tourism was recurrent in many settings I had not anticipated and that it permeated the fabric of everyday lives in a myriad of ways. For instance, in the building where I lived, several mixed-race couples had ambiguous relationships that bordered on commercial sex or had begun in the context of paid sex. My hairdresser, a Brazilian woman in her mid-twenties, had met her Spanish partner while working as a *garota de programa* in local bars. Her partner owned the hair salon she had begun managing after their relationship became more serious. There was also my surf instructor, a Brazilian man originally from the Vila of Ponta Negra who used to work in one of the main bars catering to foreign men and

garotas de programa, and who acted as an intermediary between them. He had a lot of ‘insider’ knowledge and introduced me to some women identifying as garotas de programa. In other words, I encountered ‘sex tourism’ on my time ‘off,’ in unexpected spaces, and I gained knowledge of its imbrications in the everyday lives of several people in ways that would have been difficult to access without living there. Furthermore, residing in Ponta Negra over an extensive period of time and navigating distinct groups of people (e.g. local residents, tourists, service workers, business owners, local associations opposing sex tourism, etc) allowed me to grasp issues that I had not anticipated prior to conducting research in Ponta Negra (including the racial and class tensions as well as the spatial struggles I discuss in Chapter 3).

Since tourist spaces in Ponta Negra are easy to identify and are located in close proximity to one another, I was able to rapidly establish a routine of participant observation that followed the rhythm of the people I intended to study. On a typical day, I would head to the beach in the late morning, as this was the time of the day when most of the tourists would emerge from a night out in the clubs. I conducted most of my observations on the stretch of beach that goes from the *Morro do Careca* to the beginning of the *Via Costeira* (coastal highway) because it was the most frequented by tourists (see figures 2 and 3). As the time passed, I became aware of the distinct social spaces that developed at the beach. For instance, close to the *Morro do Careca*, local fishermen would come back with their *jangadas* (wooden fishing boats, see figure 4) after fishing at sea, kids from the Vila would play in the waves or in the sand, and Brazilian tourists would commonly frequent this quieter side of the beach.

At the opposite end, where the *Via Costeira* begins, upper middle class and upper class hotels directly facing the beach attracted Brazilian tourists, foreign couples, and family-oriented tourism, as well as foreign female tourists. This was the quietest part of the beach, because there was no direct street access to the beach and it was further away from the bar/restaurant area. The busiest segment of the beach was located next to Erivan França street, a unique, one-sided street along the beach (see figure 2). Along this segment, there was a Norwegian-friendly spot where the locally hand-made sound systems played Norwegian music, and there were other spots known for attracting either Spanish or Italian male tourists. There were very few female foreign tourists in these spaces; indeed, I noted the few times when I encountered them because it was unusual, while the presence of male foreign tourists was highly visible in almost all tourist spaces and was especially concentrated along Erivan França street. These tourist spaces were also frequented by Brazilian women seeking to meet foreign men and by a whole range of local workers, including walking vendors, surf board renters, kiosk operators, etc.



Figure 4: Image of Ponta Negra by the *Morro do Careca*<sup>18</sup>

The beach was indeed a diversified social space where both tourists and locals mingled – yet some spots along the beach stood out because they attracted both foreign men and Brazilian women who sought to meet one another. These spaces were recognizable as meeting points mostly due to the visible presence of both groups and to the ways in which women displayed their bodies to the predominantly male gaze. It was a common occurrence to see Brazilian women in groups of two or three dancing erotically in thongs or mimicking sexual acts to the sound of music the compact disk sellers played from their mobile hand-made sound systems. Meanwhile, male tourists watched, took pictures or filmed women dancing, contributing to the creation of (hetero)sexualized spaces at the beach. I concentrated my participant-observation activities in the busiest parts of the beach along the *Erivan França* street, focusing on the spots where Brazilian women and foreign men sought to encounter one another. I visited the beach almost

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<sup>18</sup> Source: <http://sospontanegra.blogspot.com>



every day, either alone or with a group of Brazilian women or foreign men I had met on a previous night out.

At sunset, around 5:00 or 5:30 p.m., tourists would commonly leave the beach to retreat to their hotel rooms, eat in one of the many restaurants in the area, shop in the nearby mall, or have a drink in one of the few bars by the beach or up the hill. On the *Erivan França* street, there was an important point of encounter between women self-identifying as *garotas de programa* and foreign men: the Marine Sea Hotel. There, Brazilian women and foreign men would seek to meet one another: they would exchange playful gazes, a man or a group of men would join a group of women and pay for their drinks or food; a woman would negotiate a *programa* and leave with a man; or foreign men and Brazilian women would arrange to meet later in one of the nightclubs up the hill. I frequented the Marine Sea Hotel almost every day. Sometimes I would just drop by for a few minutes (when there were very few people or to catch up with someone met previously) and at other times, I would spend a couple of hours there. The first few times I went there, I sat alone a little awkwardly, feeling like a misfit in this space. Yet I rarely remained alone as there was always someone inviting me to join his or her table (both foreign men and Brazilian women). After a few weeks, Brazilian women who regularly frequented Ponta Negra's beach and bars to meet foreigners recognized me and invited me to join their tables.

Brazilian women also spent the early evening preparing for the night out, and I took part in this activity from time to time with a few Brazilian women, most often with Bebel. She lived in a *pousada* (guesthouse) with her cousin Monica just a street away from where I lived, and their place was a meeting point in the hours preceding a night

out. Bebel and her *colegas* (peers) commonly had a light dinner at the pousada before getting ready for the night out – showering, dressing up, applying make-up, doing their hair, etc. During these moments, Bebel and her colegas would discuss the upcoming night and the foreign men they dated or had programa with, and provide each other with tips and advice. These intimate conversations provided further insights into the ambiguity and complexity of their practices. The anticipation of the night out was a particularly charged context – at times, full of excitement, at others, tense, and from time to time, a safe space to express sadness, fear, anxiety, tiredness, etc. In these moments, I was often surprised at the ability of these women to be playful in the bars, nightclubs, or at the beach while carrying so many worries and sorrows. Taking part in their everyday routine thus allowed me to witness additional dimensions of their lives.

The nightlife in Ponta Negra commonly began after 10:00 p.m. and ended in the early hours of the morning (until 4:00, 5:00, even 6:00 a.m. for some). I conducted participant-observation in most of the nightclubs and bars (about a dozen) in the Alto de Ponta but eventually I opted to concentrate on those catering to and/or attracting Brazilian women and foreign men. These included two small bars with tropical themes, (the *Paraíso* and the *Água de Coco*) where women could enter for free or received a free drink upon paying a 5 *reais* entry fee. At around 12:00 or 12:30 a.m., those still interested in staying out would move to one of the few nightclubs in the area – most commonly to the *Açaí*, *Mosquito*, *Portal* or *Samba*.

The *Açaí* was the most popular nightclub and it operated on alternate nights with the *Mosquito*. It had a bar counter, an open area, and a dance room opening at 2:00 a.m. that was accessible through a side door and which contained a dance floor, a cage where

women would dance, another bar counter, and an elevated bench overseeing the dance floor. In the Açaí, waitresses were required to wear a schoolgirl uniform consisting of a white shirt, a green patterned skirt above the knee, and knee-length white socks. Brazilian women who regularly frequented the nightclub had a special member card allowing them to enter for free while foreign men would pay 30 reais. The Mosquito, which opened only when the Açaí was closed (on Tuesdays and Sundays) had two floors, the first consisting of two plateaus (i.e. large spaces separated by stairs) on a terrace with tables and chairs. The first plateau was located right by the entrance and allowed those already sitting at a table to watch those coming in. The Mosquito was often times referred to negatively by both Brazilians and tourists and many Brazilian women did not like the ‘meat market’ vibe emerging from this place. Stairs leading downstairs gave onto an indoor dance floor, which opened at 2:00 a.m.

The Portal and Samba had a more mixed clientele. The former was relatively small with a dance floor and some tables, and was distinctive because it attracted local lesbian women seeking to meet other Brazilian women. The Samba, a Latino dance bar, attracted middle class Brazilian women, a few foreign and Brazilian men, as well as a few female foreign tourists apparently seeking out the club’s regular Capoeira show displaying Brazilian men’s bodies. In all of these bars, I noticed a few presumably gay Brazilian men and *travestis*<sup>19</sup> who also sought to encounter foreign men but who were rather marginal in numbers, and generated much attention and gossip as ‘out-of-place.’

During the year I lived in Ponta Negra, bars opened and closed, resulting in shifting spatial practices and revealing the unstable nature of tourism in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Travestis* (literally transvestites) is the term used in Brazil to refer to male to female transsexuals who modify their bodies through hormones or silicones injections, but rarely through sex-change operations (see Kulick 1997).

neighbourhood. For instance, when I arrived in July 2007, there were two bars (Paraíso and Água de Coco) and two nightclubs (the Açaí and the Mosquito) operating on alternate nights that catered mainly to foreign male tourists and Brazilian women. A new nightclub eventually opened a little outside the Alto de Ponta Negra in October 2007 with short-lived success; in March 2008 the *praça*, an open, out-door place with several small, separate bars rapidly became the point of encounter where foreign tourists and Brazilian women would seek to encounter one another leaving the Paraíso and Água de Coco rather empty. I shifted my observations according to these spatial transformations, following the movement of foreign men and Brazilian women as much as possible.

I tried to rotate nights and to spend between three and five nights a week in the nightclubs – most commonly, spending an hour or two in the bars and/or nightclubs, but from time to time, I would stay there until the early hours of the morning. Wednesday nights were particularly lively in the Alto do Ponta Negra, due to a local tradition instituted by one of the first bars to open in the area. After Wednesday, Saturday was the busiest night of the week. Then, activity most commonly occurred, in decreasing order, on Fridays, Thursdays, Sundays, Tuesdays and Mondays. I spent several nights on my own, speaking with different groups of people throughout the night, or sitting at the counter and observing what was happening, especially during the first few weeks. Sometimes, I would arrange to meet with one woman or a group of women I had come to know. Many women welcomed my company for a night or two, or for a small chat, but most of them had their group and preferred to stay with them. I became part of Bebel's group to some extent and eventually arranged to meet with her or her colegas in the bars and nightclubs. Bebel insisted that I accompany her, as she did not like the blunt

approach that some women would take in the bars, including her own friends. She welcomed the presence of a woman with whom she could spend the night talking, while subtly flirting with men or letting one of them approach her. I was her ideal companion since I was not interested in meeting a foreign man.

Participant observation in these different spaces – the beach, the Marine Sea hotel, the bars, the nightclubs – was an important research strategy particularly helpful to understand the cyclical, transient, and at times unpredictable nature of tourism. For instance, in August, Ponta Negra was full of Italian male tourists on holiday, yet by September, they were mostly all gone. Bebel once referred to Ponta Negra as a living museum, suggesting that it was a relic from the past because it was (momentarily) emptied of tourists. Certain days were particularly busy because an international flight had arrived while over the course of several months, some periods were especially difficult for women as there were very few tourists (and many women). As anthropologists commonly emphasize, by spending considerable time in these different tourist spaces, I could capture the contradictions between what people say and do, and get further insights into these sexualized encounters across differences through extensive, prolonged observations and interactions.

#### *In-depth Interviews and Informal Conversations*

During the period of fieldwork from July 2007 to June 2008, I also conducted interviews with different groups of people in order grasp the ways in which they made sense of their participation in sex tourism. I interviewed the following four main groups of people: 1) Brazilian women; 2) foreign men; 3) workers in the tourism industry; and 4) state and non-state actors campaigning against sex tourism (see appendix 1 for more

details). In total, I conducted 56 interviews, including 27 with Brazilian women; 15 with foreign men (11 tourists and 4 ex-pats, including 3 bar or hostel owners and 1 travel agent); 4 with Brazilians working in the tourism industry (2 bar and restaurant owners, 1 surf instructor, 1 kiosk operators) and 8 with state and non-state actors involved in the campaigns against sex tourism (3 NGO workers; 2 members of associations of residents and/or business owners and 3 state agents from the municipal and state level tourism secretary and from the Tourist Police). I also conducted interviews with the mother of Ana, one of the women I followed closely (discussed in Chapter 6), as well with the head of ASPRO-RN, the local association of sex workers.

These interviews were all tape-recorded, with the exception of one with a tourist who requested that I take written notes. They were conducted in various languages – all the interviews with Brazilians were conducted in Portuguese; those with foreigners were conducted in English or French, and two interviews were conducted in a mixture of Italian/French or Italian/Spanish. I transcribed all these interviews myself.<sup>20</sup> The interviews were semi-structured with a set of questions that shifted over time as I became aware of some important issues – including, for instance, the many campaigns against sex tourism, which initially was not a topic I discussed with women, but one that eventually emerged.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am fluent in French, English, Portuguese, and understand Spanish well, but my comprehension of Italian is limited and I thus had help from my roommate in Brazil who was fluent in Italian, and from a fellow graduate student, Natasha Damiano, to grasp the content in Italian.

<sup>21</sup> These interviews vary in length depending on the willingness and availability of those who agreed to be interviewed; they range from 30 minutes to more than 2 hours, with a total of 29 hours of tape-recorded materials for the 27 Brazilian women I interviewed, an average of about 65 minutes each. In an attempt to accommodate as much as possible those who agreed to participate in my research, these interviews were conducted at various locations, including at the beaches, in coffee shops or restaurants, at a woman's house, apartment or guesthouse, or in work office spaces.

The Brazilian women I interviewed were between 18 and 38 years of age, and the majority of them were in their early to late twenties, with an average age of 27. Interestingly, of the 27 women I interviewed, almost two-thirds had experiences travelling or living abroad (17 out of 27), all but one going at the invitation of their boyfriend. Nineteen of the 27 women I interviewed had children (between one and four, with an average of two children per women, most of them toddlers or of elementary school age). Given the absence of state-sponsored childcare services, they relied, for the most part, on their relatives to take care of their children when working; a few women had their children taken care for by their in-laws or by their own mother who resided outside of Natal.<sup>22</sup> These women regularly sent remittances to those taking care of their children, and most women saved enough money to pay for their children's schooling in private schools. Of the 19 women who had children, 7 had a child with a foreigner (see appendix 1 for further details). None of the women I interviewed went to university but three had technical degrees (for instance in nursing and hairdressing). Fifteen women had high school diplomas (all of them from public institutions); while of the remaining twelve women, half had completed their primary school degree, the remaining six women frequented schools only briefly. Economically, most of these women could be considered as lower class or middle class. The 15 foreigners I interviewed were all Europeans, reflecting an important, distinctive aspect of Natal, where, as discussed previously, in

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<sup>22</sup> Of the nineteen women having children, four had left their children in the care of their mother or mother-in-law and sent them remittances. The remaining fourteen mothers live with their children and had diverse arrangements for child care: one woman had shared custody with her ex-husband, an Italian man who lived in Natal; another provided for her sister in exchange for child care (including food, housing, and money); while several women relied on their mothers to take care of their children when on a night out or spending time at the beach. A few women also brought their children with them at the beach and in restaurants during the day. The majority of women did not reveal to their children (and at times to their mothers) what they were doing in Ponta Negra; however, Felicidade told her eleven year-old daughter she was a *garota de programa*, hoping to de-stigmatize how her daughter viewed paid sex.

2007, more than 98% of the international tourists arriving in Natal were Europeans (Ministério do Turismo 2008).<sup>23</sup>

It was challenging to get interviews with both foreign men and Brazilian women. As other scholars have noted in similar contexts (Williams 2010), the transient nature of sex tourism does not lend itself easily to interview-based research. Most of the male tourists in Ponta Negra stayed for very short periods of time (one or two weeks), leaving little time to get to know each other, build trust, and arrange for a meeting. Some men were reluctant to talk with me formally (i.e. with a tape recorder) about their practices in Ponta Negra because of the stigma associated with paid sex in spite of my efforts to convey my intentions as debunking myths about sex tourism, while others were simply not interested in spending their time with a researcher while on their holiday. At times, they agreed to meet for an interview but then forgot or preferred spending their days visiting Natal or enjoying the beach. Brazilian women, too, were transient in these tourist spaces. Some of them lived in other parts of Natal and would come to Ponta Negra only on weekends; others frequented the neighbourhood only during the peak seasons. Some women rotated between different cities depending on the periods; and still others came from peripheral zones of Natal and returned there after a night out or a day at the beach, leaving little time to conduct interviews. Indeed, time constraints were a significant obstacle as many women viewed meeting with a researcher to be time that could be spent in Ponta Negra's tourist spaces meeting foreign men, whether to date or go on programa.

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<sup>23</sup> They ranged in age from 29 to 62 years old, with an average age of 42. Half of them were Italians (7), and I also interviewed men from Portugal (2), Germany (2), France (1), Belgium (1), Norway (1), and Holland (1). Four of them were expatriates and owned businesses in Ponta Negra: a guesthouse, a travel agency, a real estate agency, and a bar. The remaining European men were tourists and all but one of them had previous experience traveling in Natal (see appendix 1).



In my previous research (Carrier-Moisan 2005), I had used the snowball technique successfully, and thought that since I was in the same region, I could expect that a similar method would provide a similar result. In Cascavel, a small interior town in the state of Ceará, I had met many factory workers because I rented a house from one of them. She had introduced me to several women, who in turn had put me in contact with many other women, and so forth and so on. In Ponta Negra, I had not anticipated the difficulties associated with this strategy and that a woman would introduce me to a small, enclosed, bounded group. While women were friendly toward each other, a common utterance was, “in this life, there are no friends” – and indeed, women tended to identify closely with one or two women, and to be on their guard for other women given the highly competitive nature of the environment in which they engaged. A couple of women had come together from their hometown, including sisters, cousins, or friends. Thus there were distinct groups of women that competed against one another for foreign men’s attention.

Although I was not in these spaces for the same reasons as the Brazilian women I sought to interview, I was a woman who frequented these sexualized spaces, and was sometimes considered to be “competition,” even if I was a *foreign* woman. Furthermore, my close association with specific groups of women (e.g. Bebel and her colegas) marked me as one of them, restricting my access to other women, who simply ignored me or refused to talk to me. I thus constantly had to develop new ties and never had this moment when an interview was the ‘key’ entry point allowing me ‘in’. Another important aspect is that women did not identify as a collective group (even those who considered themselves *garotas de programa*) and kept a distance from the local association of sex

workers, ASPRO-RN. Therefore I could not rely on the outreach work of local associations or NGOs, as these did not target the women I intended to study, including both those who identified as garotas, and those who engage in ambiguous relationships with foreigners.<sup>24</sup>

My dissertation also draws upon countless informal conversations I had with dozens of foreign men, Brazilian women, local residents, workers in the tourism industry, and bars, restaurants, hotels or nightclubs owners. These informal conversations were recorded in my field notes along with other observations and in crucial ways they inform my understanding of sex tourism in Ponta Negra. I met several Brazilian women whom I ultimately did not interview for various reasons – including their sudden departure or lack of time – but who volunteered pertinent information about sex tourism.<sup>25</sup> I also had on-going conversations and interactions with the men and women I interviewed. The material and discursive practices I observed reveal important aspects that interviews alone cannot provide.

### *Collaborations in the Field*

During the field research period, I developed collaborative ties with Lita, a sociology graduate student from Spain doing a pilot study on sex tourism in Natal. She spent six weeks in Ponta Negra in the months of August and September and rented an

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, Williams notes, in her research on sex tourism in Salvador, Northeast Brazil: “In terms of access, I found that in some ways it was more convenient and efficient to focus on Aproba, because it gathered together a group of women who self-identified as sex workers (or prostitutes, as the case may be). It was much harder to gain access to women and men who did not self-identify as sex workers, or who were not mobilized as a group” (2010: 13). While in her case she resolved the challenge of finding interviewees by turning to Aproba, the local association of sex workers, in my research settings there was a rigid distinction between the association of sex workers (ASPRO-RN) and garotas de programa engaging with foreigners, not to mention the women who had ambiguous relationships with foreign men. Given my research aims, it was not an option for me to find interviewees via the association of sex workers.

<sup>25</sup> Among these different informal conversations, those with Monica (Bebel’s cousin) and Claudia (Bebel’s colega) were particularly illuminating and occurred over the course of several encounters; I rely on these informal conversations in Chapter 4 and Chapter 2, respectively.

apartment in my building. We agreed to collaborate, albeit working on separate projects, and during these few weeks, we went to the bars, nightclubs, restaurants, and beaches together. We conducted five interviews together (see Appendix 1), discussed our impressions and observations, shared our field notes, and developed a reading group on sex tourism along with another student, a Brazilian woman also researching sex tourism in Natal. This collaboration was particularly fruitful to confirm patterns I had observed in Ponta Negra and to converse about the methodological challenges encountered, and thus, it informs in various ways the findings in this dissertation.

My husband, Billy, also worked as a research assistant for me in his capacity as sociologist and ethnographer. During the last five months of my fieldwork (late January-June) when he joined me in the field, he conducted participant observation in the bars, nightclubs, restaurant, and at the beach about a dozen times. He wrote field notes, and told me about his observations and the conversations he had with English-speaking tourists. His experience was distinct from mine, as he could blend in easily in the bars and nightclubs as a European man in his early thirties, matching the demographics of the average foreign tourist. Indeed, when frequenting the bars together, we could pass as a Brazilian/foreigner couple in the eyes of some of the tourists (but not in those of the Brazilian women!). His encounters with foreigners were thus mediated by his position in the field; as a European, male tourist, foreign men spoke with him in different ways than they would with me. For instance, a Spanish tourist once told him: “It must be hard to be here with your wife!” assuming a shared experience in the bars and nightclubs of Ponta Negra by virtue of being a European man. Importantly, however, these foreign men did more than comment on women’s bodies and sexual prowess as one might have assumed,

and revealed to Billy their complex feelings about Brazilian women and their views on intimacy. The conversations he had with them thus complemented mine in many ways, and helped to provide further depth to my ethnographic findings as well as confirm my own understanding of their practices. His research assistance particularly contributed to Chapter 4, in which I draw from his field notes and the informal conversations he had with foreign men.

### *Researching the Campaigns against Sex Tourism*

My interest in the campaigns against sex tourism emerged as a result of various conversations I had in Ponta Negra with a wide range of people, including: local residents; Brazilian women seeking to encounter foreigners; bar, restaurant, hotel owners; workers in the tourism industry; members of associations of residents or business owners; NGO workers; feminist activists, etc. I became particularly intrigued by the state policing of the beach and the quasi-criminalization of prostitution that resulted from the opposition to sex tourism in Natal, as well as by the conflation of adult and child sex tourism, and the confusions resulting from it. I developed a collaborative relationship with the *Coletivo Leila Diniz*, a feminist collective critical of the state's economic development policies and of the ways the alarmist campaigns against sex tourism of various state and non-state actors tended to displace important issues, i.e. structural inequalities, lack of job opportunities, and the uneven benefits of tourism development. The collective provided me with institutional, intellectual, and emotional support while in Natal. Members accompanied me in the field, gave me tours of the neighbourhood, and provided me with relevant information regarding organized events that dealt with sex tourism in one way or another. I also accompanied the feminist collective to the city of

Salvador to participate in the *Forum Social Nordestino* from August 2 to 5. The Forum Social Nordestino is a mini-version of the World Social Forum; it is a regional encounter with different organizations involved in a wide range of social movements in the Northeast region of Brazil. I took part in sessions addressing sex tourism and/or sex trafficking.

In August 2007, I also attended a public forum at Natal city hall where various groups discussed sex tourism, including the *Polícia Rodoviária Federal* (Federal Police of the Road) and the NGOs Casa Renascer and Resposta. In March, I participated in a protest in Natal in which opposition to sex tourism was one of the many elements on the agenda; the protest targeted global capitalism, including the global commodification of women's bodies. I also interviewed state and non-state actors campaigning against sex tourism, including the NGOs Resposta, Casca Renascer, and Pau e Lata, the associations of residents and/or business owners *AME Ponta Negra* and *AR de Ponta Negra*,<sup>26</sup> as well as the secretary of tourism for the city of Natal and the state of Rio Grande do Norte. In addition, I collected campaign materials from these various groups for analytical purposes, some of which are presented in Chapter 3. I had not anticipated finding opposition to sex tourism from local businesses, given the economic benefits sex tourism generated to this sector. Furthermore, I was surprised to learn of the existence of local associations of residents and/or business owners dedicated to fighting sex tourism, and I eventually met with a few of the founding members of these organizations. These various groups had different understandings of sex tourism; they campaigned for distinct reasons,

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<sup>26</sup> AME Ponta Negra translates as Love Ponta Negra and stands for *Associação de Moradores, Empresários e Amigos de Ponta Negra* (Association of Residents, Businessmen, and Friends of Ponta Negra). AR de Ponta Negra translates as Ponta Negra's Air, and stands for *Associação Representativa de Ponta Negra* (or Representative Association of Ponta Negra) but its founder explained it was an association created to represent the interests of business owners.

but when taken together, their campaigning strategies were particularly significant, serving various political interests and reflecting local spatial tensions as I demonstrate in Chapter 3.

Since many businesses voiced their opposition to sex tourism, created associations or posted signs against sex tourism on their entrance doors barring certain women from entering their establishments, it became important to document this opposition. I conducted interviews with some of them, consulted their websites, and visited their establishments. I also consulted the archive of newspaper articles collected by the NGO Resposta on sex tourism, and conducted further research using the Internet and the key words “turismo sexual” and “Natal” on Google search Engine and through the web search engine of the following newspapers: *Diário de Natal* and *Tribuna do Norte*. I opted to begin from when the massive opposition began, in 2005 up until 2008, when I ended my research. The goals were: to understand the recent context that had given rise to the opposition to sex tourism; to confirm the stories I was told by various actors; to get a sense of the public debates on sex tourism; to understand when and why sex tourism was talked about; and to document the various responses, interventions, and campaigns that ensued. I also engaged in discussion at the federal university (The Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte), where sex tourism was debated, and I consider this to be another space where sex tourism was made into an important public issue. Through these various research strategies – participant-observation in social movements, interviews with both state and non-state actors, analysis of the campaign materials, archival research in newspapers – I was able to document the campaigns against sex tourism from various angles and to situate them within their own micro-local contexts. I

discuss these campaigns and the many different interventions to end sex tourism in Chapter 3.

### *Methodological and Ethical Challenges*

This dissertation deals with women who are often written about and spoken for and not evenly positioned to participate in the production of knowledge about themselves. In the spirit of feminist, critical ethnography, I seek here to acknowledge the process of knowledge production and the ways in which my position mediates both the research process and the production of this dissertation. As an outsider occupying various spaces of privilege, i.e. as a white, Canadian, university educated, heterosexually married woman granted money to conduct research, I am far removed from the experience of the women in my study. Interviewing women who differ from me and were positioned unequally in relation to me was challenging, and although we could find connections (as women; as surfers; as people involved in intimate relationships spanning borders) these points of similarity and shared experiences could not erase the power differentials that mediated our relationships. During the research process, I tried to make my privileges obvious rather than downplaying them because I thought that it was one way to make apparent how their experience as women was mediated by various intersections of oppression. For instance, our distinct spatial experiences in Ponta Negra or in crossing borders, helped to put into sharper relief the inequalities of race, class, sexuality and nationality shaping their lives. I voiced my criticism of those seeking to rescue them, making it clear to the women that I was not another “rescuer” seeking to save them from evil foreigners, and I told them that I wanted to challenge misguided preconceptions of

their experiences and practices. Women commonly expressed that they often felt judged for engaging in implicit or explicit forms of paid sex, and reacted positively to my approach by agreeing to talk informally with me.

Prior to researching sex tourism in Ponta Negra, I did not anticipate how tense and divisive this topic would be. I knew that there would be differences *between* distinct stakeholders, but there were also various positions and interests *within* each of them. For instance, foreign men sought to distinguish themselves from the “real bad tourist;” Brazilian women disagreed on whether going *de graça* (for free) with foreigners was fine. Business owners had opposing views on the impacts of sex tourism for their business; and NGOs disagreed on how to best campaign against sex tourism. These groups thus had different views on how my research could be beneficial to them, a situation that posed challenges to efforts at reciprocity and collaboration, especially when interests were particularly divergent. I am thus concerned to honour my interviewees and their trust in my ability to represent them respectfully, especially given the contested nature of sex tourism as a topic. I tried to remain honest about my intentions throughout the research process, and I explained to my interviewees that my position did not stem from a moralistic stance on prostitution nor a victim/pervert understanding of those taking part in it. I told them that in trying to understand sex tourism in Ponta Negra, I was hoping to challenge stereotypical understanding of the men and women taking part in it, and preconceptions about the phenomenon. I did not shy away from presenting myself as a feminist, nor did I refrain from criticizing the campaigns against sex tourism. Ultimately, my dissertation may not suit the agendas of all, but I hope that the



representations that emerged from the process of writing are accurate enough so that the various stakeholders I describe would recognize themselves and find my depictions fair.

In Ponta Negra, I was seen as a tourist and it did not matter that I was also an anthropologist. For the locals, I was a *gringa*, that is, a female foreign tourist. Many suspected that my “research” was an excuse to justify my presence in these highly sexualized spaces. Some Brazilian women assumed that I, too, was there to meet foreigners; others thought that maybe I was a lesbian interested in Brazilian women. A woman once even asked me, while I was in one of the nightclubs, whether I was working as a *garota de programa*. She thought that maybe, since it was such a popular spot, some *gringas* had begun to venture into selling sex abroad.

As a *gringa*, I was positioned in relationships that were highly commodified and thus, I was part of the tourism economy even when I thought I was not. The interactions I had with local people blurred intimacy and money and helped, to some degree, elucidate the ambiguity that characterizes relationships between locals and tourists in Ponta Negra. At times, I too was expected to pay in situations that were not clearly demarcated as commercial and that were blurring intimate ties with market ones. This was communicated implicitly rather than directly, in ways similar to, I assume, the ways that obligations and expectations were communicated to foreign men. In other words, as a *gringa*, I was able to grasp the experience of being a foreigner – but of course, this experience was mediated by my gender.

Foreigners, too, saw me primarily as a *gringa*. For some, it meant that I was often included as one of them and they assumed a shared foreign identity distinct from a Brazilian one. They thus made comments that helped elucidate their understanding of

Brazil as a distinct place and of Brazilian women as drastically different from European women. I was even, at times, considered European; I was, by virtue of being from North America, and a native French speaker, closer to Europe and thus positioned as able to “get” the differences to which they alluded. I remained, however, primarily a woman, and thus, an outsider to the many experiences they had as *men*. Although I see these men as occupying spaces of power and privilege that are reproduced in Ponta Negra through structures that privilege their western masculinity, I hope to portray these men as the complex subjects they revealed themselves to be, rather than as the perverts or evil, violent sex tourists they are often made out to be in public discussions of sex tourism (see also Constable 2003).

A final, but important note: my research does not address the topic of juvenile prostitution in tourism or the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism. I interviewed only garotas de programa older than 18 years old. While the age of consent for sexual activities is 14 years old in Brazil, the prostitution of minors under 18 years old is punished by Brazilian, federal law (Statute of Child and Youth of 1990, article 244-A; Penal Code, articles 218-B; 227, 230; 231; 231-A). Prostitution is not illegal in Brazil, while its incitement and facilitation are, and the category ‘sex worker’ is even recognized by the Ministry of Labour and Employment in its national Classification of Professional Occupations following lobbying efforts on the part of associations of sex workers in Brazil (Rede Brasileira de Prostitutas 2007; Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego 2007).<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the legality of prostitution does not necessarily translate into its moral and social

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<sup>27</sup> While prostitution appears to be state-sanctioned and even includes sex with tourists in the description of the competences and activities linked to prostitution, the state is also actively involved in controlling this activity – especially in the realm of sex tourism, with the policing of beaches (Folha online 2007), the distribution of condoms with warning against traffic in women (Camacho 2005), and the attempts to eradicate the phenomenon, with the help of NGOs (World Vision 2010).

acceptance, and in Natal, the campaigns against sex tourism provided the legitimate grounds for backlash against prostitution, an aspect I explore in Chapter 3. In the following chapter, I turn to an examination of the concept of “sex tourism,” seeking to capture its imbrications in the daily, intimate practices of low-income, racialized Brazilian women in Ponta Negra.

## Chapter 2: Between *Namoro*<sup>28</sup> and *Programa*: Sex Tourism in Ponta Negra

Relatively new, the term *sex tourism* now circulates widely in various parts of the globe, and has been adopted in both popular and scholarly productions. Sex tourism is the subject of novels (Houellebecq 2001), fiction films (Cantet 2005), documentary films (Araújo 2008; O'Rourke 1991), extensive news coverage (e.g. Jornal da Globo 2006), international campaigns (World Vision 2010; ECPAT 2010), statements, and codes of conduct (UNWTO 1995; ECPAT 2010), in addition to featuring prominently in scholarly work in the social sciences. Yet the meaning of sex tourism, both in popular representations and scholarly work, remains rather elusive. Does it refer to the sexual exploitation of children in tourism (Pruth 2007)? Or is it synonymous with any tourist-oriented prostitution between consenting adults (Cohen 1982; 1986)? Does the term include tourism in Amsterdam's red-light district (Wonders and Michalowski 2001)? Or does sex tourism constitute a feature of the Global South, and thus is necessarily marked by economic and/or racial inequalities (Sanchez Taylor 2001; O'Connell Davidson 1995, 1996)? Does sex tourism encompass the practices of female western travelers (de Albuquerque 1998; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Sanchez Taylor 2001), or is "romance tourism" more appropriate to describe this phenomenon (Pruitt and LaFont 1995)? And what about those seeking marriage, love, and intimacy in tourism (Cabezas 2009)? Can we frame their practices alongside those who uniquely exchange sex for money in tourism? In spite of this elusiveness, the term "sex tourism" is used in various campaigns and has been adopted by scholars, politicians, NGOs, media, and local populations alike.

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<sup>28</sup> *Namoro* translates as courtship.

What is sex tourism then? And is the concept useful to think about the practices of the Brazilian women and foreign tourists I discuss in this dissertation?

In this chapter, I engage with the scholarship on sex tourism and suggest that studies of this topic need to further emphasize its ambiguous nature. I begin with a critical examination of the concept of sex tourism, suggesting that it remains an important analytical tool, albeit one fraught with conceptual problems and limitations. Drawing on my ethnographic data, I consider the blurring of affect and money as an integral part of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, and thus I disrupt interpretations of sex tourism as exclusively synonymous with prostitution. I argue that the ambiguity of sex tourism mediates women's ability to exert control and choice in distinct ways due to the blur of spheres commonly understood as separated, such as work/leisure, intimacy/market, or love/money. I also describe what women term the "glamour" and the "decadence" of *essa vida* (this life). Overall, my goal in this chapter is to provide a sense of "essa vida" and what women mean when they say they hope to "sair dessa vida", or to get out of this life.

### **The Troubles with "Sex Tourism"**

As the introductory quotes to this chapter suggest, scholars of sex tourism increasingly recognize the conceptual problem with the term "sex tourism" and point to its limits in grasping the experience of those deemed affected by it. In its popular meaning, sex tourism is often understood as prostitution-oriented tourism,<sup>29</sup> and the term

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<sup>29</sup> Clift and Carter capture in a few words a widespread, but narrow understanding of sex tourism, proposing that "attempts at defining sex tourism rapidly become problematic, but a normal working definition is taken as travel for which the main motivation is to engage in commercial sexual relations" (2000: 6). This conception is rather limited: to begin with, tourists rarely travel with the sole purpose of having sex (Oppermann 1999: 256), and sex tourism includes more than prostitution, as will become apparent in this chapter (see also Cabezas 2004; 2009; Piscitelli 2007; Williams 2010).

often conjures up images of creepy, aging, white, male tourists exploiting young, poor, Third World prostitutes – a vision that is also found in some of the scholarship on sex tourism.<sup>30</sup> Yet as the work of many scholars suggest, sex tourism neither can be reduced to prostitution (Cabezas 2004; 2009; Fosado 2004; Oppermann 1999; Piscitelli 2006; 2007b; 2006; Ryan 2000; Ryan and Hall 2001; Williams 2010) nor to an implicit pathologization of foreign men and a parallel victimization of local women (Silva and Blanchette 2005; Williams 2010). Sex tourism, as these scholars have shown, encompasses more than an exchange of sex for money and may even lead to romantic love, leisure, travel, consumption, adventure, migration, social mobility, and marriage (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2009; 2004; Gregory 2007; Kempadoo 2004; Oppermann 1999; Piscitelli 2004a). Furthermore, this stereotypical vision is challenged by empirical studies of African American sex tourism (Williams 2010); female sex tourism (de Albuquerque 1998; Frohlick 2009; 2007; O’Connell Davidson 1998; Sanchez Taylor 2001); and gay sex tourism (Fosado 2004; Padilla 2007) as well as sex tourism in the West, or Global North (Wonders and Michalowski 2001).

In an effort to grasp the complexity and diversity of sex tourism, Chris Ryan defines it as “sexual intercourse while away from home” (2000:36), which includes basically any sexual act that may or may not be commercialized that occurs while travelling. This comprises, according to him, practices as disparate as travels to attend the

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, O’Connell Davidson insists on the fatness and ugliness of the British sex tourists she saw in Thailand in the context of sex tourism: “large numbers of sex tourists are either physically repellent by European standards (I have never seen so many enormously overweight men together in one place before), or disfigured or disabled in some way, or too old to be considered sexually attractive”(1995: 54). This view reflects a popular and widespread image of the typical sex tourist, but should not be taken as representative of all male tourists who buy sex in all locations. Furthermore, this view tends to individualize and pathologize foreign men who have paid sex while travelling. Recent ethnographies provide a rich, and more complex portrayal of the men buying sex while travelling (Brennan 2004; Gregory 2007; Kempadoo 1999; 2004; Padilla 2007).

Pride Parade in San Francisco, visits to the red-light district in Amsterdam, Spring breaks in the United States in which sex/romance occurs, child sex tourism, strip club tourism, sex trafficking, and heterosexual prostitution in tourism. As he proposes, “there is no single paradigm of sex tourism, but many” (2000: 24)<sup>31</sup>. There are potential problems, however, with this broad understanding of sex tourism; if we can lump together traffic in women with holiday romance or child sex tourism with attending a pride parade, then it becomes difficult to make analytical sense of what constitutes sex tourism and potential issues of power encompassed within it. I thus find myself rather hesitant to use the term “sex tourism” as it may confuse more than illuminate the issues and practices I seek to discuss here.

Nonetheless, I still use the term sex tourism in this dissertation, not because I think it has an essential, core meaning that I will uncover here, but rather because it has acquired diverse local meanings. In spite of its elusiveness, I consider that the term sex tourism remains salient and an important analytical tool because the term circulated among several groups of people in Natal, including the media, the state, local associations of residents and business owners, workers in the tourism industry, tourists, sex workers, Brazilian women dating foreigners, and local residents, to name but a few. In Ponta Negra, sex tourism was on everybody’s lips, even in settings where I would not necessarily expect to hear about it, including at home with my roommate or landlady, at the grocery store, overhearing a conversation between the cashier and customers, and at the beach, on my time “off” while taking a surf lesson. I had begun this research thinking the term “sex tourism” was highly problematic, given the confusion over its meanings,

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<sup>31</sup> Other scholars share this broad understanding of sex tourism, see for instance, Oppermann (1999), Clift and Carter (2000) or Ryan and Hall (2001).

and refrained from using it when introducing my research and myself. I was interested in understanding the relationship between *brasileiras* (Brazilian women) and *gringos* (foreign men) as I would often say. Almost invariably, however, the person I spoke to would reply: “you mean sex tourism?” I soon realized that it was a particularly loaded term and a controversial topic that seemed to affect everyone in Ponta Negra.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, given the salience of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, it remains important to attend to its materiality, to try to grasp this thing called “sex tourism”, and to find ways to render its complex material expressions. But where to begin when sex tourism is such a politically charged, potentially confusing, even harmful term? And how can I avoid being complicit in the making of an objectified and objective truth about sex tourism, and especially about those involved in it? This is a complex task, even more given the limits of my position, as an outsider or an out-of-place gringa aware of the legacy of both anthropological depictions invested in processes of othering and projects meant to rescue poor, victimized, Third World prostitutes (Doezema 1998; Mohanty 1988; Abu-Lughod 2002). It is impossible to escape the politics of representation and I claim here neither objectivism, nor do I pretend to “give voice” to marginalized women, for this entails its own polemics, its own politics: which voices, to begin with? There are only “partial truths” (Clifford 1987) we were once told. But partial truths do not operate on an equal, level playing field. As critical feminist ethnographers have shown, some ‘truths’ have more weight, considerations, and recognitions than others (e.g. Cole 2003: 5-15). Both popular and scholarly representations of sex tourism strike me as carrying an important, even overwhelming “truth”; sex tourism continues to be seen as synonymous with

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<sup>32</sup> The phrase “traffic in women” did not circulate in the same manner, albeit it was an important aspect of the campaign against sex tourism which I discuss in Chapter 3.



prostitution and women's exploitation. My ethnography makes apparent the problems with these assumptions, and the processes of exclusions, marginalization, stigmatization, and victimization such assumptions entail.

### **Blurring Heterosexual Male Sex Tourism**

*As I discussed with Lara, she suddenly puts her hand over my thigh, and said: "I'm here to arrange someone", then paused, and added "well you know it's so slow these days, I would even go with a woman tonight". She was looking at me, intensively. She was offering me a programa, as I was, for her, a "gringa lesbica" – a lesbian foreigner. Why else would I be in this bar, alone? My status as a "researcher" seems more like an alibi to be there – the only white, foreign woman in the bar.*

*Excerpts adapted from my field notes, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Yesterday, I went to the Matrix, with Lita, the Spanish sociologist. A short, masculine Brazilian woman wearing cargo khaki pants and a white shirt invited me to dance with her friends. I've seen her before in the other nightclubs and noticed her presence, as she spent her time at the bar, watching the other women. This is rather rare in the nightclubs catering to tourists in Ponta Negra. I thought maybe her girlfriend was working the bars, but no, as I chat with her, I realized she is there to flirt and watch the spectacle of these young, highly sexualized, Brazilian women. She must assume I am in there for the same reasons as hers. She asked me whether Lita was a friend or not – and I said yes, aware she was trying to know whether we could be more than friends. I know she was thinking we were probably interested in women, too. So she asked me where I was from, how many times I had been in Brazil, and then she asked me whether I like men only.*

*Excerpts adapted from my field notes, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

Following the innovative work of scholars who seek to "queer" sex tourism (Fosado 2004; Padilla 2007; Williams 2010), I address here, even if only partially, the diversity encountered in Ponta Negra – queer and otherwise. Brazilian women would notice me – as a *gringa* – in the bars (whereas I could pass as Brazilian for some foreigners), and wonder about my presence, especially after a couple of months. I did receive offers of programa, to my own surprise, as one of the introductory vignettes to this section suggests. On more than one occasion, I suspected subtle flirting, and close to the end of my stay, I was told by Larissa, a woman I interviewed, that she thought I was

interested in meeting Brazilian women when she first saw me in the bars, as I stood out in the spaces where only gringos and garotas would seek to encounter one another.

My repeated visits to the clubs and bars attracted attention, and I knew the regulars were observing me, intrigued, and trying to figure out what I was seeking in those spaces of erotic cross-cultural encounters. The fact that I could be cast as a gringa lesbica meant that programa between women could happen, albeit discretely (and never to my knowledge). While there was a lot of gossip around women's bisexuality or lesbianism, none of the women I interviewed openly identified as such. I did meet women on two occasions in committed homosexual relationships who engaged in paid sex with foreigners, including a woman who had married a Norwegian man but managed to live partly in Natal, partly in Norway. While in Brazil, she resided with her female partner, under no suspicions from her husband, who spent the majority of his time in Norway. This seems to suggest that self-identified lesbian women too blurred the distinction between affect/money, private/public, and authenticity/performance – yet I suspect in unique ways that would deserve further attention. As one of my vignettes illustrates, I also met a lesbian Brazilian woman who frequented the bars for voyeurism and for flirting, much like many of the male tourists. I can only speculate, for now, as to the extent and meanings of these practices, as I could not get closer to any of these women. Their presence was mostly notable in the *Portal*, a nightclub that attracted a varied clientele, and where I noticed women flirting with each other. I believe these practices were amongst the most marginalized, and it was only through my subject position as a gringa that I could come to know of the existence of an underground lesbian scene (I believe mostly for local Brazilian women).

The gay male scene was rather marginal too, as Frederico, an Italian identifying as gay I interviewed, told me. In the neighbourhood of Ponta Negra, there was “nothing” for him, with few exceptions. Indeed, apart from an isolated area at the southern part of the beach, where local gay men meet one another, Ponta Negra appears as a space dominated by heterosexuality. Antonio would usually frequent the nightclubs in Natal’s downtown, where there were very few, if any, other gringos. Yet in spite of this lack of a gay scene, he was still in Natal because he thought that it was a much more liberal place than his native town in Italy and he narrated to me how he was impressed at the sight of men dancing as couples in one of these nightclubs. Antonio enjoyed the beach, the surf, and the few possibilities to have sex with Brazilian men he imagined as endowed with a tropical sexuality, much like heterosexual tourists would for Brazilian women. Yet unlike Padilla (2007), I did not discover a niche-market for sexual/economic encounters between local men and gay tourists in Ponta Negra.

The presence of a few *travestis* (male-to-female transsexuals) was visible in Ponta Negra, albeit in back alleys or nearby the nightclubs, but not necessarily in the main nightclubs. There was a group of three or four of them, which I noticed mostly early in my fieldwork and on other rare occasions afterwards. They would usually hang out together by night in the Salsa street or by the deserted beach, and from time to time, enter the clubs. I rarely, if ever, saw them at the beach by day; within the larger cityscape, travestis tended to frequent the areas of the city known for the local street prostitution scene. They were thus frequenting more marginalized spaces closely associated with difficult working conditions, meagre wages, and potential harm. None of the tourists I met admitted being interested in travestis or trans women but I heard several stories of

foreign men being ‘lured’ into sex with travestis. Spanish tourists visiting Natal indeed reported a similar deceit in a Spanish newspaper (Marin 2006). The trope reinforces Ponta Negra as a space of heteronormativity, with the idea, as expressed in the media coverage and through gossip, of a ‘fake woman’ luring an unsuspecting tourist; yet, while no tourist admitted to engaging in sex with travestis, I suspect that some foreign men in Natal were also seduced by what Ross (2012) describes as the ‘full-package deal’ (i.e. male genitals with female attributes). Since I did not interview any trans women or travestis, it is rather difficult to engage with the ways in which they, too, blur affect/money in the context of sex tourism; however I would suspect that they also capitalize on the private/public blur that operates in tourism. Indeed, in the documentary film *Cinderelas, Lobos e um Príncipe Encantado* (Araújo 2008), Camila, a self-identified travesti, explains that foreign men bring her to shopping malls (and according to her, they do not suspect she is a travesti); she also says she once fell in love with a foreign man, but thinks gringo love is an illusion. According to her, she fell in love because he paid her 1200 reais for a night together. It would be interesting to probe further the specific ways in which travestis further play with the romance that many tourists are looking for – a project I leave to others.

In addition to marginal queer spaces, there were other ways in which sex tourism was rather diverse; I saw a couple of disabled tourists in wheelchairs, for instance. I also met female travelers seeking to date Brazilian men, including a Dutch mother with her two teenage daughters, which generated a lot of local gossip, as both mother and daughters were seen in the presence of young Brazilian men, who received gifts, money, and other benefits from the women. I too, was chased after by Brazilian men, and learnt

that albeit in discreet ways, men also engaged in commercial sex with female tourists in Ponta Negra. I noticed in the more isolated parts of the beach some Brazilian men that I came to recognize as *caça-gringas* (gringa-hunters), including a local tourist guide. I saw him with young-looking gringas with whom he would parade, but I also saw him with a 50 year-old white woman in a remote part of the beach where he seemed to be hiding. I can only speculate as to the reason for this, but assume that it was rather uncommon and stigmatized for a young man to engage in romantic-sexual relationships with older women. I also met two Norwegian women who were regulars to Ponta Negra on their third trip, and engaging in (paid) sex with local Brazilian men. They were noticeable, like I was, and when I approached them they willingly shared with me their experiences, which strangely bore more resemblances to that of their fellow Norwegian male travelers than I would have initially assumed. The presence of other gringas was mostly notable at the beach, and in bars catering to the local middle class and university students. There, from time to time, gringas were also seen, usually in the company of a group of young Brazilian men dancing with them and accompanying them at the beach by day. The presence of these few gringas in Ponta Negra, and their imbrications in affective/sexual/economic exchanges indicate that it is important not to make assumptions about the gendered nature of sex tourism.

If sex tourism in Ponta Negra was overwhelmingly heteronormative, heterosexual, and gendered female, there was also some diversity, albeit in the margins. Unlike elsewhere in Brazil, such as the gay scene in Rio de Janeiro, or the heterosexual female sex tourism in Pipa and Jericoacoara, Natal was a space marked by the reproduction of dominant, normative identities and practices. Throughout this

dissertation, I seek to shed light on this dimension, in an attempt to question the assumed heterosexuality of sex tourism. As argued by Gregory in the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, “the privileging of heteronormative masculinity, locally and within international tourist industry, constructs sex work as female and heterosexual” (2003: 33). If Ponta Negra was a (hetero)sexualized space dominated by encounters between Brazilian women and foreign men, it was particularly fascinating, however, for the blur of affect and money characterizing these relationships to which I now turn. But first, I engage with the ways in which this blur has been problematized in the scholarship on sex tourism.

### **Thinking the Blur of Affect and Money in Sex Tourism**

In spite of the recognition in the scholarship of the ambiguous nature of sex tourism, the point of departure, in most studies, remains sex work or prostitution. As Cabezas proposes: “the category of sex worker has remained unexamined and immutable within sex tourism research” (2004:991-2).<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the language used in most studies reflects this pattern, as scholars discuss “sex workers”, “prostitutes” or “sex tourists” (e.g. Brennan 2004; Padilla 2007), even when these identities may not be those adopted by the protagonists in the study (Cohen 1982; O’Connell Davidson 1995; Padilla 2007; Sanchez Taylor 2001). In his research among Dominican men involved in sexual/economic exchanges with male tourists in the Dominican Republic, Padilla (2007) recognizes that in spite of his uses of the term for analytical purposes, the term *male sex worker*, “occasionally creates conceptual slippages” (2007:15). This is in part due to the scarce

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<sup>33</sup> For recent, compelling work examining the category of sex worker, see Cabezas (2009) and Williams (2010).

utterance of the term, as it “is very rarely used in actual social discourse except in unusual cases in which men had experienced a significant amount of exposure to HIV/AIDS organizations” (2007: 15). Furthermore, in the course of his research, it became challenging to determine who belonged to the category of *male sex worker*, partly because of the difficulty of categorizing relationships with benefits that are non-monetary, “or when the instrumental aspects of the exchange are less explicit” (2007:15). These conceptual slippages are often times left unexamined in sex tourism research, creating confusion over what the chosen terms and categories include.

Because of the racial and economic inequality inherent in tourism from affluent countries to poor tropical destinations, the mere presence of gifts or other benefits is also commonly seen as necessarily transforming the male or female tourists into “sex tourists” and the locals into “prostitutes” or “sex workers” (O’Connell Davidson 1995; Sanchez Taylor 2001). In this view, buying a drink in a bar, sending remittances, and paying for a clearly defined sexual act are all the same: prostitution. The presence of gifts suggests that interpretations of romance or love are ignorant of the economic disparity between the tourists and the locals. The assumption is that inequalities define the relationships, and thus, only when the tourists and the locals share the same class does the possibility for mutual exchange arise. For instance, in her research on female sex tourism in the Caribbean, Sanchez Taylor (2001:756-7) argues that only those rare female tourists who engage in sex with middle class men are exempt from this label. Drawing on Yuval-Davis, she argues that “the exchange here is more on the basis of mutual pleasure than money for pleasure” (Yuval-Davis 1992: 52, cited in Sanchez Taylor 2001: 756-7). These women, according to Sanchez Taylor, represent “the exception rather than the

rule” (Sanchez Taylor: 2001: 757). I find this interpretation rather problematic for its assumption that middle class men (and women) do not engage in prostitution, for its presumption that all working class men (and women) are necessarily and exclusively driven by money when engaging in sex with tourists, and for its conclusion that all female (and by extension male) tourists having sex with partners unequally positioned economically are necessarily “clients” or “sex tourists”. “Mutual pleasure” and “money for pleasure” may at times be particularly difficult to distinguish or may be entangled within intimate relationships such as friends, lovers, boyfriends/girlfriends, or husbands/wives.

For scholars such as Sanchez Taylor, there is thus a rigid distinction between “pure love” and “commercial sex” and any commercial dimension annihilates other interests such as the pursuit of romantic love, feelings of attraction and/or sexual pleasure (Zelizer 2005; Cabezas 2009). There is no room for ambiguities, nuances, complexities, and diversity and for the recognition of the plethora of practices that blur together love and commercial sex, sometimes making them indistinguishable. As Cabezas (2009: 118) aptly proposes in the context of Caribbean sex tourism:

The underlying assumption is that ‘true’ love is about untainted intimacy, mutual pleasure, and emotional comfort; pure love is without monetary exchanges. When there are strategic behaviors that beget marriage offers, that beget visas, then these relationships become tainted, impure, and suspect. There seems to be no liminal space, only simplistic binaries, where women ultimately lose and men eventually gain. However, women’s tales of their experiences are often riddled with contradictions that suggest agency, multivalent meanings, and fluctuating situations. These relationships can be ephemeral, amorphous, and strategic, combining affect, money, mobility, and yes, even pleasure.

Thus, the presence of interests such as status, cultural capital, transnational migration, economic stability, and money does not always preclude love, affection, or



attraction. Furthermore, the presence of gifts, the buying of drinks, and the sending of remittances does not always mean that foreign men or women should be seen as “sex tourists”. As Zelizer proposes in the context of intimate relationships in North America, contrary to the common assumption that money necessarily corrupts intimacy, “people manage to integrate monetary transfers into larger webs of mutual obligations without destroying the social ties involved. Money regularly cohabits with intimacy, and even sustains it” (2005: 28).<sup>34</sup> These mutual obligations, found in the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, are quite reminiscent of what Marcel Mauss (1967) describes as the complex cultural rules about appropriate forms of exchange; gift exchanges are never free according to him, but rather create a set of reciprocal obligations.

Drawing on Mauss, Cabezas (2009: 123-129) explores the ways in which gifts define social ties in the context of heterosexual male sex tourism in the Caribbean. She proposes that: “women referred to gifts not as payments in kind for services rendered but as a way to solidify and strengthen the affective connection” (123). In other words, they think of the gifts as creating mutual obligations and long-term, reciprocal, intimate ties. Thus the ambiguities of sex tourism allow for practices far more creative, complex, and contradictory than an either “pure love” or “commercial sex” framework does. I thus propose that ambiguity is a key “analytical tool” (Williams 2010:105; see also Fosado 2004) that allows us to further probe the experiences of those involved in sex tourism and to grasp the larger implications these have in terms of transnational migration, social mobility and border-crossings, among other things. It is my contention that the diffuse

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<sup>34</sup> Zelizer (2005: 27) provides several examples of such intimacies, including for instance parents paying nannies for the care of their children, immigrants sending remittances back home, friends giving loans of money to each other, parents paying to adopt babies, or parents helping their children financially with allowances, college education, and first mortgages.

nature of sex tourism in Ponta Negra is crucial in explaining why both tourists and locals engage in its practices. The reasons for this are complex, but as this chapter demonstrates, the affective and the material may come together without corrupting each other rather than existing as rigidly distinct spheres (Zelizer 2005; Cabezas 2009).

Yet my focus on the ambiguous nature of sex tourism is not an invitation to celebrate these “romantic” encounters or to deny their deep imbrications in economic motivations. “Love” is socially constructed rather than universal and is imbricated in complex economic, political, social and cultural processes. As Kempadoo (2004: 43) proposes in the context of sex tourism in the Caribbean:

Is it really possible to seize that universal, essential quality called love that transcends socially constructed meanings? More than a century ago, Frederik Engels argued that romantic love and desire were created as bourgeois fabrications in the drive to consolidate patriarchal capitalism. More recently it has been advanced that meanings of love and romance are enmeshed with consumption patterns and discourses, and have been transformed over the past century through social and economic change to become a part of the mass market and mass media culture. Can then histories of gendered, racialized, sexual relations be simply erased through the invocations of the supposedly universal quality of love?

Thus, love is here understood as something that is neither “pure” nor existing outside of its historical, political, social and cultural context. Love, to paraphrase Cheng (2010: 133), does not erase the power differentials between foreign men and Brazilian women, but rather mediates these.

### **Spatial Ambiguity in Ponta Negra**

The ambiguity characterizing sex tourism is an old observation, with some early studies referring to “open-ended” prostitution (Cohen 1986: 115), and more recent works referring to the freelance (rather than contractual) nature of the exchange between locals

and tourists (Sanchez Taylor 2001: 758; see also Kempadoo 2004; O'Connell Davidson 1995; 1998). Among the first to write about sex tourism, Erik Cohen describes these relationships as "ridden with ambiguities" (1982: 411) and notes the presence of emotional attachment, in addition to economic/sexual interest, for both Thai girls and foreign men in Bangkok. Similar ambiguities have been noted in a variety of contexts and settings associated with sex tourism, including in gay sex tourism in the Caribbean (Fosado 2004: 79; Padilla 2007: 149-153) or in female sex tourism in Kenya (Kibicho 2009) and Costa Rica (Frohlick 2009; 2007). In Brazil too, the affective and the commercial come together in a myriad of ways (Piscitelli 2007b; Williams 2010).

Many scholars have proposed that the sexual exchanges that take place in the context of sex tourism are fluid and ambiguous because of the spatial configuration in which they take place: in settings that are not strictly dedicated to commercial sex (not in strip clubs, red light districts or brothels) and considered to have an "atmosphere of 'normality', distanced from prostitution stereotypes" (Piscitelli 2007b: 492; see also Cabezas 2004; 2009: 118). Often times this atmosphere of normalcy is intentional on the part of business owners, given their understanding of what tourists are looking for: "easy access to women who do not seem to be prostitutes" (Piscitelli 2007b: 491). The landscape of tourism thus invites this 'natural' atmosphere, where encounters with eroticized women happen in ways seen as non-commercial: there is flirtation, seduction, conversations, and shared drinks. As Cabezas proposes: "The transactions that take place are difficult to recognize and categorize as a form of labor; instead, the landscape of tourism lends itself more to interpretations of adventure and romance" (2004: 997). This is certainly a key feature in Ponta Negra, and this explains the appeal of this place for

foreigners who imagined, in this tropical landscape of sun, sand and sea, women naturally endowed with hypersexuality willing to have sex with them. Ponta Negra, as a tourist space, suggests romance and casual sex encounters, rather than labour.

During the year I spent in Ponta Negra from July 2007 to June 2008, the interactions between foreign male tourists and Brazilian women were deeply ambiguous. The spaces where foreigners and Brazilian women sought to meet one another were part of a tourist area, not a red-light district. By day, the beach of Ponta Negra was frequented by different groups of people, including local surfers, joggers, volleyball or soccer players, fishermen, hawkers, beachgoers, and kids playing together, contributing to an atmosphere of leisure, relaxation, and romantic pursuit. There were also domestic and international tourists who could be traveling alone, as couples, with their friends or with their children, in addition to the highly visible white male foreigners. Along the beach, some spots were recognized as points of encounter between gringos and *garotas*<sup>35</sup> but for the unknowing newcomer, the visible signs of commercial sex were not necessarily obvious. Even in the most visible spaces of exchange of sex for money, practices were not necessarily rigidly defined.<sup>36</sup> The long stretch of beach indeed offered several possibilities for diffuse forms of commercial sex, some women capitalizing on the

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<sup>35</sup> *Garotas* is a local diminutive for *garotas de programa*. The word *garota* (the singular form) literally means girl.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, there was a resto-bar by the beach, the *Marine Sea Hotel*, which, along with the beach area facing it, stood out, in the beach landscape, for the obvious transactions happening there. It was where the most strictly defined transactions would take place – but these were not the only interactions taking place there. Because of the open nature of this resto-bar, some clients, among them, many expats, would gather together at a table in the late afternoon, to have a drink while watching the local women in the neighbouring tables, but not necessarily with the purpose to engage in paid sex. Their presence was often times noted by the Brazilian women who saw them as *cafuzo* – a term that came to connote, in this context, a man unwilling to pay or provide for a woman, in other words, a cheap man. Some tourists – including couples of foreigners – would come to enjoy a meal or a drink there, due to its location by the beach, unaware that this place was a meeting point for *gringos* and *garotas*. Several women who did not identify as sex workers, prostitutes, escorts, or *garotas* would also frequent this place, sometimes accompanied by their children, creating again, more fuzziness.

informal economy of the beach to meet foreign men through indirect means, such as offering massages or selling fruits, jewellery, clothing, and so on. The beach was thus a mixed space and facilitated encounters that could not be easily defined as pertaining to the realm of “sex work”. Yet while there was an important diversity of people at the beach, the presence of white foreign men accompanied by Brazilian women was also quite noticeable – at times even overwhelmingly visible because of their massive numbers, outnumbering the local couples. As a white foreign woman, I often felt “out-of-place” in Ponta Negra, given the presence of very few other gringas.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 5: A meeting point for foreign men and Brazilian women at Ponta Negra's Beach (photo by author)**

By night, the beach was mostly deserted, given that most of the nightlife had recently moved up the hill, following the closing of bars in the aftermath of the massive

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<sup>37</sup> Female international tourists were more likely to frequent Pipa, a nearby beach attracting surfers, located 80 km from Natal. Pipa is locally recognized as a hub for *caça-gringa* (literally, gringa-hunters, in reference to Brazilian men looking for sex/romance with foreign women).

police operation against sex tourism in 2006 that I discuss in the next chapter. Gringos and Brazilian women would meet in the Alto de Ponta Negra, seen as the high point of the nightlife, for both locals and tourists. In the nightclubs catering to gringos and Brazilian women, I also felt oddly out-of-place, even more so than at the beach, for I usually was the only gringa. With the exception of the nightclubs, for the passerby with no knowledge of the sex tourist scene, the Alto de Ponta Negra did not appear as a space of commoditized sex. Indeed, the Alto de Ponta Negra, much like the beach, was a rather mixed space,<sup>38</sup> with several fancy restaurants, small bars frequented by local university students and the middle class, reggae bars with few gringos (but from time to time, a couple of gringas, or female foreigners), as well as a youth hostel and adjacent pub catering to domestic and international backpackers. Their spatial proximity to the nightclubs catering to gringos and garotas facilitated an ambiguous context, where encounters in the nightlife could fall between the flirty and the highly commercialized.

Given this diverse nightlife, the interactions between Brazilian women and foreigners could easily get fuzzy, as even when money was exchanged for sex, they would flirt, drink together, engage in conversations, dance, kiss, and sometimes, leave together for the man's hotel room or a nearby motel. A tourist could buy a rose from the flower merchants who circulated in the bars and nightclubs and offer it to his partner. This blur was also at play during the day at the beach where gringos and Brazilian women (whether garotas de programa or not) would walk hand in hand, kiss each other, lie down together at the beach, go shopping in the nearby mall, eat in fancy restaurants, spend a couple of days together in one the neighbourhood beaches, or go on a dune

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<sup>38</sup> In Chapter 3, I discuss how this mixture creates spatial tensions and attempts at gentrification; in this chapter, I focus on how this diversity creates ambiguities.

buggy tour for the day. In this tourist landscape that invites romance, many gringos would make arrangements with a woman for a couple of days, a week, or a month. In exchange for an amount of money, usually agreed upon in advance (but not always), the woman was expected to spend most of her time with the tourist, which meant accompanying him at the beach, eating dinner with him, spending the night out with him sometimes until late in the bars and nightclubs, traveling with him to the neighbouring beaches, and having sex with him. The daily rate for this form of commercial sex was usually about the same amount of money as for a single programa yet many women said they preferred these long-term arrangements, especially during the low-season when it was more difficult to secure money with a quick trick. For instance, Mácia, a 32-year-old mother, whom I met in the open praça while she accompanied a young, blond, blue-eyed, multimillionaire Swedish tourist, later told me she preferred by far to accompany older men because they were more likely to hire a woman for several days or weeks, according to her own experience. When I asked her whether she chose the foreign men she would go with, she replied, “it depends on my needs!” before laughing and adding “sincerely, I choose men who are older.” She explained why:

Because I feel good, I feel... (...) I don't know how to explain. I think that... I prefer older men, because they are nicer, trustworthy, they like more to talk (...). Also because younger men they want a woman now, they're done already and then the next day they take another, so it's not my style. I prefer to give company, to be with a man for a week, and so usually older men like this.

Mácia had traveled with tourists to nearby beaches, eaten in fancy restaurants, and spent time with tourists in their hotels. The way it worked for her was that there was an agreement over the price beforehand:

So he'll say to you, 'I'll pay this much for you every day' which is usually the same as if doing a programa, but you get leisure, you eat out, you receive gifts,

plus your pay every day. It's like going on holiday and making money, you understand? So this way it's good! And depending on the person, a nice company, a good person, it's great!

Whereas she could potentially make more money by doing several tricks a day, she still earned roughly the same amount as if she would perform a trick a day. Given the difficulty of securing a trick per day, especially during slower periods, Mácia preferred these arrangements, as she explained: “You don't have the problem of meeting, of waiting there [in the bars and nightclubs], so for me, this is better.” The ambiguity of Ponta Negra was extremely important to Mácia, otherwise she would not have come to the bars and nightclubs. As she explained to me, she was temporarily in the sex trade hoping to find a man who would provide for her. She had previously worked as a waitress in one of the nightclubs catering to gringos and Brazilian women, where she had met a Norwegian tourist whom she dated for two years and whom she visited three times in Norway, eventually ending their relationship because she felt he was too “stressed out”. This was when she began to systematically seek to go out with foreigners in exchange for money:

After our relationship was over in January I started to go out, and pronto. I am still looking for a person who will help me, and with whom it's something really serious, at my age, right? I'm 32, I had my son almost 13 years ago. I don't want essa vida you know, I'm looking for a job because I don't want to be here all the time, I don't like it. I like to sleep in my house, I like to be quiet, I like a normal life and there [in the nightclubs] it's not. I want stability. I want a normal life, a job, and if possible someone who would help me, and marry me or bring me to Europe! (laughing)

The ambiguities at play in Ponta Negra were thus crucial, for she hoped to meet a man and get involved in a legitimate relationship that would allow her to have economic stability, “a normal life” as she put it. Furthermore, Mácia could think of herself as distinct from a prostitute, a recurrent theme in my conversations with women. She did not



like the label prostitute or garotas de programa, seeing herself more like *uma companhia* (an escort): “when we see ourselves as prostitutes, we behave accordingly. I don’t see myself like that. I see myself like a good company. I talk, I travel, I feel like, I am a good girl, I am a good person. So I don’t see myself like a garota de programa, a prostitute. I see myself like a companhia.” This process of distinction was quite common among the women I met and was contingent upon the possibility to migrate and marry. As I discuss further in Chapter 5, the ambiguity of sex tourism made it possible for women to establish their respectability and engage in various practices of distinction meant to establish their value and marriageability.

For many women in Ponta Negra, acting as a companion or an escort was thus preferable because it opened the way for long-term, romantic relationships with foreigners and because it could later translate into experiences of upward mobility or economic stability, whether abroad or in Natal. Thus, some women would even agree to accompany a man without making any explicit arrangements, in the hope that he could eventually become a provider or partner. Bebel, for one, would often times have non-monetary exchanges with foreigners in the hope of securing significant departure gifts or marriage proposals. Once, she told me, under suspicion of being self-interested, she paid for her lunch to convince a Spanish man she was not a garota de programa. Later, she dated an Italian backpacker for two weeks without receiving anything in exchange – not even a departure gift she later complained – hoping he would eventually invite her to visit.

Things would also get blurred in Ponta Negra given that many women who were not garotas de programa inserted themselves in the spaces recognized as points of

encounter between garotas and gringos, seeking romance with foreigners – a romance that could also include material benefits. As Claudia, a white, 37-year-old woman, self-identified as garota once explained to me, she had just recently begun to go on programas “before, I did not charge, I just dated” and would only *namorar* (court, date). She would go out with foreigners, get invited to have dinner in a nice restaurant, and act as their girlfriend during their stay – but without receiving cash for her company, just gifts or food in high-class restaurants. Yet, she insisted, for her to accept to *namorar* a gringo, he would have to treat her well, which meant, in her words “he has to spend, he has to please a woman, to treat her well”. She explained she eventually had enough of this because she felt she was always depending on the good will of foreigners to have a nice dress or a fancy meal. She had recently begun to ask directly for money preferring to make money she could manage, identifying only since then as a garota de programa.

Whereas Claudia drew a fine line between *namoro* and *programa*, many women were not as consistent: if they met a man they liked on a night out while working, they could decide to simply flirt, rather than work. But even this line was sometimes difficult to mark: whether garotas de programa or not, on a night out women would say they were going to *paquerar* (flirt) with foreigners; and often times would refer to foreigners as their *namorados* (boyfriends) rather than their clients, even when engaging in direct commercial sex with them. “Where is your boyfriend?” (*cade o seu namorado?*) was a common way for friends to enquire about one another after a night out. Similarly, some women preferred to say they were making love (*fazer amor*) with men even when subsequently referring to the men as their clients. Felicidade, for instance, was explaining to me how the sex trade worked with tourists in Ponta Negra. She used the word “clients”

to refer to the foreign men, but then she said: “I look at the beach and in the restaurants in the late afternoon. They ask me to have a drink with them, and it ends up happening, we schedule for later. Some of them invite me for dinner, I agree, then we go dancing a little bit and then we make love. And in this way, we become friends.” In her research among sex workers in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Cabezas (2009: 119-120) found a similar blur, with the use of the term friend (*amigo* in Spanish) to refer to the tourists with whom women would have sexual/affective/commercial relationships:

The term *amigo* challenges the notion that foreign acquaintances are simply clients; rather, it affirms the malleability of tourist-oriented relationships that can easily evolve and assume other diverse functions. Through this reluctance to completely commodify all their interactions with tourists, Dominican women expand and create multiple outcomes. The myriad arrangements exist along a continuum from informal ties of affection to commercialized heterosexual transactions that evolve and transform into socially ‘legitimate’ arrangements over time.

Similarly in Ponta Negra garotas de programa only partially commodified their relationships with foreign men, paving the way for intimate ties along a broad spectrum and allowing for the possibilities that these relationships could turn into long-lasting ones.

### **Ambiguous Intimacies: Private and Public Labours of Love**

There was a great deal of ambiguity because women had multiple, at times contradictory interests. This multiplicity of interests was well expressed during a conversation with Isabela, a 22 year-old woman self-identified as garotas de programa. In the following excerpt, she explains the different motivations women may have when they seek to meet foreign men:

Isabela: All women have (...) their intentions, depending on their situation. Some want social status, others are well-intentioned, others want love, and others just want money.

ME: And you?

Isabela: I don't know what I want. Sometimes, I feel like I want to make money, money, money, money, but there are other times when the only thing I want is for him to come to sleep beside me, to call me *amor* (love), to give me affection.

Among the women who self-identified as *garotas de programa*, it was quite common to hear them insisting that they chose the men with whom they would have sex, saying, for instance: “I have to feel something for him” or “I choose, I don't go with any men”. In practice, however, women were not always able to choose (due to financial need or during slow periods) – yet what is significant is that they insisted on the blurring of feelings seen as “private” with their “work” in the bars, nightclubs, and at the beach. The reasons for this were manifold; some sought to give an appearance of normalcy to relationships that were commoditized, in order to show their respectability, an aspect I explore further in Chapter 5. Others were after love, romance, or sexual pleasure with men they fetishize, as I touch on in Chapter 4, and others sought to emphasize their resourcefulness and skill at getting the men they wanted, given the highly competitive nature of the sex trade.

What is significant, here, is that by saying that they choose men, by flirting with them, and by referring to them as their *namorados*, these women engage in practices of “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983), quite distinct from those usually discussed in the literature on sex work (Chapkis 1997; Day 2007:35; Hoang 2010), including in strip clubs (Egan 2006; Frank 2002; Ross 2009: 164). Hochschild first developed the notion of emotional labour in reference to flight attendants, proposing an important distinction

between the management of feelings in the private sphere (emotional work), which has use value, and the commodification of feelings for profit (emotional labour), which has an exchange value. She defines emotional labour as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (1983: 7 footnote), a notion that has been widely applied in the literature on sex work (e.g. Chapkis 1997; Day 2007) and sex tourism (e.g. Brennan 2004; Williams 2010). These studies have compellingly shown how sex workers in various contexts report the maintenance of a strict distinction between their labour and their private life, separating sexual practices and intimate feelings performed at work from those they share with their intimate partners. Sex workers commonly describe how they either suppress feelings (of repulsion, disgust, displeasure) or express feelings (of genuine pleasure or attraction) – a distinction that may not always hold in Ponta Negra. This does not mean, however, that sex workers may not experience sexual pleasure and feelings of attraction/affection for their clients (Chapkis 1997). Yet sex workers commonly seek to separate both realms and actively manage their public feelings in an attempt to satisfy their clients and make a profit.

In contrast, in the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, the *garotas de programa* I met would often times insist on the importance of *having feelings* (of attraction or affection) to engage in sex with foreign men. At times, the women I interviewed, like the sex workers in these studies, also made a distinction between *namoro* and *programa*, and use emotional labour in Hochschild’s sense. However, here I am seeking to draw attention to what I see as a unique way of merging together their public and private feelings (and thus, in Hochschild’s definition, emotional work with emotional labour). In Ponta Negra, ideally, a woman seeks to engage in commercial sex with a man she has

feelings for, or alternatively, courts a man she finds attractive but still receives some material compensation in exchange. In other words, emotional work/labour permeates their everyday life in ways that challenge the public/private or work/leisure binaries.

Similarly, I understand the practices of women in Ponta Negra slightly differently than the “love work” or “staging of attraction” noted in studies of sex tourism (Brennan 2004; Cohen 1982; 1986). These studies aptly reveal the processes whereby sex workers in the context of sex tourism “are hard at work selling romance along with the other goods and services they deliver” (Brennan 2004: 98), yet they also draw a rigid separation between feigned/real, authentic/performed, love/interest, and emotion/strategy. For instance, Cohen identifies the staging of attraction as crucial for Thai girls engaging in prostitution with male tourists in Bangkok. He proposes that, in Thailand, “the girls, particularly those who have more experience with the *farangs* [foreigners], are highly adept at staging attraction to their customers. They generally understate the mercenary aspect of the relationship and emphasize the emotional one” (1986:116) – usually leading to some confusion on the part of the customers over the nature and authenticity of the relationship: do Thai girls really love them, or do economic interests drive them? In Cohen’s reading, love is staged by Thai prostitutes to gain long-term financial security by maintaining ties with the *farangs* after they have left. This reading echoes more recent interpretations of love as emotional labour performed in the context of sex tourism. In her ethnography of sex tourism, Denise Brennan argues that sex workers in the Dominican Republic perform love strategically, using “the discourse and practices of romantic love to secure marriage proposals for a visa. After all, why waste a marriage certificate on romantic love when it can be transformed into a visa?”(2004:97). Whereas she recognizes

the difficulty of distinguishing between relationships for interest versus those for love, she still draws a rigid line between “emotion” and “strategy”, as if one necessarily precludes the other (2004: 97).

I propose that in the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, these distinctions are much less defined. This is not to say that women in Ponta Negra do not feign love, stage attraction, or manipulate foreigners. Daniela, a 20-year-old woman, for one, told me she was engaged in a relationship only for monetary interest purposefully feigning love. Her Italian husband, a widower in his late 60s, was living half time in Natal, half time in Italy. He had a furnished apartment in a private and guarded building, and Daniela could live there even when he was away. She had a domestic worker who also cooked her meals, and had more than enough money to buy herself all the essentials, in addition to nice clothes, beauty products, perfumes, and other items she would use to cruise the bars at night, when her partner was in Italy. When he was away, Daniela would work as a *garota de programa* in the nightclubs, bars, and at the beach. A curvy, lively *morena*, Daniela could be selective with the men she would have paid sex with given her secured financial situation. When her husband was back, however, she would spend all her time with him. When I interviewed her in mid-October 2007, she told me “I don’t intend to remain married to him for a long time”, and later added, “I’ll take it until I can’t stand it, when I can’t, I’ll end it.” Daniela was not alone, nor marginal, and on many occasions I heard women’s stories of cashing in on romance.

However, I seek to bring to attention the ways in which in the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, the labour of love is commonly *both* private and public. In other words, the distinction traced by Hochschild tends to get blurry. Brazilian women in Ponta

Negra leave the meanings of the relationships with tourists open and ambiguous rather than seeking to establish clear boundaries separating clients from boyfriends or the realm of work from the intimate sphere. In other words, these women simultaneously engage with men in varying degrees of intimacies, allowing the possibilities for long-lasting ties to develop – what other scholars have termed “incomplete commercialization” (De Gallo and Alzate 1976, cited in Cabezas 2009:119). Women in Ponta Negra are seeking to establish reciprocal ties of mutual obligation (Mauss 1967; Cabezas 2009) which may explain their emphasis on the importance of having genuine feelings of attraction and affection for foreigners. Much like Cabezas proposes in the context of the Dominican Republic “in using intimate labor that deemphasized the sale of sex, women were able to perform relational work that could open up the relationship to more stable and productive possibilities” (2009:130). In short, women in Ponta Negra blurred the boundaries of affect/money, because they seek to leave the possibilities open for relationships premised upon ties of mutual obligation.

### **“I Fall in Love Every Time”**

Over the course of my fieldwork, it was almost impossible to assess whether a relationship was motivated by either love or money, as these motivations were often times intertwined in complex ways and not always mutually exclusive (see also Brennan 2004: 95-96). The presence of financial interest did not necessarily preclude women from entertaining feelings for foreign men. Perla, for one, admitted falling for almost all the men she had sex with. The 28-year-old woman, originally from Recife, the capital city of the neighbouring state of Pernambuco, worked for two years as a stripper before meeting



a German man whom she followed to Germany and with whom she had a daughter. Perla stayed two years in Germany, but left, as things did not work well with him, “He began using a lot of drugs, it was not good for my daughter to grow up with a person like that.” She came back to her hometown Recife, where she had left her three other children, from her previous marriage with a Brazilian man. Depressed and broken-hearted after her bad experience in Germany, she came to Ponta Negra with a friend to distract herself, as a tourist on a one-week holiday. She enjoyed the place and decided to stay, while her four children remained in Recife with her mother. It had been four years since she had first come to Ponta Negra when we had this tape-recorded interview, in December 2007:

M-E: You arrived here and you began to have relationships with foreigners?

P: Yes

M-E: To frequent the beach, to do programa?

P: Yes, I do. I do [programa], I don’t deny this to anyone, I’m not ashamed to tell you.

M-E: You consider yourself a *profissional do sexo* (sex worker), a garota de programa...

P: Sex worker, because the garota de programa, she goes with any type of man, she goes with young, she goes with old. I don’t. I go with the one I want to go with. If I don’t like them, I don’t go.

M-E: This is what a sex worker does?

P: For me, yes.

M-E: Like, when I saw you with that Spanish guy.

P: Yes

M-E: It’s like, this was more like namoro, no?

P: Yes. I do it this way: they [the tourists] come, no? There is one who likes me, if I like him, I’ll stay with him during all his Holiday. And when he returns to his

country, a year later he'll come back again; I'll stay with him. And when I'm with him, I'm only with him. I don't go with anyone else.

M-E: And they pay you?

P: Yes

M-E: They pay for the day, week? How?

P: No. If I'm with one person only, you know, he doesn't have to pay me every single day. When he leaves me he gives me a good amount of cash; he buys me things. With this money, I pay a little [my bills] and the rest I send it to Recife for my other children. But my family does not know that I do programa.

Interestingly, Perla said she was not ashamed of what she was doing, to me, an outsider, but she was still hiding what she was doing from her family, pretending to be a waitress in a restaurant, which she indeed did initially when she arrived in Ponta Negra. Perla thus emphasizes, to some degree, her respectability, by taking the identity of a *profissional do sexo*<sup>39</sup> because she does not go with any man, something she saw as wrong. Perla was highly selective about the foreign men she would have sex with, opting for men she liked, enjoyed spending time with, or found attractive. For her, to have feelings for a man was a precondition to have paid sex with them. Rather than “performing love” or “staging authenticity” as described in several ethnographic studies of sex tourism (Brennan 2004; Cohen 1982; 1986; Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006), Perla stressed the importance of having genuine feelings in order for her to have paid sex with tourists, which was echoed by many other women, as already discussed. As she said: “I

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<sup>39</sup> Not all women in Ponta Negra would have agreed with her. Indeed, several women preferred the identity of garotas de programa, which according to my observations, was the most frequently used. Several women told me they prefer it to profissional do sexo because they thought the profissional do sexo was the one who would go with anyone. What is significant, here, is that they share with Perla an understanding that there is a hierarchy of practices of commercial sex, and they sought to distinguish themselves by emphasizing their ability to choose and their respectability. This is something that was recurrent in women's presentation of themselves –whether identifying as garotas, companhia, or profissional do sexo.

have to feel something, if I don't, I don't do it, I don't do it", adding later, "I like kissing, I like making good sex".

Importantly, Perla could be selective, unlike other women, because with her Afro look, she received a lot of attention from foreign tourists. Perla did not straighten her dense, thick, curvy hair, but wore it naturally. A curvy, light morena, she was also a skilled samba dancer, and would often show off her ability in the bars and nightclubs, attracting many male tourists. Furthermore, she was not exclusively dependent on the money earned in the sex trade, she also helped tourists find apartments or offered them buggy tours keeping a cut of the sale. "Many are friends of mine with whom I've never had sex," she said, complicating the understanding of the kind of intimate ties Brazilian women relied upon in the context of "sex tourism". As Cabezas (2009) proposes, the emphasis on "sex" does not always do justice to the panoply of practices women engage in.<sup>40</sup> Perla had many foreign friends who trusted her and would hire her for services other than sex work.

The extent of the blur of work/leisure, love/money, and private/public can perhaps be better grasped through the story of a particular encounter Perla had with a foreigner, with whom I saw her spending some time, both at the beach and in the main nightclub of Ponta Negra. Perla had just said goodbye to him the day before we had our tape-recorded interview, and she expressed her sadness that he had recently left. He was a Spanish tourist, in his late thirties, early forties, whom she had seen coming and going for two years in Ponta Negra before anything had happened between them:

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<sup>40</sup> As a foreign researcher, I also found myself in forms of commercial ties that were not sexualized. For instance, I often paid for drinks in the bars and nightclubs as a way to reciprocate for the conversations I had with women; and I offered meals in exchange for interviews. For the women I came to see regularly, I became one of the intimate ties they cultivated and these ties were defined by mutual obligations and reciprocity.

It was already two years since I was looking at him. Two years, but he never gave me a look. Two years! I used to say 'I still haven't been with him yet', and every year I kept thinking, which month would he come, is he coming this month? And this year I said 'he won't escape me'. He wanted to get away from me, but I insisted, and on the third day, we were together, until now.

Perla was, as she said, *apaixonada* (in love), but this feeling was not unique to him. As she told me: "sometimes, I tell my friends that I fall in love every time." It may seem then, that money was somewhat secondary, especially given that she sought other means of making money. Yet Perla had a clear sense of how much she thought she should earn, refusing to go for free or under a certain price, as other women sometimes would.

With me, men have to take a shower, brush their teeth first (laughing). Of course they have to smell good. And I always ask for 200 reais; for less than 150, I don't go out with anyone. Many of them they say '100 reais', others '80 reais', with me no. [They say] 'Ah, but yesterday I went out with this one, with a girl for 100 reais' [I tell them] 'so find her because with me, you don't go out for 100 reais'.

Perla was also rather economically driven with men, selecting them according to their ability to pay, as the following exchange makes obvious:

P: And also, I see it when a man has money, because (...) if he passes more than 10 minutes talking with me without offering me a drink, I go away. I like these men who come [and say]: 'what would you like to drink?'. I ask for a whiskey with Red Bull right away, because there are many men who would say 'no, Red Bull, no'. If, when I ask, they don't have a problem, then they have money. First dose, second dose as well! (Laughing)

M-E: So we can talk now!

P: So we can talk now! There are some men who come like this to the girl: 'do you want a beer?' They don't even ask 'what would you like to drink?'. [When they ask me] 'Do you want a beer?', I say 'I don't drink beer my love, I just drink this. Do you want to pay for my drink?' (Laughing)

M-E: you're *experta* (you're skilful, you're smart)

P: Yes, I am *experta*. Because when they go to a brothel in Europe, it's 30 minutes, counting on the clock, no?

M-E: It's different.

P: And when they come here they want to pay 50 reais for the entire night. I don't go. Many of them want to stay for the entire night. I say 'I don't go. First, if you go to a brothel in your country, you don't get kisses on the mouth, you can't walk in the street holding hands, you can't go to a restaurant with them. And here we go to the beach, we're always together, and you don't even want to pay 200 reais?' I told them: 'this, for you, is nothing. Because if I were to go to Europe, 200 reais it's 3 drinks you get to drink there'.

Perla hoped for more than just sex, yet she was not willing to compromise her price for a potential lover. She did not "perform love"; rather she merged her personal interests with her need for money, developing both friendships and personal relationships with boyfriends/tourists.

In her comments, Perla also hints at an important spatial contrast between Europe and Brazil. She was well aware of the potentially exploitative nature of the exchange between foreign tourists and herself, given the value of Euros in Brazil. She knew that several men were taking advantage of the ambiguities of sex tourism to get the most they could out of their money. In their home country, she assumed they would pay for a prostitute in a brothel (rather than hire an escort) and thus, would not be able to have all that Brazilian women offered: a holiday girlfriend experience. Like many other Brazilian women, Perla was hoping to find a foreign man she would eventually marry, but she knew very well of the potential disenchantments of a life abroad, especially given her own experience, having lived two years in Germany with her ex-boyfriend. She did not fit the widespread, stereotypical depiction of women as victims, as circulated by the state, local NGOs, and the media. She was highly critical, indeed, of the state intervention to eradicate sex tourism, and was even interviewed by a journalist, during the main

operation against sex tourism in 2006 (something I discuss in the next chapter).

Recounting her interview with the journalist, she said:

I told her, ‘the problem, it’s not the foreigners. The problem is that the Brazilian population is very hypocritical’. I talked this way to her. Because it’s not just the foreigners who come looking for sex. I told her: ‘Go there in the *Praia do Futuro*, (Future Beach) or go to the Avenue Roberto Freire by night. Who stop? Brazilians, with their cars, looking for *travestis* (transvestites).

Indeed, Perla saw hypocrisy in the state and NGOs’ fight against sex tourism, because both Brazilian men and women (including, according to her married women, lawyers, judges, and deputies) also hire prostitutes. “I think if this prejudice against foreigners would go, the Brazilian population would be much better,” she told me, adding later that several of the cases of sexual abuse with minors also involved Brazilians. In her critique, in many ways Perla disrupted the dominant discourse that victimizes her and that pathologizes foreigners, as she turned her critical gaze onto Brazilian society. Perla faced several discriminatory practices in the bars and nightclubs of Ponta Negra and seemed more affected by how local residents and business owners treated her than by engaging in paid sex with foreigners. This brings me to discuss an important issue, a recurrent one in the scholarship on sex tourism, namely the conflation of sex tourism with exploitation (O’Connell Davidson 1995).

### **Ambiguities and Exploitation**

As Perla suggests, sex tourism is a terrain for potential exploitation, given that tourists may capitalize on the diffuse nature of sex tourism to get more, for less. Furthermore, their many privileges – including their wealth, mobility, nationality, age, race, and gender – structure the encounters, no matter how well intentioned they may be.

The sex tourist economy in Ponta Negra is inscribed within a global political economy that has historically relied on economic inequalities between the West and Brazil and follows from imperial representations of sexualized otherness and from postcolonial relations. The blur of love and money has thus led some commentators to locate exploitation in the ambiguous nature of sex tourism; in this view, women are exploited because as ‘girlfriends’ they do not always receive cash in compensation for their labour (Leite cited in Williams 2010: 129-130). We can gather from Perla that the blur of affect/money in sex tourism may simultaneously work to the advantage of women, begging the question of how to define exploitation in the context of sex tourism (see O’Connell Davidson 2010 for a similar point regarding trafficking). Larissa, whose story I recount in Chapter 5, perhaps best captures in a few words the paradoxical nature of women’s ambiguous relationships with foreigners, with what she termed “the glamour and the decadence” of Ponta Negra. Women thus operated in a complex matrix of power, in which the ambiguity was both seductive and oppressive. I now turn to this tension, reflecting on the *distinct* working of power in sex tourism where the intimate and the market merge together.<sup>41</sup>

In the words of Larissa, there was some glamour that accompanied sex with foreigners, given the reification in the local imagination of foreigners as better men than Brazilian men. Travel (both locally and abroad), gifts, nice meals in fancy restaurants, nights spent in chic hotel rooms, and the prospect of learning foreign languages were all seen as the main benefits of this life, as Laila’s comment suggests:

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<sup>41</sup> This is not intended as an exhaustive examination of the hazards and benefits of being a garotas de programa in Ponta Negra but rather as an initial reflection on the ways in which ambiguity works and mediates women’s experiences.

Those normal girls working normally they don't know Natal, I already know all of Natal, Pipa, Genipabu, the most beautiful beaches, the best restaurants. I know how to speak languages they would never understand. I am treated very well. I have come to know fancy hotels, you understand? And they haven't. Who doesn't want to know the best hotels, or stay in the best hotels, in 5-star hotels?

In spite of the ambiguity, money was extremely important and constantly mentioned as a prime motivation for engaging in this life, even for women looking for romantic love. Women in the sex trade usually contrasted the money earned from foreigners to the monthly minimum wage they would likely earn if formally employed (usually making its equivalent in one night or two). Yet when probing further, women also revealed that money alone was not sufficient in itself to explain their decision of engaging in ambiguous relationships with foreign men. Many of them would not go out with Brazilian men nor have paid sex with them, even if similar monetary compensation were offered. Only a few women said they would accept an offer to go on *programa* with Brazilian men – most commonly, these were women less successful with tourists or who relied on the local sex trade in difficult times. Yet, a large majority of women express their disgust at the idea of going with Brazilian men and sought to distinguish themselves from street prostitutes servicing local men – a process of distinction that I examine in Chapter 5, and that reveals the glamour associated with paid sex with foreigners. Several of the women I spoke to mentioned the differential treatment of *gringos* and *brasileiros* (Brazilian men) insisting that local men were abusive, aggressive, and exclusively sexually driven when paying for sex, in contrast to foreigners, described as gentlemen.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In addition to men from Europe, Brazilian women also spoke positively of Argentine men, seen as better than Brazilian men yet not as good as European. Women did not express the desire to migrate to Argentina, nor to marry an Argentinean. Other Latin American men were rarely mentioned. One of my interviewees dated a Chilean man whom she compared negatively to European men, much like women did for Brazilian men.



For instance, when I asked whether she would agree to go with Brazilian men, Alícia replied: “Brazilians are gross, especially when it comes to *prostitutas* (prostitutes); they are gross because they think that a prostitute should do everything they want.” Similarly, Bebel explained that even if offered the same amount by gringos and brasileiros, she would not accept to have programa with the latter. When asked why she chose to have programa with foreigners, she answered:

B: Why with foreigners? Because they pay well. Brazilian men don’t pay.

M-E: Just for that reason? What if a Brazilian man were to come and offer you the same amount of money?

B: But you know it’s because Brazilian men they’re very much like this, they have a lot of prejudices, they tell you things like: “you’re a *puta* (whore, bitch) so I’ll do what I want. I’m paying. I do what I want”. The gringo no, the gringo he respects you. He knows what a woman needs. (...).

Thus, while money was an important incentive, the prospect of meeting foreigners imagined as better men than Brazilian men, was also crucial and in part explained the appeal of this life for many women – an aspect I explore at length in Chapter 4.

Women in Ponta Negra insisted on the extent to which they exert choices, as they operated in spaces mostly free of pimps, where they control with whom they would have encounters and on which terms, including where, what, for how long, and in exchange for what. The beaches, the bars, the nightclubs, the restaurants, and the shopping malls were all open spaces where they could circulate freely, gauging their potential clients/boyfriends while sharing a drink, a meal, a dance, or a conversation. The diffuse nature of sex tourism in Ponta Negra allowed women to navigate different encounters, some highly commercialized, others less so. Women would even, at times, perform authentic feelings of attractions or love, cashing in on romances by capitalizing

on the ambiguities of a sex tourist economy. It is perhaps Alícia who best captures the extent to which women were aware of the ambiguities in sex tourism, and would not necessarily be exploited by them, but rather, would use them strategically. When I asked her about how she would approach men in the bars and nightclubs, she answered:

A: Me? I arrive like someone who doesn't want anything, talking normal. I come in a normal way, you understand? I ask them 'how long you've been here?' or 'you're a nice person', 'you are very beautiful', I go very slowly, you know? Because there are a lot of women [who say] 'let's go to have a little "sucking" party [*festinha de chupa*] and I don't know what else. You have to go slowly in that space, in that territory.

M-E: And you always ask for money, or sometimes, you would go *de graça* (for free)?

A: I always ask for money.

ME: Before leaving or ...

A: After.

ME: After?

A: After. [Because] before, he won't give [money] if you bargain before. [After], he'll look at me and say: 'you did not tell me anything'. I'll tell him: 'but here in Brazil you know if you have a woman, you have to pay to be with her. You're not stupid or crazy. You're in Brazil, you're here for what? To work? You're here to tan, to be with women, to drink, to go out, pronto. And every woman that would leave with you, you'll get into trouble if you don't want to pay. Do you like problems? No? Isn't it? So give me my money, bye my love, I really liked you'.

Alícia would thus ask for money only after having sex with foreigners (a practice not unique to her but neither shared by all). She thought that foreign men should be aware, when coming to Brazil, that they would have to pay for sex. Thus she played with the stereotypical image that *todas Brasileiras são putas* (all Brazilian women are whores) and turned it to her own advantage, by asking foreign men for money only after the act. Alícia assumed that it was their problem if the foreigners were unaware of the

commercial nature of the interactions, and therefore foolish enough to think that the interaction was for “real”. When I asked her whether she had problems with men refusing to pay, she said that usually no, as most of them sought to avoid being in trouble with the local police (especially in the aftermath of a campaign against sex tourism targeting foreign men).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter 4, for several men, it was part of an elaborate play too, where the signs of the monetary transaction had to be erased in order for them to feel their seductive power.<sup>44</sup>

While they certainly were extremely resourceful, tricking men in various ways, Brazilian women experienced restrictions on their global mobility that located them in a different subject position in contrast to the foreign men visiting Natal. Denise Brennan (2004) makes a similar argument in the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic. She describes how Dominican sex workers see foreign men as “all potential dupes, essentially walking visas, who can help the women leave the island – and poverty” (2004: 24). Yet she warns that it would be misleading to position women on equal terms with these tourists: “sex workers’ relationships with foreign men fall short of mutual exploitation since white foreign male sex tourists are better positioned than Afro-Dominican female sex workers to leave Sosúa satisfied with their experiences there”

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<sup>43</sup> We could think such a rational, economic, calculated, and strategic woman would be only in this for her own self-interest, whether money or a life abroad. Yet, during our tape-recorded interview, she made constant references to her being *apaixonada* (in love), saying of gringos: “I fall in love so much with them that they make me cry” (*eu me apaixono tanto que me fazem chorar*).

<sup>44</sup> I suspect that it is because of the mutual desire for ambiguous relationships that the Internet did not figure prominently among both men and women I spoke to. For the most part, women expressed a preference to meet foreigners in ‘real’ life, rather than through personal ads or Internet dating /sexual services. Most commonly, the use of the Internet at local café was to sustain relationships already established rather than to meet foreigners. Other technologies played a similar role: cell phones were used mostly to maintain relationships, whether during a man’s stay in Ponta Negra or afterwards. New technologies also facilitated the transfer of money directly in women’s bank accounts or through Western Union, as well through the buying of e-ticket for women.

(2004: 25). Their limited mobility and the hierarchies in which these relationships are inscribed thus disrupt women's narrative of choice.

Yet women insisted that they chose the men and sought to portray themselves as savvy women who had previously rejected more exploitative forms of labour. Women would often point to other forms of work previously performed as far more exploitative. Bebel, for instance, described her job as a domestic worker as following:

R: When I got a job in Recife, the woman was paying me five reais a day, to clean three bedrooms, three bathrooms, the living room, and the kitchen; to take care of a dog and also to bring children to school. This gives 25 a week, 100 a month.<sup>45</sup> 100 reais, for what? Very little to eat. And for clothes, for shoes, for everything else?

ME: For rent?

R: For rent, for everything. It's nothing. This doesn't work for me. To work for free, no. I was killing myself, the first time [I went] I killed myself working.

She later added, "the rich people, they're great *pirangueiro* (thief, cheap, bad person) no? They like to exploit the poor". Similarly, Laila pointed to the limited amount of money she had previously earned, in contrast to the sex trade in Ponta Negra: "as a domestic worker, it's very little money. So what I received in a month, working here I get it in an hour." Several other women mentioned that the minimum wage they would likely receive in a regular job would never be enough to live on. As Gregory also found in the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, women come to sex tourism often after "having *already* rejected domestic and paid-work arrangements that are exploitative and subject them to abusive male authority" (2003: 348). Likewise, in the context of my research, several women also explained how they eventually decided to ask for money in exchange for sex, after either experiencing what they define as more exploitative labour

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<sup>45</sup> This was less than half the minimum wage. It is an illegal practice but still quite common to find domestic workers with such arrangements in Brazil.

conditions, or deception and disappointment in their relationships with local men. For instance, Mácia told me: “So when I had this very big disappointment with this Brazilian man, my mother died at the same time, this was in 2006 (...) I was angry. I was disillusioned, lonely, you know. [I decided] I won’t need a man to stay with me (...) no, I’ll be with a man only if I can take advantage of him.”

Most women reported suffering violence and abuse at the end of their previous Brazilian partner, and very few women narrated incidents of sexualized violence with foreign men. Alícia was among the few women who narrated such an incident, when chatting with a group of women at the Marine Sea Hotel. A man with whom she had agreed to have sex had later refused to wear a condom and had tried to force her to have sex with him. She told the women of how she had grabbed an emptied beer bottle, and threatened him with it, until he eventually left. Women tended to describe Brazilian men as violent and foreign men as gentle whether in the context of the sex trade or not. In my interviews and conversations with women, very few of them narrated negative experiences. Bebel was an exception: she refused to go with Spanish men after having a bad experience with one Spanish man. Most commonly, however, women drew connections between violence and the local street prostitution, and expressed their relative sense of safety in comparison. For instance, Eliane said “in the nightclubs, it’s safer. There are parties, there are people. In the street, no. In the street, one hits you, you can get shot, one comes to rape you. In the street, no one will help you. It already happened, of one working *na pista* (in the stroll) and they killed her. They killed her, about 3 months ago.” Unlike in other locations, women did not report fearing the law, police officers, or jail time (Brennan 2004). Indeed, I once witnessed Gabriela, a 24 year-

old woman looking for police officers in order to help her pressure a foreign man who owed her money to pay her. This suggests that foreign men were likely to be the target of police intervention, especially in the aftermath of campaigns against sex tourism positioning them as the criminal problems (see next Chapter).

Women in Ponta Negra also narrated how cruising the beach, bars, and nightclubs of Ponta Negra was not without its own difficulties and commonly expressed a sense of alienation and a desire for a different life – whether engaging in commercial sex or not. Among other things, the competition between women was significant, especially during the periods with few tourists in town, when there were three or four women for every man. As Bebel put it: “there are many fights, the other girls against us. When one’s succeeding, the others are all jealous. They want to fight, to argue.” When my husband, an Irish man in his early thirties eventually joined me in the field, in the last five months of my stay, I was warned – at times jokingly, but also seriously – not to leave him alone in the bars and nightclubs, even when I would simply head for the bathroom. The assumption was that another woman could ‘steal’ him, as far too often, women had been quickly turned down for another woman, in part due to the ambiguities and openness of the encounters between foreigners and Brazilian women in the bars, nightclubs, and at the beach. In effect, the ambiguities meant that some women would accept going for cheaper, even for free.

In addition to the competition, the rhythm of such a life, too, was particularly difficult to sustain on a regular basis, as I myself experienced, with some nightclubs opening their doors as late as 11:00 p.m., and their dance floor, at 2:00 a.m. Whereas tourists visiting Ponta Negra were generally on short holidays in which they could

indulge in the festivity (spending the late hours of the night and early hours of the morning up while resting at the beach the next days), Brazilian women did not always enjoy the partying, drinking, and late nights. This was especially difficult for those with children to care for during the day. Among my interviewees, twenty women had children, and fifteen of them took care of them in the absence of affordable childcare services (two-thirds of them as single mothers), while five others had their children in the care of their relatives.<sup>46</sup>

In the bars and nightclubs, women drank alcohol and used drugs (mostly cocaine and marijuana) as inhibitors, in order to feel more at ease approaching men. Eliane drank every time she would go out into the nightclubs to meet foreigners: “if I drink, I feel hotter, I’m on top of everyone, I ask to dance, I kiss.” When not drinking, she would not *namorar*, as she said, because she would feel ashamed. Valentina, too, needed to drink to approach a new man and to try to secure a new, long-term relationship with foreign men. As she explained, “after he [a former *namorado*] left, finding another boyfriend... ah the shame! I had to drink a lot, I had to drink to succeed.” A couple of women were heavily dependent on drugs or alcohol and relied on foreign men to sustain their consumption. Isabella, for instance, said she drank and used cocaine daily *para esquecer o que eu faço* (to forget what I do). She used to consume with one of her ex-lovers, similarly to Felicidade who spent most of her earnings on cocaine, and who sought foreign men who could help sustain her consumption by providing her with cocaine during their stay in Natal. Many women were initially seduced by the party atmosphere of Ponta Negra but eventually grew tired of the constant drinking and partying that accompanied it. A few

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<sup>46</sup> Women who did not live with their children still took care of them in other ways: among other things, they would visit them, talk to them over the phone, and send money to the relatives taking care of them.

women preferred to remain relatively sober in order to remain alert and in control of the situation, while some expressed their preference for men they described as “*serio*”, meaning that would not party in the bars and clubs.

Another related hazard is connected to safe-sex practices, sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS, and pregnancy. While my study did not specifically address issues of sexuality and health, I did discuss safe-sex practices with women in my informal conversations with them or during our taped-recorded interviews. All the women who brought up the issue or those I questioned on safe-sex practices claimed they consistently use condoms with the tourists, and all were well aware of the importance of protecting themselves against the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease. Given the illegality of abortion in Brazil (except in cases of health risk or rape) women were particularly concerned about avoiding pregnancy. According to their various experiences, most men insisted on using condoms, and in the few cases of a man’s refusal, women told me they would simply refuse to have sex with him. However, the paradoxes of intimacies created complex situations in which women would cease to enforce condom use, in an attempt to prove the authenticity of their feelings for foreigners they sought to get intimate with.

This was something that I discovered with time, as some of the women began expressing concerns about unwanted pregnancies from men they had accompanied for a week or two – at times, even after a one-night stand. Given the short stay of tourists in Natal, women sought to compress the time needed to create a sense of intimacy. The choice of not enforcing the use of condoms was a way to achieve that. For instance, Bebel had previously told me she always enforced condom use to prevent diseases and



pregnancy: “nobody knows what they have, if they have diseases, if they have AIDS, if they have venereal diseases”. Yet, while one of her *namorados* (boyfriends) was back in Italy after his first trip to Natal where they had met, she staged a pregnancy over the phone. She explained to me she was attempting to secure a marriage proposal from him, some remittances, and/or a flight ticket to Italy. Eventually, her plan did not work; instead, he almost flew to Natal to visit her, and seeing this was not getting her anywhere, Bebel staged a miscarriage again over the phone. Bebel had been with him for about two weeks, and she had hoped their relationship could transform into something serious including a marriage, which explains why she did not use a condom. This suggests that women may expose themselves to more risks of STDs or pregnancy when they engage in relationships that are not strictly commercialized, an important aspect that needs further investigation but that contradicts the common assumption of sex workers as vectors of disease. It was when women sought to become more intimate (and not when they engaged in highly commercialized sex) that they ceased to enforce condom use. Similarly, Schifter-Sikora’s work on HIV and sex tourism in Costa Rica reveals a similar pattern. As he writes, “Intimacy, not ignorance is the main culprit of the spread of the virus. If sex tourism would only be about sex, and would not have the love component, there would be fewer dangers to contracting HIV” (2007: 163; cited in Williams 2010: 132).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Additional research on this issue would be particularly relevant to further understand the connections between intimacy and safe-sex practices. Given that the local association of sex workers in Natal, ASPRO-RN, did not intervene in the bars, nightclubs and at the beach of Ponta Negra in education or condom distribution, these questions appear as of utmost importance. I discuss the relation of the association to the *garotas de programa* in Ponta Negra in Chapter 5. To my knowledge, women had knowledge of sex education through their peers, families, and schools, rather than from the associations of sex workers in Natal. None of them disclose whether they were HIV positive, and there are no data available to assess the HIV rate (or other STDs) of *garotas de programa* in Ponta Negra.

Another aspect that further complicates women's experiences is that the absence of pimps does not necessarily mean that there were no intermediaries. Indeed, the ambiguities of sex tourism allow several people to benefit from arranging encounters – including waiters in bars, owners of hotels or guesthouses, taxi drivers, friends, or relatives. For instance, Lívio, my surfing teacher, previously played the role of intermediary while being employed as a waiter in one of the nightclubs catering to gringos and garotas. He had a list of garotas de programa he would phone upon request from foreign men, and took a percentage of what the women earned. I suspect that many others arranged encounters in a similar fashion. Of all the women I interviewed or informally spoke to, only Gabriela reported being introduced to foreign men by an intermediary, in her case, a neighbour who took a cut of her earnings. Once she realized it was rather easy to meet foreigners on her own, she dropped him and began selling fruits and offering massages at the beach. Friends and relatives, too, benefited from women's earnings. For instance, at the pousada where Bebel stayed, a Brazilian woman in her early forties, Yolanda, accompanied Bebel and her colegas in the bars and nightclubs, expecting to have her drinks and entrance fee paid for in exchange for her company.

Furthermore, the endless uncertainties of making money from one day to the next, the many transnational disappointments, the dependence on foreign men's willingness to maintain a relationship, the stigma associated with sex with foreigners, and the many expenses involved with this lifestyle (such as drinks, fees to enter the bars, higher rent in this tourist location, as well as money invested in the body, including hair, nails, surgeries, make-up, perfumes, clothes, and shoes) all destabilized the narratives of glamour, money earned quickly, and successful romances. For women engaging in the

sex trade, *sair dessa vida* (to get out of this life) was a common utterance, a phrase heard over and over, expressing women's limited possibilities in Ponta Negra and their desire for something else. While they had rejected other options considered as more exploitative as discussed above, many women in Ponta Negra simultaneously sought a way out of *essa vida*. The late nights, the drinking, the potential for a condom to break during intercourse, the stigma, the financial insecurity, the dependence on men's willingness to offer gifts or pay for sex, among other things, created tensions and stress that led several women to eventually seek a way out. Several women mentioned their age – even when as young as 22-23 years old – as a factor to seek other opportunities, given the market for young-looking bodies. They believed that as they would age, their choices of potential partners would become more restricted. For instance, during one night in April, Marina, who looked barely 18 years old and claimed she was 19, talked to me about her difficulty in getting men, because of her extremely young look. Foreign men thought she was a minor, and were reluctant to have sex with her. In spite of her youthful look and young age, she was still worried that she would age in this life, saying "I have no luck, I'm still in this life" later adding "I'll end up getting old in this life."

One way out was through long-term relationships with foreigners and migration to Europe, and many women often referred to foreign boyfriends or marriages as a means to get out of this life. Alícia, a 19-year-old woman, mentioned that her biggest fear was: "to stay *nessa vida* (in this life) and not get anyone," hinting at the spatial dimension of her experience. She was hoping to get married to a foreigner soon and live in Europe, in order to stop cruising the bars and nightclubs in Ponta Negra: "I'll try, I'll try until I meet someone, as soon as I meet a man, I'll stay with him. Until I meet him I'll stay here, but it

won't take too long." Women indeed sustained *essa vida* for a varying amount of time (from a couple of days to several years, or as a part-time, cyclical or seasonal practice),<sup>48</sup> and they commonly oscillated between periods in and out of this life, a fluidity possible due to the absence of pimps.

Bebel, too, explained that once she realized what *essa vida* was all about, she began to seek a marriage. When I met her, she was a relative newcomer to Ponta Negra and its sex tourist scene: she had arrived in July, like me, and when we talked for the first time in September, she expressed enthusiasm for this life. She was, after all, just recovering from an extremely busy period in August, a lucrative month marked by the presence of Italians on holiday. She had made so much money with them, she could hardly believe sex with foreigners could be so lucrative. She also enjoyed the company of Italian men whom she described as charming, handsome, gentlemen. If I had interviewed Bebel in the first week I had met her, she would have emphasized the glamour of Ponta Negra. During our first conversation, she was extremely voluble and enthusiastic, and she explained she did enjoy every bit of this life: the attention from foreign men, the parties at night, the dancing with her friends, and even the sex. In the months that followed, however, her narrative changed, and I came to realize the multi-textured dimensions of her experience. When I interviewed her in November, she was going through a difficult period, for several days in a row of not succeeding with foreigners, and being less able to choose with whom she would go. *Sair dessa vida* then became particularly important:

"After I saw... because *essa vida* (this life) is bad enough and very, very hard. You endure a lot from men (*aguanta saco de homens*) you have to endure many things." Thus,

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<sup>48</sup> As an illustration of the varying amount of time, I met a 20 year-old woman newly arrived in Ponta Negra who thought of going back the next day to her hometown given her lack of success with foreigners., Other women had started seven or eight years ago, drifting in and out, including to live in Europe.

she was looking to “arrange a marriage, to sair dessa vida, to get out quickly.” Bebel was eventually able to secure a proposal, after entertaining three potential husbands simultaneously, her “Italian collection,” as she humorously referred to them (all three of whom she claimed to be in love with). Bebel eventually headed for Italy, where she spent an initial three months. The last time I heard from her, in late September 2008, she was getting married and going to live in Italy. She had “succeeded” to sair dessa vida, but it is hard to know whether her success will be long-lasting, and whether she finds herself in new power arrangements. Furthermore, her experience reveals the unpredictability and uncertainties that essa vida entails.

Ponta Negra was also the site of international criminal activities and charges of drug trafficking, laundering of money, and trafficking in women were leveled at Norwegian, Italian, Spanish, Pakistanis and Brazilian people (Bezerra 2008; 2007; 2006c; Tribuna do Norte 2009). Daniela, a 20-year-old woman I interviewed in October 2007, went to work illegally in a brothel in Italy, under conditions she had not consented to.<sup>49</sup> In her words, “it was a horrible experience.” Earlier that year, she had agreed to work illegally as a garota in an Italian brothel. She was told that she was going to make 50 Euros for each programa, and thought that she could save money, but once there, she never saw any of the money. She said “there are many promises, but actually when you get there you ask God to get back to your country.” After traveling by boat and then by plane, Daniela was taken to the brothel where she was forced to see clients, work several hours a day, engage in sexual practices she did not agree to, and where she was severely beaten if attempting to resist. She could not go out alone, nor every day. She explained

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<sup>49</sup> Among all the women I spoke to informally and formally, she was the only woman who reported such an experience.

she was also forced to take drugs, in order to make her more compliant. After two months, the brothel was raided, when one of the women in the brothel alerted a pharmacist serving her. Daniela was subsequently deported and has a permanent note in her passport that identifies her as a former illegal migrant and that complicates her ability to cross the border anywhere in Europe. The immigration officials in Italy assumed that she was in the brothel of her own choosing. Yet as she explains, “You go at your own will but when you get there, you are not doing it of your own free will, you’re doing it because you’re forced to.” When I interviewed her, Daniela was planning to go to Italy with her Italian husband (with whom she lived in Brazil) but she said she would never return to Europe to do programa: “Only here [in Ponta Negra]. Because here, I do what I want. If I want to go out one night, I go out. If I don’t want to, I don’t go out. Here I’m not forced to do [programa]. There [in Italy], you’re forced to do it. You sleep three, four hours and then you have to do it.”

Daniela thus saw her experience in sex tourism in Ponta Negra in drastically different terms than her experience in Europe: in Ponta Negra, she was able to control when, what, with whom, how long, and for how much money she would engage in paid sex with foreign men. The campaigns against sex tourism, which conflated her experience with that of trafficked women, did not account for what she saw as consensual versus forced. Yet the question of consent is murky and the distinction between voluntary/forced is, at times, a problematic one (Doezema 1998). Daniela indeed complicates further the question of consent, when narrating her experiences in Ponta Negra: “Many people say that the life of a garota de programa is easy. Not so much. Sometimes, you have to go out with someone because you need the money. And you’ll

go out with a horrible man, understand? You have to go out and pretend you like it.”

After marrying her Italian partner, a widower in his late sixties, she felt in a better position to exercise control but this also came at a cost: “I’m married, but I hate [going with him] in bed.” The she added: “but I preferred [being married]. I don’t want to do this again. Before, I was forced to... Well, I did not have money. I had to go to the clubs every night. Not now. Now I go if I want to. I live well with one person, I go out if I want to.” When I interviewed Daniela at her rented apartment in Ponta Negra, her husband was washing her clothes – something unusual – and I commented upon that to her. Daniela exclaimed that she dominated him and claimed she even beat him at times (which was possible especially given his frail stature in contrast to her strong body). Daniela was a lively woman, whom I would never have suspected of being forced into prostitution in a brothel in Italy. She was extremely voluble and playful with men and would publicly describe herself as a savvy woman tricking foreign men. Her account reveals that the meaning of “being forced” shifted according to the contexts, and that there are degrees of complexity to what women saw as exploitative and non consensual. Gregory proposes that in the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic “sex work was reducible neither to ‘sex’ nor to ‘work’ but instead embraced disparate practices through which women renegotiated and contested hierarchies that were secured *simultaneously* in terms of gender, race, sex, and class” (Gregory 2007: 134). Daniela negotiated different hierarchies yet she still made a crucial distinction between her experience in Ponta Negra and the one she had in a brothel in Europe, a distinction erased in the campaigns against sex tourism that conflate it with traffic in women.

## **Conclusion**

Women in Ponta Negra occupy complex subject positions and find themselves enmeshed in many hierarchies – not only as women selling sex (for many women did not explicitly sell sex) but also as women located in inequalities of race, gender, class, citizenship, age, and sexuality. The complex fields of power in which women operate will become more apparent in subsequent chapters. Women in Ponta Negra engage in relationships that are open and ambiguous, rather than rigidly defined – a starting point to critically engage with subsequent sections of this dissertation. In the next chapter, I continue to describe the fields of power in which the women I interviewed operate, turning to the genealogy of sex tourism as a public discourse in Brazil and Natal. Rather than attributing an essential meaning to “sex tourism,” I take a discursive approach in order to analyze the different meanings sex tourism takes on locally, and the implications this has for those deemed affected by sex tourism.



### Chapter 3: “Doing good for Women?": A Geography and Genealogy of the Campaigns against Sex Tourism in Natal



Figure 6: The Big White Penis Public Act against sex tourism in Natal, November 8, 2006.<sup>50</sup>

In Natal, the newspaper headlines announced: “In Ponta Negra, a public act against sex tourism” (Diário de Natal 2006). The caption was accompanied by a picture of the event, a march in the street of Ponta Negra with a notable symbol of sex tourism: a 2-meter, papier-mâché sculpture of a white phallus, with several flags representing different North American and European nations – including the United States, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal, among others (see Figure 6). Starting in the early 2000s, Ponta Negra became a centre of several interventions against sex tourism. This street protest was provocatively and humorously labelled “The Big White Penis Act.”<sup>51</sup> It

<sup>50</sup> Photo by Carlos Santo/DN. Source: <http://www.sospontanegra.blogspot.com>

<sup>51</sup> The protest was co-organized by the movement *SOS Ponta Negra*, made of different organizations dedicated to combating the problems resulting from urbanization and mass tourism, as well as by the NGO *Pau e Lata* (Wood and Tin Cans) which uses music to engage the public on different social issues.

was only one of many interventions to fight sex tourism in Natal since the early 2000s, with a variety of stakeholders involved in this struggle: most notably the municipality of Natal, the state of Rio Grande do Norte, the federal government, academics, NGOs, feminist organizations, associations of local residents and business owners as well as international organizations. They protested against “sex tourism” but its meaning was differently interpreted by these various stakeholders: some fought the sexual exploitation of children, others protested against prostitution (which is not illegal in Brazil), and still some others campaigned against the perverse effects of mass tourism on the local economy and landscape. Despite the fact that different interests and understanding of what sex tourism meant, these various stakeholders coalesced in their opposition to sex tourism in ways that blur the assumed distinctiveness of the private sector, the state and civil society.

In her work on migrants who sell sex in Europe, Laura Maria Agustín documents the rise of “a veritable Rescue Industry”(2007: 4) and proposes the term “social sector” to refer to these converging practices of various actors invested in saving and rescuing migrants selling sex.<sup>52</sup> She argues: “what is officially governmental mixes with the ‘non’ governmental to such an extent that they cannot be disentangled, which is why I talk about the social sector in general, rather than the state or private sector or civil society” (2007: 153). Similarly, in the context of sex tourism in Natal, activists, local residents,

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<sup>52</sup> The rescue industry described by Agustín takes roots in Victorian society and in notions of saving poor, morally fallen, victimized women that emerged at the time (e.g. Walkowitz 1982). Agustín argues that contemporary attempts to rescue migrant women selling sex are thus premised upon salvationist impulses that ultimately restrict the mobility of these women; the campaigns against sex tourism in Brazil, much like the anti-trafficking movement in Europe and North America, are thus deeply rooted in similar attempts to save victimized women from deviant men.

business owners, and state agents converge to rescue Brazilian women from bad foreigners in a multiplicity of ways.<sup>53</sup>

This chapter seeks to examine these convergent practices meant to rescue Brazilian women but often times resulting in furthering their marginalization, exclusion, and stigmatization. Whereas the march in Ponta Negra, at first glance, appears as a radical act against imperialism, post-colonialism, globalization, mass tourism, sexism and racism, a closer examination reveals that it is also about middle class anxieties over black/mixed-raced and working class mobility (both social and spatial). This chapter thus uncovers how the street march and other campaigns against sex tourism in Natal are interwoven with national and international articulations and entangled in local micro-politics that (re)inscribe local hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. As several scholars of prostitution in Western Europe and North America have demonstrated in different contexts, the salience of prostitution as a social problem is contingent upon spatial and historical processes of inclusion and exclusion (Agustín 2007; Brock 1998; Hubbard 1999; Ross 2010; Sanchez 1997). I thus spatially anchor the production of sex tourism as a social problem, drawing inspiration from what British geographer Phil Hubbard terms a “geography of prostitution” (1999:4; see also Ross 2010: 199). Likewise, scholars of sex tourism in Brazil have disrupted taken-for-granted assumptions about sex tourism, analyzing critically the campaigns against trafficking and sex tourism (Amar 2009; Grupo Davida 2005; Piscitelli 2006; 2004a; Silva and Blanchette 2005; Williams 2010). This chapter expands on these compelling bodies of work by tracing both the spatiality of sex tourism and the history of its engineering into a salient issue in

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<sup>53</sup> As an illustration of this convergence, the movement SOS Ponta Negra, which participated in the “Big White Penis Act” against sex tourism, includes associations of residents and business owners, NGOs, as well as government agencies.

Natal. In other words, this chapter engages with both the *geography* and *genealogy* of sex tourism in Natal, starting with the larger national and international context that gave rise to the constitution of sex tourism as a particularly salient issue in Brazil.

### **The Genealogy of Sex Tourism as a Social Problem in Brazil**

Beginning in the 1980s, sex tourism in Brazil became a subject of public concern, but only since the late 1990s and early 2000s did it begin to generate increasing anxiety as well as significant public intervention, media attention and state action, both at the national and international levels (Piscitelli 1996; 2004a; Pruth 2008). Several commentators have pointed to the ways in which anxieties surrounding sex-related issues and sex panics serve the most varied political purposes (Hubbard 2001; Herdt 2009; Rubin 1984; Vance 1984) and the battle to end sex tourism in Brazil is similarly entangled in complex political terrains (Amar 2009; Grupo Davida 2005; Piscitelli et al. 2004; Williams 2010). Indeed, sex tourism was not a new phenomenon in Brazil when it began to generate such recent anxieties. Although for several decades Rio de Janeiro had been recognized as a main hub for international sex tourism, there was no major intervention launched to eradicate it. For several decades, Embratur, a state-owned agency of the Ministry of Tourism created during the military dictatorship, had been promoting the image of Brazil as a tropical paradise and of Brazilian women as one of its main attractions for several decades (Alfonso 2006).

In effect, the state-owned agency contributed to the consolidation and international circulation of a national narrative that propagated the idea of a hybrid nation, with the sensual mulata as its emblem. This national narrative developed most

fully following the influential writings of Brazilian intellectual Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s, and the populist policies of President Getúlio Vargas during the same period. As discussed in more detail in the introduction, in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery (1888) and independence of Brazil (1889), Brazilian intellectuals and the elite had difficulty reconciling their mixed race identity in the face of a theory of racial purity and especially the eugenics that developed in Europe. They adopted a whitening ideology that espoused, paradoxically, both scientific racism and miscegenation, believing that “the ‘superior’ white race would prevail in the process of racial amalgamation” (Skidmore 1993: 46). The influential writing of Gilberto Freyre celebrating racial mixture against eugenics created the grounds for a national ideology based on the celebration of Brazil’s racial mixture. As proposed by Natasha Pravaz, under President Vargas, “samba would become the best indication of the hybrid character of the nation” (2003: 124), and the *mulata*<sup>54</sup> – a woman of mixed origin – the ideal embodiment of this racial mixture or “a representation of Brazil itself” (2003: 123).

The image of the sensual *mulata* was central in the subsequent promotion of Brazil as a tourist destination, her representation in tourist advertisements expressing the sensuality, exoticism, and *joie de vivre* of the nation. During the 1960s and in the following three decades, Brazil, and especially Rio de Janeiro, became closely associated with carnival, samba, and the *mulata* mainly through the massive tourist advertisement campaigns deployed by Embratur, but also by several travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, and bars (Gilliam 1998). Images of semi-naked mixed-race women in a tropical setting

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<sup>54</sup> Natasha Pravaz (2003) aptly notes that the *mulata* represents a polysemic category; popularly she refers to a woman of mixed origin (Goldstein 2003). Whether she represents a mixture of Portuguese, African, and Native (being of multiracial ancestry as in Twine 1997) or a mixture of Portuguese and African (or white and black, as in Pravaz 2003: 137) is not always agreed upon –yet she clearly embodies racial mixture.

were commonly used in tourist advertisements, consolidating the images of Brazil as a destination of sun, sand, sex, and sea. For several commentators, the promotion of Brazilian women as one of Brazil's main attractions explains, in part, the appeal of Brazil for tourists interested in sex travels and for its international reputation as a sex tourist destination (Alfonso 2006; Gilliam 1998; Leite 2003; Pruth 2008, 2007; Texeira and Batista 2002). Yet for years the image of Brazil as a tropical and sensual paradise was not the subject of major public concern, partly due to this national celebration of the sensual mulata.

In the aftermath of years of military dictatorship ending in 1985, Brazil became more concerned with the promotion of democratic ideals, especially given its long record of human rights violations and the severe social problems plaguing the country, such as urban violence, unemployment in the large industrial centres of the South, and severe economic disparities structured by race, gender, age, and region (Amar 2009). During the 1990s, Brazilian children were the focus of many national and international news stories that portrayed many of these children as either member of violent gangs, as working children, as murdered by death squads, or as sexually abused. The newly democratic state became particularly concerned with addressing children's rights and was increasingly pressured by local and international organizations to take action (Amar 2009; Hecht 1998). Street children were at the centre of these interventions in the early 1990s, but the attention to their plight eventually faded into the background in the late 1990s (Rosemberg and Andrade 1999:117). Child sex tourism slowly began to attract the attention of the media, the state, local and international NGOs and academics, beginning with national and international media reporting in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g.

Rodrigues 1994; Simons 1987), but reaching a peak in the early 2000s, with several campaigns and media reporting throughout the 2000s (e.g. CBC&VB 2006; Campos 2007; Alfonso 2006; Vieira de Carvalho 2003).

This emergent national concern to combat child sex tourism was indeed part of a larger web of international articulations. To begin with, “sex tourism” became a serious and legitimate topic of scholarly work starting in the early 1980s (Cohen 1982, 1986; Enloe 1989; Hall 1992; O’ Malley 1982; Truong 1990). It was mostly, as proposed by Kempadoo and Ghuma, “due to feminist research and action around prostitution in Southeast Asia in the 1980s that ‘sex tourism’ was identified as a concept to refer to practices structured in the tourism industry that involve the exchange of material goods or money for sexual labor” (1999: 291).<sup>55</sup> Starting in the late 1980s, the work of NGOs and international organizations was particularly influential worldwide in placing child sex tourism on the agenda of national governments and the tourism industry. The work of the NGO ECPAT<sup>56</sup> is noteworthy for the significant role it played in achieving substantial media coverage, an international code of conduct to protect children from sexual exploitation in tourism, and shifts in national legislation allowing for the prosecution of child-sex offenders when the crimes were committed outside their national border. Yet ECPAT also put forth a vision of sex tourism involving consenting adults as necessarily harmful and as leading to child prostitution. As the organization states in the document

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<sup>55</sup> Since then, as I discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the term *sex tourism* has been used by scholars, politicians, activists, journalists, NGOs, international organizations, among others, to convey a wide array of practices of commercial sex in tourism ranging from organized sex tourism to romance tourism, and including adults and/or children.

<sup>56</sup> ECPAT was established in 1990 in Thailand and initially ECPAT stood for End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism. Eventually the organization expanded its activities outside of Asia and now ECPAT stands for End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes. (ECPAT 2010; Kempadoo and Ghuma 1999).

“Client, Customer, Exploiter: User of Child Prostitutes” (1998:1 cited in Kempadoo and Ghuma 1999: 303):

Child abusers come from all walks of life and social backgrounds. The majority of these men become child abusers through their use of prostitutes. Children constitute a larger proportion of workers in the sex trade and are often found in the lower end of the market, where the prices are cheap and the conditions are worst. For those who deliberately seek sex with children law and social conventions make it difficult and dangerous to satisfy their interests. *Prostitution enables them to have instant access to children. Prostitution is especially attractive to pedophiles and child preferential abusers.* (Emphasis Mine)

In other words, for ECPAT, prostitution in itself inevitably leads to the sexual exploitation of children, and thus distinctions between children and adults or coercion and choice matter little here. It is the whole sex trade – and particularly prostitution in tourism – that is to be blamed for the children who are the target of sexual abusers.

ECPAT and its abolitionist vision have had a significant influence on the global arena. In its international campaigns, no distinction was made between the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, and prostitution between consenting adults. As noted by Kempadoo and Ghuma:

in the campaigns against child prostitution, an assumption, articulated most clearly by ECPAT, is that the entire sex trade needs to be eradicated. Sex tourism is unequivocally equated with coercive practices, and it is this perspective that informs the work being undertaken on the subject by the UN, the tourism industry, and various national governments” (1999: 304).

Another related, defining moment on the international scene came in the mid-1990s when the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) elaborated the *Statement on the Prevention of Organized Sex Tourism*, in which sex tourism refers to “trips organized from within the tourism sector, or from outside this sector but using its structures and networks, with the primary purpose of effecting a commercial sexual relationship by the tourist with residents at the destination” (UNWTO 1995). The



statement also stipulates several guidelines to be taken by both the tourism industry and national governments to eradicate organized sex tourism. These guidelines target both adults and children, and do not distinguish between different forms of sex tourism.<sup>57</sup> This statement and its guidelines were to become internationally significant for the future of the fight against what came to be known as “sex tourism” as it provided the first official definition. Similar to ECPACT’s understanding of sex tourism, the UN lumped together prostitution in tourism and the sexual exploitation of children, and makes an indiscriminate connection between the two. As we shall see, this has had far reaching implications for the ways in which campaigns against sex tourism are conducted, leading to the implementation of anti-prostitution policies and practices in Brazil, at the federal level and in Natal and Rio Grande do Norte, at the municipal and state-levels.

Facing various pressures from different national and international organizations, Brazil’s national tourism administration organized the International Seminar on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents in the Americas in 1996. This seminar led to the adoption of the Brasilia Charter, which endorsed most of the measures proposed by the UNWTO (Kempadoo and Gupta 1999). A year later, the state-owned tourist agency Embratur decided to ban the image of women in bikinis from its tourist advertisements and simultaneously launched a campaign against the sexual exploitation

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<sup>57</sup> For instance, in the guidelines addressed to national government, the following requests are included, among others: “*Issue* guidelines to the tourism sector, insisting that it refrains from organizing any forms of sex tourism, and from exploiting prostitution as a tourist attraction” and “*Establish and enforce*, where applicable, legal and administrative measures to prevent and eradicate child sex tourism, in particular through bilateral agreements to facilitate, *inter alia*, the prosecution of tourists engaged in any unlawful sexual activity involving children and juveniles.” In the guidelines to the tourism industry, too, anti-prostitution measures feature alongside means to prevent children from abuses, as in the following measure: “*Adopt* practical, promotional and commercial measures, such as, for example, positive self-identification of enterprises which refrain from engaging in sex tourism; banning commercial sex services, in particular involving children, on the contracted tourism premises; providing information to travellers about health risks of sex tourism, etc” (Mowforth et al.: 2008: 216-217).

of children and adolescents in tourism (Alfonso 2006: 109). This was the first of a long series of state-based interventions against what became known as “sex tourism” in the country. This first campaign<sup>58</sup> was realized in partnership with several actors from the social sector: the Ministry of Justice, several NGOs, the federal police and different businesses from the tourism industry. It was made public in hotels frequented by international tourists as well as during international flights. Furthermore, a hotline was established to denounce the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism.<sup>59</sup>

The state-owned tourism agency Embratur continued its national campaign until the 2004 creation of the federal program “Sustainable Tourism and Childhood” by the Ministry of Tourism, part of the new Plan to Combat the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents.<sup>60</sup> As part of this program, the Ministry of Tourism along with the World Tourism Organization also launched a permanent campaign against what they also term “sex tourism” (thus conflating the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents with sex tourism). The new campaign specifically targets the period of Carnival, once a celebration of the sensual character of the nation, with its first campaign, “Brasil: Quem Ama Protege” (Brazil: Those Who Love It Protect It) launched just before Carnival in 2004 in various major cities, including Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Fortaleza and Recife.

Pamphlets, t-shirts and flyers were produced and disseminated in airports, seaports,

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<sup>58</sup> The campaigns consisted of a banner with the image of a person whose angry eyes only were visible, with the caption: “Exploitation of children in sex tourism. Beware. Brazil is watching you” (Alfonso 2006: 109).

<sup>59</sup> The campaigns benefited from the financial and institutional support of several organizations in Brazil – the Federal Police, airline companies, the Justice Ministry, various NGOs and the tourism industry (Alfonso 2006: 109; CBC & CV 2006; Ministério do Turismo 2010a). Some of these NGOs received financial support from international organizations such as UNICEF or World Vision targeting child sex tourism. For instance, World Vision was involved in campaigning against sex tourism from 2003 to 2007 with its Child Sex Tourism Prevention Project, which received U.S. Department State Funding: <http://www.worldvision.org/content.nsf/learn/globalissues-stp-faqs>

<sup>60</sup> Realized in partnerships with universities, municipalities, states and the civil society, the program’s aim is to integrate the actions of these various actors from the social sector to prevent the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism within all levels of the tourist industry (Ministério do Turismo 2010a).

hotels, internet cafes, and in the street during Carnival. Since this first campaign, the slogan has changed a number of times but the campaign persists year-round, peaking during carnival time and other major tourist events (Ministério do Turismo 2010a; CBC & CV 2006).

The campaigns against sex tourism in Brazil also reached into different segments of society, expanding what we could think of as the social sector and revealing the extent to which sex tourism has become a major social concern in Brazil. As an illustration of this, the magazine *Marie Claire* (the Brazilian edition)<sup>61</sup> launched its own campaign against sex tourism in 2007, in partnership with the state, *Turismo Sexual: Vamos Acabar com essa Vergonha* (Sex Tourism: Let's put an end to this Shame). The magazine invited readers to sign a letter which began in the following manner: "I hereby express, through this letter, my repudiation of sex tourism in Brazil. I want foreign tourists to come to this country to visit our beautiful landscapes, not for sex. This shameful situation unfortunately contributes to a criminal scheme of sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. This must end" (Revista Marie Claire 2007). In this campaign, travel with the intention of having sex was seen as directly leading to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. In other words, the campaign made no distinction between consenting adults and children, a conflation that is common in other campaigns and media reporting on sex tourism in Brazil. As we shall see in the case of Natal, this conflation is not unproblematic for it tends to victimize and infantilize the women who engage in commercial (and non-commercial) sex with tourists, and to transform foreign

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<sup>61</sup> Marie Claire is a major women's magazine on beauty, health, and fashion first published in France, currently with specific editions in more than 30 different countries including Brazil.

tourists into perverts who presumably would have sex with both adult women and children without discerning between them.<sup>62</sup>

The fight against sex tourism in Brazil intensified with the international concern for human trafficking that gained momentum around 2000. As several critics have noted, this concern is quite reminiscent of earlier discourses on the traffic in women, or white slavery, of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Doezema 2000; Grupo Davida 2006; Piscitelli 2004a). The expression “white slavery” commonly refers to the forced prostitution of white European women, trafficked through international networks and forced into sexual slavery in brothels in South America (especially Argentina and Brazil), Africa and Asia, from about 1870 to 1930 (Doezema 2000; Piscitelli 2004a). The panic over white slavery was closely entangled with European notions of morality, respectability, and proper womanhood (Walkowitz 1994). Yet it also coincided with several national interests in Brazil, including the implementation of policies meant to “clean” Brazilian cities, especially given that Brazil had a significant population of poor (female) European immigrants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Piscitelli 2004a).

The present day concern with trafficking in women, much like the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century panic surrounding white slavery, is also closely entangled with larger political issues, yet the political, economic, and historical context has drastically changed. For one thing, the international migration of poor women has shifted, and now Brazil is

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<sup>62</sup> The various campaigns in Brazil also leave aside the Brazilian men and transgender people who engage in commercial sex with foreigners – a critique that applies to most campaigns and interventions made in the fight against sex tourism in Brazil. In this chapter, however, I am not developing this point further, as my interest lies in probing claims of “doing good for women” based on my empirical data on sex tourism in Natal, mostly based on heterosexual sex tourism. I invite others to take up the discussion from where I leave it.

in the business of exporting its women,<sup>63</sup> rather than importing working-class European women (Piscitelli 2004a). Notably, as a number of authors have pointed out, the panic surrounding traffic in women at the beginning of the millennium coincides with a time of general anxiety in many European countries regarding the potential burden that migrants might represent for the state (Agustín 2006; 2007; Bloch 2009; Bermann 2003; Doezema 2000; Piscitelli 2006).

Similar to the panic surrounding white slavery, the concern with traffic in women is not necessarily substantiated by empirical evidence (Bloch 2009; Doezema 2000; Kempadoo 2005; Sanghera 2005) and definitional problems raise questions of what is meant by “trafficked” especially given that it is often conflated with any form of migration for prostitution (Agustín 2007; Bloch 2009; Murray 1998; O’Connell Davidson 2010; Piscitelli 2006; 2007a).<sup>64</sup> In other words, this means that sex trafficking is not always distinguished from sex work, creating confusion over its meanings and opening the way for European and North American nations to deport migrants for selling sex. The confusion results from different understanding of what coercion and consent mean, which in itself is the topic of several debates among feminists. Doezema (1998), among others, argues that the line between voluntary and forced prostitution is in itself problematic.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> The exportation of the nation’s women is not unique to Brazil; the case of Filipinas who migrate to work as live-in domestic workers constitutes an important parallel and contrast (Parreñas 2001; Pratt 2005). Unlike Filipinas, the Brazilian women in my study are not cleaning, cooking or doing childcare; as we shall see, they use ‘love’ as a marketable skill in project of social mobility. Yet, they find themselves, quite ironically, in relationships with men who often times, are seeking the equivalent of a live-in-maid.

<sup>64</sup> It is important to note here that there are other forms of forced labour beyond sex trafficking, yet these are often effaced by the emphasis on sexual slavery and the panic it generates.

<sup>65</sup> According to this logic, then, while forced prostitution is condemned, the protection of sex workers’ rights is deemed unnecessary. This approach also assumes that the victims of trafficking are young, passive, exploited and innocent Third World women, whereas voluntary prostitutes are Western women, able to make the choice of working in the sex trade, and thus guilty if abuses are committed against them. Thus, Doezema argues, this new perspective creates a false divide between whores and Madonnas, conflating guilty with voluntary and innocent with forced prostitution reinforcing “the belief that women

Who may be considered “trafficked” is thus a contentious issue, and a slippery notion that does not recognize how “people’s experience of exploitation, abuse, powerlessness and restriction ranges along a continuum” (O’Connell Davidson 2010: 250).

In 2000, the Palermo Protocols were adopted by the UN, and included two protocols – one on smuggling; the other, which concerns this discussion, on trafficking: the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children*. This protocol, as several critics have noted, is not free from definitional problems: the protocol leaves the definition of trafficking open to interpretations in terms of what constitutes coercion (Agustín 2007:40; O’Connell Davidson 2010: 249; Piscitelli 2006; 2007a).<sup>66</sup> Subsequently, U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports contributed to shame various countries and pressure national governments, including Brazil, to adopt legislative measures to fight sex trafficking (Bloch 2009: 172). TIP reports are described as “the U.S. Government’s principal diplomatic tool to engage foreign governments on human trafficking” on the U.S. Department of State website (U.S. Department of State 2011). First published in 2001, this annual report rates countries based on their efforts to meet the ‘minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking’. Notably, the rating (1, 2, 3) is tied to levels of foreign aid funding for countries, and TIP reports are used by various organizations (international, NGOs) to assess where trafficking measures are most urgent. Brazil rated at Tier 2 consecutively

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who transgress sexual norms deserve to be punished” (1998: 42). Yet as she rightly claims, it is women already in the sex trade who are more likely to experience exploitation.

<sup>66</sup> The protocol stipulates: “‘Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN 2000: article 3a).

since the first TIP report, which means that the country is considered as in need of serious improvements to fight trafficking (legislation, prevention, criminalization of traffickers, etc.) albeit making some efforts.

Facing mounting international pressure<sup>67</sup> to take a tougher stance on sex trafficking, Brazil ratified the UN protocol in 2004. Article 231 of the Brazilian penal code additionally penalizes the act of helping women to either enter the national territory for prostitution or leave the country to practice prostitution outside of Brazil (Piscitelli 2006; 2007a). This means that women who are in any way helped by their friends and relatives in their migration trajectories to work in the sex industry are considered trafficked (Piscitelli 2006; 2007a). As proposed by Piscitelli, in her study of Brazilian women who migrate to sell sex in Europe, “considering that, in practice, migrants always request and receive help, almost any type of migration to work in the sex industry can be seen as trafficking” (2007a: 17).

Furthermore, the issue of human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation has become closely connected and conflated with sex tourism, seen as one of the prime sites for international networks in which sex traffickers operate. In the early 2000s, when sex trafficking became the subject of public concern in Brazil, several national reports and publications by NGOs and scholars made an explicit connection between trafficking and sex tourism (e.g. Leal and Leal 2003; Leite 2003: 68; Portella 2003). Williams reports how in its educational materials, the NGO CHAME,<sup>68</sup> which came into existence

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<sup>67</sup> Along with the United Nations, several other international organizations have been involved in the fight against sex trafficking, including for instance the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, USAID, UNESCO, and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (see Bloch 2009: 172).

<sup>68</sup> CHAME stand for *Centro de Apoio Humanitário à Mulher*, or the Humanitarian Center for the Support of Women.

to prevent both the international traffic in women and sex tourism, “refers to sex tourism as the ‘gateway’ or ‘tip of the iceberg’ to trafficking” (2010:190). Without denying the potential connections between sex tourism and trafficking, I believe that their conflation has contributed to many problematic interventions that do not properly distinguish between consensual and coerced sexual activity.

This entanglement is perhaps best illustrated with the example of Operation Princess and its sister campaigns (2003-2005) – a series of raids conducted in Rio de Janeiro originally intended to combat sex trafficking, especially child sex-trafficking (Amar 2009; Grupo Davida 2005). Political scientist Paul Amar argues that these campaigns were part of an effort, from newly elected president Luis Inácio da Silva (hereafter ‘Lula’) and his administration to shift the image of Brazil as one of the most unequal societies in the world and to assert itself as a “global role-model of social justice, humanity, and safety” (2009:514). The choice to focus on the trafficking of children resulted from various factors, including the recent report by the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations Office against Drugs and Organized Crime (UNDOC) that painted Brazil as the champion of sex trafficking in 2001. Brazil was facing increasing international pressure to take actions against sex trafficking, and since it sought to play a key role on the global arena, it had to make some serious commitments. Thus, as Amar (2009: 528) eloquently summarizes:

By the time Lula assumed power in 2003, a massive child-rescue initiative was deemed essential to Brazil’s plans to legitimize and empower itself on the world stage, as well as to address social-justice concerns at home. For Brazil to assume leadership of the democratic global south and make a claim to the proposed new seat on the Security Council, it wanted to change the image of Brazilian law enforcement from death squad to rescue mission, authoritarian to humanitarian. The national landscape had to be cleared of lawless, victimized children.



Lula thus declared as one of his top priorities the fight against sex trafficking and launched a national campaign. Rio de Janeiro, as the site of major public concern regarding security, became the focal point of these new campaigns. The most dramatic operation (Operation Shangrilá) took place in 2005, when the Federal Police arrested 40 Brazilian sex workers and 29 Americans on a showboat in Guanabara Bay, in Rio de Janeiro. This raid was subsequently reported as the arrest of traffickers and the rescue of child victims of sex trafficking (Amar 2009; Grupo Davida 2005). The incident generated massive public attention, yet it soon became apparent that this operation had nothing to do with human trafficking, that none of the Brazilian women was underage or coerced, that no pimping had taken place, and that no Brazilian law had been violated. It appears that this operation was not about protecting women or children from being trafficked, but rather that it was targeting sex workers and their foreign clients. Given the legality of sex work in Brazil, this situation was met with opposition from sex worker associations in Rio de Janeiro and from the broader public and ultimately, the American tourists were released, without any charges (Amar 2009).<sup>69</sup>

A similar operation was launched in Natal in 2006 but this time, the main concern was to protect women and children involved in sex tourism (rather than in sex trafficking): beaches were policed, tourists were arrested, nightclubs were closed down or searched, and so on (Bezerra and Lopes 2006; Freire 2006). In this massive intervention,

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<sup>69</sup> Amar (2009) documents how this public backlash resulted from the many contradictions of these operations, including the unveiling of the criminal involvement of the Military Police in scheme of sex trafficking. Ironically the Military Police had created vice squads in charge of fighting against sex trafficking. According to him, the public opposition was also fuelled by anti-US sentiment regarding the autonomy of Brazil in asserting its own policies regarding sexuality, especially in light of the controversy surrounding the financing of AIDS prevention (Brazil famously rejected U.S. funding conditional upon abstinence-based approaches). The Rio raid against sex workers was perceived as a form of US imperialism and misplaced moralism, disguised as an anti-trafficking campaign and rescue mission.

which I discuss further below, in Natal, as in Rio, sex tourism became synonymous with forced prostitution, sexual violence against women, and the sexual exploitation of children. This is not unique to Brazil as Doezeema demonstrates in her discussion of several anti-trafficking campaigns worldwide in which “forced prostitution, child prostitution and sex tourism are linked together and made indistinguishable” (1998: 42). In Natal, as in the rest of Brazil, these articulations were also made, creating confusion and contradictions over the meanings of sex tourism and allowing for the deployment of all sorts of interventions in the fight against “sex tourism” including state policing of Ponta Negra, quasi-criminalisation of sex work, and practices of discrimination against *garotas de programa*, especially mixed-race or black women. While the campaigns in Natal are necessarily contingent upon what happens at the national and international level, sex tourism also has its own micro-politics, as a close examination of the strategies deployed to fight sex tourism in Natal reveals.

### **The Campaigns against Sex Tourism in Natal**

Since early 2000 sex tourism in Natal has captured the attention of the media, NGOs, associations of residents and business owners, politicians, scholars, and local populations alike. The topic of sex tourism has also triggered a boom of research, and academic publications (Lopes Júnior 2005; Pruth 2007; 2008; Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006, Teixeira and Batista 2002). In the first few weeks of my fieldwork, I was made aware of some of the tensions presented in Natal, as I was warned to be careful with the dissemination of my research findings due to the potential reactions it could incite,

especially given that two of my predecessors – foreign anthropologists who had done research on sex tourism in Natal – had been publicly condemned for their work.

As it happened, in August 2005, the municipality of Natal and its city council declared Portuguese anthropologists Fernando Bessa Ribeiro and Octavio Sacramento “persona non grata” in response to the presentation of their research in one of the local newspapers, the *Diário de Natal* (Azavedo 2005c; Guimarães 2005). One city councillor, explaining his decision to initiate this request, claimed the anthropologists had “offended the women of the city” (Guimarães 2005) because they had proposed that sex tourism and family tourism could peacefully coexist. The condemnation stirred a polemical debate in Natal, with some local academics from the federal university and feminist activists from the NGO Coletivo Leila Diniz, using the same local newspaper to voice their critique of the condemnation, which they saw as retrograde and provincial (Azavedo 2005b; Sousa 2005). One of the two anthropologists also replied that their intention was not to offend Natal’s citizens but rather to suggest that like other commercial activities, the sex trade in Natal should be regulated by the state, itself a contentious issue<sup>70</sup> (Azavedo 2005a).

As in the rest of Brazil, the concern for sex tourism in Natal had begun with a preoccupation about the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in the context of tourism. The city of Natal went even further than any other Brazilian city in confronting this problem; it was the first Brazilian city to adopt the “Code of Conduct for the Tourism Industry against the Sexual Exploitation of Children” hereafter referred to as “the code.”<sup>71</sup> In 2001, more than 160 representatives from the governmental sector, civil

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<sup>70</sup> The issues of the state regulation of the sex trade generated widespread debate following the draft legislation presented by depute Fernando Gabeira to legalize prostitution in Brazil. See Azavedo (2005a).

<sup>71</sup> The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism was first elaborated by ECPAT international in 1997; it is now an independent organization funded by UNICEF

society, and various NGOs came together to craft the code and logo, inspired by its international equivalent, developed by the NGO ECPAT, as discussed above (Bonorandi 2006). Business establishments who commit to abide by the set of ethical guidelines defined in the code receive a seal, similar to a fair trade logo, and advertise it on their brochures, websites and/or entrance doors. In order for a company to be deemed worthy of the seal, it has to meet defined criteria, which are regularly monitored by the organization Resposta, an NGO that emerged in 2003 in Natal with the mandate of monitoring the code.<sup>72</sup> In 2010, the list of signatories included, among others, travel agencies, local associations, universities, restaurants, shops, hotels, and bars, with 89 signatories (Resposta 2010a; 2010b).

Although the logo is not directed against adults in sex tourism it implicitly promotes conduct aimed at the eradication of all forms of sex tourism, such as in article 9 of the code, which stipulates that a person or entity abiding by the code must commit to “repudiating any type of sex-oriented publicity in tourism” (Resposta 2010b). Furthermore, some establishments using the code’s seal in their advertising also claim to repudiate sex tourism in all its forms. This laid the ground to further connecting the sexual exploitation of children with prostitution, as we shall see with the other campaigns

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and supported by the World Tourism Organization. It also receives the technical support from several ECPAT groups. The Code has now 947 signatories in 37 countries; the city of Natal, with its 89 signatories, stands out for the number of adherents to the code (see [www.thecode.org](http://www.thecode.org)).

<sup>72</sup> Originally, the code of conduct was elaborated by three key actors: Casa Renascer (an NGO dedicated to children victims of abuse), the Potiguar University and the Banco do Brasil (Pruth 2007: 36). Ana Paula Felizardo, formerly employed in Casa Renascer, was elected as its new president. In 2005, Resposta integrated the ECPAT umbrella, but its activities exceed the code. Indeed, Resposta literally translates as ‘response’, and stands for *responsabilidade social posta em prática*, or social responsibility put into practice. Among other things, the NGO works towards broader social transformations within the tourism industry and work closely with tourism professionals and institutions of higher learning that have programs in tourism. Notably, its sexual politics are quite distinct from other social actors in Natal, as the NGO does not endorse campaigns that target adults. It is supportive of women’s sexual rights, including the right to sell sexual services (Pruth 2007: 41), which has important implications for its relations with other actors campaigning against sex tourism in Natal, as we will see below in this chapter.

against “sex tourism” held in Natal. The issue, here, is not to contest the legitimacy of the fight against the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism, but rather to point to its problematic conflation with sex work. While cases of sexual abuses of children have occurred in the context of tourism in Natal (e.g. Bezerra 2006a; Correio da Tarde 2007), the panic surrounding this issue does not coincide with its prevalence; there are far more cases of children being subject to sexual violence and sexual exploitation domestically than there are cases of foreigners exploiting underage girls or boys for sex.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, empirical research in Brazil, including my own work, reveals the visible predominance of consenting adults rather than children or adolescents (Piscitelli 1996, 2004a; 2004b; 2007b, 2008; Silva and Blanchette 2005; Williams 2010: 199).

One of the most striking moments in the constitution of sex tourism as a pressing issue in Natal was March 2006, six months after the incident with the two researchers declared ‘persona non grata’. What triggered this moment was special media coverage from the national news network *Globo* whose journalists went undercover with hidden cameras and revealed the inaction of the city of Natal<sup>74</sup> and the complicity of many

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<sup>73</sup> As per personal communication with Sayonara Dias, pedagogical coordinator, Casa Renascer, April 2008. Casa Renascer is an organization that deals with the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Natal, among other things. As Sayonara explains, “The majority of the cases we receive corroborate national research: it’s the biological father, the stepfather, in this sequence, and several cases of sexual violence within the family.” Furthermore, cases of sexual exploitation in tourism are not only rare, they usually occur after the exploitation begins domestically. A study by the Federal Police of the Road (*Polícia Rodoviária Federal*) also reveals that in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, there are 138 different locations on the roads considered vulnerable to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents – the large majority of them, unrelated to international tourism (Public Audience of the Municipality of Natal, August 15 2007). The municipal secretary of tourism in Natal, Fernando Bezerril, also stated that the situation of child sex tourism in Natal is far from being alarming, in light of information obtained from the National Secretary of Human Rights from 2003 to 2006 (Araújo 2007). For similar findings elsewhere in Brazil, see Williams (2010: 205-207).

<sup>74</sup> The media coverage took place in both Natal and Fortaleza, the capital city in the neighbouring state of Ceará, also infamously known as a sex tourist destination.

establishments in facilitating prostitution<sup>75</sup> in tourism (Jornal da Globo 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e). Headlines such as “A structure for sex tourism” and “A sad destiny for the underage prostitutes of the Northeast” (Jornal da Globo 2006b; 2006c) characterized this special media coverage with images of taxi drivers and owners of hotels and bars allowing prostitution between tourists and Brazilian women, even with underage girls. This coverage also pointed to the inaction of the different levels of government in addressing the problem of sex tourism.

Such coverage, distributed on national television, in newspapers and on the Internet, has had a significant impact on the city of Natal. It has brought the topic of sex tourism into the public sphere but on a much larger scale than with the polemic over the anthropologists’ research. *A Cidade do Sol* (Sun City) as Natal’s nickname goes, had not only been darkened with images of child exploitation and sex tourism, but the municipality itself was identified as facilitating this situation (Jornal da Globo 2006b). While the public image of the city was deeply affected by this media coverage, the local government was specifically blamed for its inaction. As a result, the city embarked upon a vigorous crusade to “save” the women and children involved in sex tourism in an attempt to revamp its image as an attractive sun destination.

In the weeks following this media coverage, the state along with associations of business owners and residents, took various measures to stop sex tourism, while leaving its meanings largely undefined. A week after this coverage, the city council of Natal held a public hearing on the issue of sex tourism, in response to the *Globo* news reports (Dickson 2006; Régis 2006). The general commander of the military police, the

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<sup>75</sup> The coverage was subsequently reported as negligent and as wrongly accusing some hotels of favouring the sexual exploitation of minors (Jornal de Hoje 2006).

municipal secretary of tourism, business owners working in the tourism industry, and the head of *Resposta* (the organization in charge of implementing the code) were among the participants in this public hearing. A city councillor presented draft legislation based on a similar initiative in Rio de Janeiro, prohibiting the use of semi-naked women and men in publicity representing the city of Natal (Dickson 2006; Régis 2006). The owner of a hotel and ex-state secretary of tourism, Mário Barrera, also proposed the use of repressive measures meant to eradicate prostitution in tourism. He told the audience that the city should: “simply put barriers at the entrance of the city to sort out the tourists. It’s not difficult to identify those who come in search of sex. All First World countries have barriers at their borders. The problem is that we have no control over the purpose of the visitor who comes to town” (Régis 2006).<sup>76</sup>

During the public hearing, critical comments were directed at the city for only taking the issue of sex tourism seriously once it was the subject of national media coverage that had tarnished the image of the city. The mayor of Natal, Carlos Eduardo, wrote a letter that was published in the local newspaper *Tribuna do Norte* (Eduardo 2006), which consisted of a defensive statement seeking to counter depiction of the past inactions of the municipality with regards to combating sex tourism. A veritable sense of emergency permeated this period, as only ten days after the *Globo* media coverage, the

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<sup>76</sup> Although this idea was not subsequently adopted by the municipality, his comment reflects the ways in which for him sex tourism meant prostitution, and not the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. Furthermore, the idea of “selecting” tourists was adopted by Fortaleza, in 2007, the other city featured in the *Globo* media coverage. In effect, the Federal Police at the international airport of Fortaleza started to identify “tourists at risk” defined as men aged between 25 and 50 years old, traveling alone or with other men, and usually coming on their own rather than as part of ‘all-inclusive’ packages. “Tourists at risk” are now given a stay of 30 days upon arrival at the airport of Fortaleza, rather than the usual 90 days. (Fernandes 2007). Furthermore, the Federal Police has created a digital database to control where foreigners are in real time (Fernandes 2007; Diário do Nordeste 2010). The Project, a collaboration between the Federal Police and the Brazilian Association of Hoteliers from Ceará, has its own website: <http://www.cearadesk.com.br/>

state of Rio Grande Do Norte also held a special meeting in which different state and non-state actors took part in elaborating a plan of action against sex tourism. Participants included local NGOs, both the Municipal and State Secretary of Tourism, the Public Minister, the Minister of Security, and the Association of Hoteliers, among others (Oliveira 2006). The goal of the meeting was to coordinate their efforts to fight sex tourism in an attempt to make clear that the state took the problem of sex tourism very seriously. The operation “Free Ponta Negra” (*Ponta Negra Livre*) was launched.

As part of this new massive operation, the first of series of raids took place less than a month after the *Globo* coverage (at the end of March and beginning of April), involving the deployment of 150 military, civil, and federal police officers. The main street along the beach in Ponta Negra was blocked at both ends, and a total of 120 foreigners were approached; nine of them (all men) were eventually detained. These arrests were carried out under the guise of fighting “sex tourism.” However, the term seemed to apply to a panoply of practices, including prostitution. The crimes committed were not related to pimping nor to the sexual exploitation of minors; five Portuguese men were arrested for possession of marijuana, two Spanish men were arrested for not carrying their passports with them,<sup>77</sup> and finally, an Italian and a Swede were arrested for having overstayed their tourist visas (Bezerra 2006b; Freire 2006). Similar raids in the following days ensued, and one of them resulted in 323 foreigners questioned, with 78 of them found without their passports and thus arrested (Bezerra and Lopes 2006). In addition to the arrest of foreigners, three bars were closed down, not because they were facilitating the commercial exploitation of prostitution or involved in the sexual

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<sup>77</sup> It is illegal in Brazil not to carry an official identity card and foreigners have to carry their passport with them at all times.



exploitation of minors, but because their establishments infringed on sanitary or safety regulations (Bezerra and Lopes 2006; Porpino and Bezerra 2006).

While no foreign tourists were found in the company of underage Brazilians, and none were found to have violated any law relating to prostitution, it was in the name of fighting “sex tourism” that this operation was conducted and subsequently reported on (Tribuna do Norte 2006b). The news of Natal’s massive sting operation even reached Spain, where it was reported as a successful operation “against sex tourism” with the arrest of foreigners involved in “child prostitution” (Gutiérrez 2006). This was a clear misrepresentation of the operation and reflects the conflation of issues even at an international level. While some residents and local business owners welcomed the operation, many local residents, workers at the beach, owners of bars, restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies, as well as *garotas de programa*, were particularly critical of the raids and their effectiveness. Frank, owner of a hotel by the beach, remembers these raids quite vividly in an interview conducted with me in late March 2008:

You know that the cops, they sent two buses here by the beach, two buses, and they arrested everyone who wasn’t with their passport in hand. This story was terrible, because there were many police officers, going into the nightclubs and in the streets, [asking] ‘where is your passport?’. It’s because the tourists, they’re afraid of having their passport stolen, so they leave it in their hotels (...) Myself, I’ve been living in Brazil for the last 45 years, I don’t go out with my passport, I go with a photocopy.

In an interview conducted in early May 2008, Manolo, the owner of a pub and an adjacent youth hostel in the area, was highly critical of the operation, in spite of his repudiation of sex tourism and his own strategy to oppose it (as we shall see below):

Once, two years ago, [something] came out in the [TV Program] *Fantastico*, from the *Globo Network*, talking about sex tourism here in the Northeast and showing Natal. After that, the mayor did an operation, according to him, to prohibit sex tourism. And so he did! And he raided some bars such as the Samba. The

municipal, federal, and state police, various government agencies, even the fire brigades came. In one of these operations there were more than 100 people. And they were looking for something, for some reasons to close the bars, so the Samba was closed because it didn't have an emergency exit. It's something we need [in a bar], but they talked as if the Samba was being closed because it was a bar of sex tourism. The truth is that the Samba was a victim because it wasn't a bar fostering this. Other bars were also closed, some tied to prostitution, others not, just to do this, because it was huge: people (...), dogs, soldiers wearing masks. So they did something really shocking, they did this to appear in the media, to say they were doing something but in reality this has had a very bad impact besides failing to work (...) and harming local businesses. So this was one more reason for the people in Natal to stop coming in Ponta Negra, 'cause with this mega-operation pro-technical, as we've called it, it became even worse.

A couple of weeks after these operations, in April 2006, the municipality installed surveillance cameras at the beach to deter illicit activities related to "sex tourism" (Araújo 2006). Yet these cameras became a tool, as evident in subsequent media reporting (Souza 2007), to discourage prostitution (albeit with limited success). The municipality also launched the bilingual campaign "Stop Sex Tourism" at the airport and in the city (Tribuna do Norte 2006a). Similar to the beach operation, the meaning of sex tourism was left largely undefined, with slogans such as "If you have come to enjoy Natal, welcome. If you have come for sex tourism, please go back home" (Tribuna do Norte 2006a). The campaign included an ad with the image of a tan white man with a red face and a condom over his head, with the caption: "It won't protect you against shame" (see Figure 7). The implicit meaning was that even safe sex practices would not protect the sex tourist from either the moral stigma of his acts or the potential 'embarrassment' if he were to face criminal charges. Indeed, with the condom and the caption "Stop sex tourism" also apparent, this ad is more suggestive of adult prostitution in tourism, rather than sex with minors.



Figure 7: Ad from the City Campaign: "It won't protect you against shame"<sup>78</sup>

Another similar ad appeared on beer coasters used in bars. On one side, the image of a young, white, blond man with a red face was accompanied by the caption in English: “Blushing or Tanning? Sex Tourism: don’t put yourself through this embarrassment”, and on the other side, several names – mostly evoking foreign nationalities – were written all over, with the caption “Don’t let sex tourism stain your name” (see Figure 8). The emphasis of the slogans was on shame (see a similar ad in Figure 9), and notably, did not prominently feature the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. As is evident in Figures 8 and 9, only in extremely small letters was there any indication that “sex tourism” meant the sexual exploitation of children, with the caption: “Child molesting is a grave crime and will be punished with 6 to 10 years in jail.”

<sup>78</sup> Source: Tribuna do Norte. 2006a. *Campanha Publicitária está Pronta* [Advertising Campaign is Ready] Tribuna do Norte April 27. Image retrieved at <http://www.tribunadonorte.com.br/noticia/campanha-publicitaria-esta-pronta/8368>

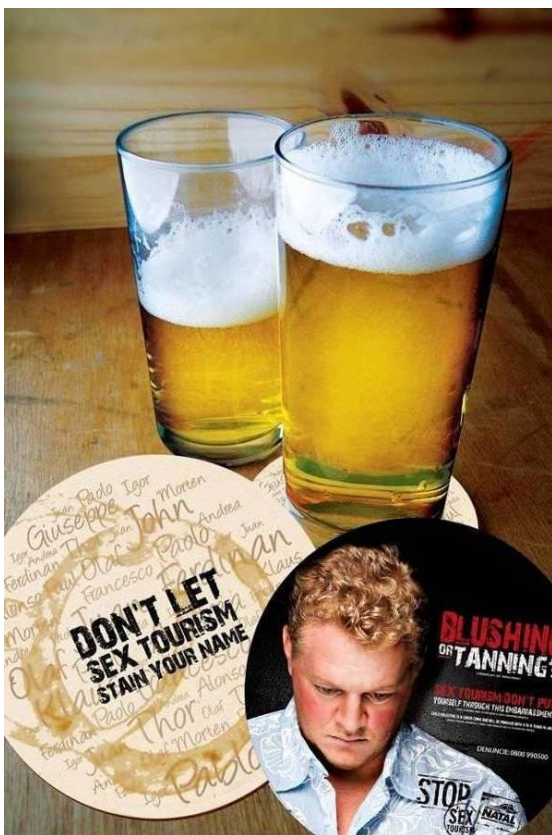


Figure 8: Ad from the City Campaign: "Blushing or tanning?" (Sources: SECTUR)<sup>79</sup>

The message of the city campaign so thoroughly conflated the issues that it led the organization Resposta, in charge of monitoring the code, to distance itself from it. The problem, for Resposta, was the lack of an attempt to make it clear that the campaign was targeting children and adolescents. In its own campaign Resposta never uses the phrase “sex tourism” because of one of its local meanings, potentially understood as sex between consenting adults in tourism. The head of Resposta, Ana Paula Felizardo, explains during an interview conducted with me in her office, in mid-February 2008: “our campaign is always with a focus on sexual exploitation.” For her, “the municipal campaign is completely wrong, that campaign and the guy with a condom [on his head]! Our relationship with the municipality has turned bad because we don’t endorse this

<sup>79</sup> Source: @ SECTUR 2007 by permission.

campaign, because it's wrong!" One of the problems, for her, is the confusing message sent by the campaign: "the logic is that the condom does not cover the shame in the face. In so doing, it stigmatizes the condom which is a struggle of the AIDS and HIV movement." Thus, she affirms "our campaign is always with a focus on sexual exploitation." For Felizardo, the campaign subverted the fight against child sex tourism into a crusade against commercial sex between consenting adults, while also undermining the efforts of the AIDS movement in Brazil to normalize condom use. In short, the campaign stigmatizes condom use and commercial sex, rather than condemning the sexual exploitation of minors.



Figure 9: Ad from the City Campaign: "If you're here after sex tourism, get your bags and go back home"(Sources: SECTUR)<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Source: @ SECTUR 2007 by permission.

The state was not alone in this conflation between prostitution and the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in the aftermath of the *Globo* media coverage. Several associations of local residents and business owners along with NGOs became more active in their denunciations of “sex tourism” in the aftermath of the *Globo* media coverage. In November of that year, local residents and activists from different NGOs were involved in a campaign to eradicate sex tourism in Natal, marching in the streets of Ponta Negra with the notable symbol of sex tourism that introduces this chapter: a 2-meter sculpture of a white phallus called the “Big White Penis” (Diário de Natal 2006). The march targeted the bars, nightclubs, and restaurants seen as fostering encounters between Brazilian women and foreigners. Yet many of the activists and groups involved conflated sex tourism with the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, as this conversation with Danúbio, founder of the NGO *Pau e Lata* which co-organized the march reveals:

D: Our focus was sex tourism, targeting child abuse.

ME: The march was not against prostitution?

D: No, it was [against prostitution] yes. It was two issues. It was against sex tourism. And inside sex tourism, we focused specifically on the involvement of children and adolescents.

This comment reveals the extent to which local actors connect indiscriminately child exploitation with prostitution and sex tourism. The street demonstration thus made strategic use of the repudiation inspired by the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism to legitimate opposition to “sex tourism”. In other words, it allowed combating adult prostitution without making this explicit.

By using the symbol of a giant white penis, the street protest reinforced the notion of foreigners as the bad guys exploiting local women and equated sex tourism with sexual violence. The giant white phallus – as a racial, gendered, national, and sexual symbol – also expressed many anxieties and tensions about the massive presence of white European and North American tourists in Natal. Standing for imperialism, colonialism, globalization and (sex) tourism, the phallic sculpture allowed the inhabitants of Natal to rally against a common, easily identifiable enemy. Thus, the march served as a catalyst to protest against the evils of foreign (mostly western) tourism, seen as a form of neo-colonialism, especially since many western foreigners now own restaurants, bars, nightclubs, apartments, condominiums, and houses in Ponta Negra. The landscape has thus drastically changed in the last decades due to tourism development. Danúbio, founder of *Pau e Lata* expresses his opposition to sex tourism as being inherent to his opposition to tourism:

In my opinion, sex tourism is unfortunately inherent to whichever form of tourism. This is a very specific opinion of mine, but I haven't seen yet any form of tourism that doesn't result in this. In fact, deep down I think I'm against tourism, even [in the case of] those traveling with all the good intentions to know [other places]. The examples until today show that it's almost never positive for the one visited.

The fact that sex tourism is the particular concern of his movement here underscores anxieties about sex, power, and sovereignty. In effect, during the march, as in other interventions against sex tourism in Natal, the exploitation of the land and nature was connected, even conflated, with the sexual exploitation of Brazilian women. As one street protester, poet, and visual artist Pedro Grilo, explains to one local newspaper: “I’m in solidarity with the common good, refusing the ambitious and insensitive land

speculation. I take revenge in my canvas, where Ponta Negra only has palm trees.

Previously, Ponta Negra was such a bucolic scenery” (Diário de Natal 2006: 8). Activists during the street protest thus rallied to fight prostitution as well as mass tourism, its many side effects and new political space, especially since feminists also join in the campaigns.

### **Doing Good for Women? Feminisms and the Campaigns against Sex Tourism**

Beyond the campaigns in Natal, different organizations also gathered together regularly at the municipal, regional, and state level to discuss ways of combating sex tourism. In one such meeting in which I participated during the *Forum Social Nordeste*<sup>81</sup> held in Salvador in August 2007, a feminist organization based in Recife (*Coletivo Mulher Vida*) organized a session called “ Sex Tourism, Traffic, and Immigration: What do we have to do with this?”<sup>82</sup> in which several feminist organizations and NGOs from Natal took part. In this session, seamless links between pornography, human trafficking, violence, and sex tourism were made, as if all of these were the same phenomenon, thus further entrenching the assumptions that all paid sex is a form of violence against women, trafficking is the same as migration (for sex), and sex tourism is inevitably a form of sexual exploitation. The question of women’s agency was at the centre of the discussion at the meeting. Prostitution, several feminist activists iterated repeatedly, is a form of *vício* (addiction, vice). Thus, if women engage in sex tourism it is because they are enslaved by Brazilian consumer society and driven to make “easy money” to purchase consumer goods. Furthermore, feminist activists at the

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<sup>81</sup> As I explained in the introduction, the *Forum Social Nordeste* is a mini-version of the World Social Forum; it is a regional encounter with different organizations involved in a wide range of social movements in the Northeast of Brazil.

<sup>82</sup> This is also the title of one of their publications, see Coletivo Mulher Vida (2003).



meeting described women in sex tourism as dupes believing that a “Prince Charming” (the foreign tourist) would eventually save them, and portrayed women as unable to make informed choices due to their economic position and lack of education. The notion of *vício* was invoked to explain the reasons why so many women engaged in commercial sex with foreigners – why else would they, if it necessarily harms them?

These visions are well captured in the writings of organizations in the region that serve as both models and inspiration for other NGOs active in Natal. In one of these publications, by the Coletivo Mulher Vida, which organized the session in Salvador, women engaging in sex tourism are depicted as part of a form of human trafficking and referred to as “*meninas-mulheres*” or “girl-women” (2003:12). The term “*meninas-mulheres*” not only conflates adult women with adolescent girls or children but also conveys the idea that these women are not fully capable of making their own decisions like other grownups. In another publication by feminist activist Jacqueline de Souza Leite from the organization CHAME, based in Salvador, sex tourism is described in the following manner, echoing the discussion in the session:

By no means sex tourism gives value to women or transforms their social situation. It rather contributes to the denigration of their image and the reproduction of sexist and chauvinistic relationships, in addition to racist ideologies (...)

[It] has had a bad impact on the communities where tourist complexes are built, producing, among the young women, a desire for objects they receive as gifts. [This] feeds false dreams of changing their lives and getting material things easily. In a similar way, it feeds, in their circles of friends and relatives, patterns of behaviours and dreams of consumption inaccessible for their own class – a perverse way to be inserted into the consumer society (2003: 68).

From this perspective,<sup>83</sup> sex tourism is necessarily harmful because it is premised on the (sexual, racial) objectification of women. Furthermore, it creates dependence on goods these women and their relatives should not wish for because these are “inaccessible for their own class.” In other words, only those of the proper class may fully participate in the consumer society. While Leite’s critique of sex tourism is potentially cogent for its analysis of class inequality and commodity fetishism, it remains problematic for its essentialist assumption about sex tourism. It is indeed difficult to engage with questions of coercion and consent in sex tourism, as these are complex and not easily answered issues. Indeed, for Leite, exploitation occurs when women are not paid for their sexual (and other) services. As she told Williams, “the sex industry is a legitimate industry,” the exploitation occurs when relationships are ambiguous, “when he dates” (2010: 129) and expects to have sex, visit the city safely, and have a girlfriend for his stay without paying. The assumption is that western tourists take advantage of women’s vulnerable position – a valid, crucial concern, but one that raises several questions regarding what constitutes exploitation<sup>84</sup> (Indeed, the issue is how to articulate a critique of sex tourism that does not reduce poor, racialized women to what Anne McClintock aptly describes as reductive images of “sluts and slave dolls” (1993: 7) or “too poor, too victimized, and too prone to false consciousness to be able to represent themselves objectively” (1993: 7). In the words of Williams (2010: 130-131):

How can researchers, or NGO activists for that matter, who are so far removed from the daily harsh realities that our informants must endure, evaluate if it is

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<sup>83</sup> It should be noted that the feminist perspectives that prevailed in these various meetings and promoted by NGOs organizations are not the only feminist positions existing on sex tourism in Brazil. There are many “feminisms” indeed and a wide range of perspectives on sex tourism in both feminist scholarship and activism in Brazil; see Piscitelli (2007; 2004a; 2004b; 1996) for her rich exploration of this complex universe which provides insights beyond the victimisation/liberation debate.

<sup>84</sup> See O’Connell Davidson (2010) on the problematic distinction between inappropriate/appropriate exploitation in the context of trafficking.

“less exploitative” to receive anywhere from \$R30 to US\$300 in cash payment for the sale of sexual services, or gifts such as new clothes, a month’s rent, airfare, or dinner at a fancy restaurant to which they could never have access to if it were not for their *intimate associations* with seemingly moneyed foreigners? This is particularly challenging when faced [with] the prostitutes’ articulations of the ways in which they are exploited that have nothing to do with the act of selling sex – to tourists or locals – but rather are ramifications of the criminalization of sex work (even though it is technically legal).

This conception of women as enslaved by consumer society prevents a critical analysis of the ways in which Brazilian women are playing necessary roles in foreign tourism and negotiate their quest for social mobility through one of the few means available to them. While concerns for the protection of women against potentially exploitative men are not completely ill-founded, the lack of a sustained critique of state economic policies results in the targeting of women as individuals making naïve, wrong choices because passively hoping for a prince charming who will save them. In this way, the state economic policies favouring mass tourism development at the expense of other sectors remain unchallenged, and black, mixed-race low-income women are singled-out as the problem.

There are few exceptions to this trend, including, for instance, the feminist organization Coletivo Leila Diniz which provides a sound critique of the ways in which sex tourism is often talked about in Natal, as Jolúzia Batista, a member of the collective, puts it in a local monthly newspaper dedicated to the issues of the sexual exploitation of minors: “feminism as an emancipatory movement advocates that all women have equal opportunities to be protagonists of their own life. We do not pretend to ‘save’ women as advocated by the institutional discourse” (2007:2). Rather, the collective questions the role of social inequality in fostering sex tourism, including “differentiated access and opportunities between men and women, concentration of wealth, [government]

corruption and the racial question” (2007:2). Ultimately, Batista asks: “where and what are the opportunities for these young women?” While the organization does not specifically work on the theme of sex tourism, it is often involved in public forums, academic talks and municipal or regional meetings where sex tourism is discussed. Thus the collective prefers to target state policies and focuses on the development of social and economic rights for women, rather than seeking to ‘save’ or stop the women from taking part in sex tourism. Yet its voice is rather marginalized in Natal, and other groups rarely take seriously its concerns over state development policies and inequalities, leading to rescuing campaigns.

In Natal, claims of protecting women against exploitation (*exploração*) by foreigners were invoked by various actors – not exclusively feminist ones – and appropriated for all sort of ends. Notions of rescuing women have become the rationale for intrusive police interventions by state and non-state actors. These measures deeply affected poor, mixed-race or black women in Ponta Negra for their perceived and presumed association with the sex trade. Indeed, following one of the raids during the Operation Free Ponta Negra, Luís Fernando Ayres, regional chief executive of the federal police, declared in one of the local newspapers that “sex tourism is malevolent because there are people who earn money by exploiting women, by exploiting the human needs of these women. These women didn’t find a job, they didn’t find anything in the social area, the only thing they envision is being a garota de programa” (Tribuna do Norte 2006b). According to his logic, it was thus the police responsibility to invade the beaches, bars, and restaurants of Ponta Negra in order to protect women from the foreigners exploiting them. Albeit not everybody agreed with the massive intervention from the police, several

actors from the social sector did collude in their vision that black, mixed-race, low-income women were the victims of bad foreigners seeking to exploit them, and thus, in need of protection.

This was the case of Danúbio, from Pau e Lata (which co-organized the street march). Indeed, he thought that university-educated women could engage in commercial sex because they could *opt* for this, while poor, mixed-race or black women from the periphery should be rescued because they did not have other options. Danúbio is worth quoting at length as his views reflect a widespread understanding of whose bodies in Ponta Negra were seen as vulnerable and in need of rescue intervention:

I'm not against any type of prostitution. I mean, as long as you're an adult and as long as you opt for this. I've met some women who are university students, aware of this. And who have found a good way to make money, and even some of them that I've talked to, they like it (...). The question is: what makes you become a prostitute? (...) It's visible, you can recognize the majority of the girls who are from here, looking for clients in the street. I identify them because of my work (...) in Feliz Camarão, in the *Zona Norte*.<sup>85</sup> So why is it that they all come from these neighbourhoods? It's because there's a whole system of offer set up, and they think they are going to make good money, oh "make good money, make good money, make good money!" And they are always invested in the idea of leaving Brazil: "and it's going to be everything that I want, to live with a foreigner, it's everything that I want" (...) Anyway, it's still very strong, this dream of getting away from Brazil. Twenty years ago, in the Northeast, the dream was to go to São Paulo and then many people went. (...) And this dream continued, but now due to globalization, it's for foreign countries. So the prospect of many girls is to go live in Europe or the United States to get to know a foreigner, get along well with him, love him, and marry, etc, etc. It's real, and it's not real! She's a big mule (*mula*). So it's all set up for them to think this way and while the prince does not show up, they [continue] to frequent [the foreign men].

In other words, female (white) middle class university students can prostitute themselves, whereas (black or mixed-race) women from the impoverished periphery of

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<sup>85</sup> The city of Natal is divided into the *Zona Norte* (North zone) and *Zona Sul*, (South zone) a division that marks a contrast between the center in the *Zona Sul* (administrative, urban, modern, where the university, NGOs, government offices, shopping malls are located –the domain of the middle and upper class) and the periphery in the *Zona Norte* (the outskirts of the city with poor infrastructure, services, roads, housing, sanitation, and where the majority of the impoverished reside).

the city are too naïve to see the “big lie”, and only hopeful of finding a “prince”. In this comment, Danúbio reveals his fears that these women could be at risk of exploitation when leaving the nation, pointing to another spatial dimension of the fight against sex tourism. In Natal, notions of “doing good for women” are often times invoked in the many campaigns. Yet, as Williams argues: “categories such as gender, race, age, and sexuality inform who is seen as in need (or is worthy) of intervention, protection, and rescue from the state or civil society” (2010: 191). This is particularly significant in the case of Natal, as we shall now see.

### **Spatial Tensions in the City of Pleasure**

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, by 2000, Natal was considered a city of pleasure for middle class leisure and tourism, and Ponta Negra, seen as its “postcard” (Lopes Júnior 2000: 56). The advent of mass tourism following the inauguration of Natal’s international airport brought important transformations to the city, including the development of new infrastructure, changes in Ponta Negra’s landscape, and the presence of a new phenomenon: sex tourism. The neighbourhood was drastically transformed as bars, nightclubs, and restaurants owned by foreigners, and often times catering to tourists and Brazilian women, came to sit next to locally owned business frequented by a local middle class, including university students, young professionals, and business owners.

When I conducted fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, recent bar closings by the beach resulting from the campaigns against sex tourism had further altered the locality. The nightlife had moved up the hills into the Alto de Ponta Negra, a space that until the arrival

of mass tourism was the domain of young professionals, university students, and the middle class. It became, as one journalist put it, “infested (*infestada*) with this forbidden diversion” (O POTI –Diário de Natal 2006) – the forbidden diversion referring to the gringos and garotas seeking to meet one another in the local bars and restaurants. The presence of gringo and garotas thus disturbs what the local middle class see as their space. For them, sex tourism is a catalyst for other problems, including criminality, traffic in women, and the overall decadence of the neighbourhood.

As the former privileged space of the middle class in Natal, the presence of dark-skinned, young, working-class Brazilian women, in addition to tourists in Ponta Negra, deeply transformed this social space. During an interview in May 2008, Manolo, the owner of one of the first pubs to open in the Alto de Ponta Negra explained that tourism affected his targeted clientele and the neighbourhood. Initially only the (white) upper class used to frequent his bar. It was, as he said, those with money, “who spend more and are well-behaved (*mais comportado*)” who represented his ideal clientele:

It has changed a lot with time. When there was only [this] pub in this street, the public was more upper class (*classe A*): the rich of the city frequented this place. After that then the middle class (*classe B*) came too and it remained like this for about six years I think, just this public. When foreign tourism began so too sex tourism began and people from Natal started to pull away and the public changed. From then on the upper class (*classe A*) left completely, with the middle and lower classes (*classe B, C*) and tourists remaining.

For local business owners like Manolo and for members of the middle class, the presence of gringos and garotas is perceived as an invasion of *their* space. This sense of invasion and loss of spatial privileges is well captured with the project of privatization of the beach by the association AR de Ponta Negra – an association dedicated to promote the interests of businesses operating by Ponta Negra beach. This project of privatization

was only in its initial design when I interviewed its creator, Nelson Melo, the president of AR de Ponta Negra. I interviewed him in his home, one of the five houses left by the beach, hidden behind a pharmacy that used to be his parents' summerhouse. From the mid-70s on, Nelson frequented Ponta Negra with his parents, eventually building his own house there in 2001. He saw the beach changing, for better and for worse. He welcomed the new city regulation of 2000, which resulted in the closure of the *barracas*, or the improvised kiosks in poor conditions serving food and drinks by the beach, operated by the local fishermen from the working class *Vila*.<sup>86</sup> New kiosks regulated by the city and responding to sanitary regulation replaced the old *barracas*. Nelson enjoyed this change as well as the new sidewalk built in 2000, making the beach more accessible to the local middle class. Then, however, things began to deteriorate according to him: "When the *barracas* were out, the beach was all-pretty. Then with little time people from the *Vila* made pressures to come back, they didn't have kiosks but they wanted a space to be able to work, and they began to frequent [the beach]." As a result of a lack of space, people from the *Vila* began selling along the sidewalk or by the beach. Thus, as Nelson sees it, "this facilitates [sex tourism]. When the prostitutes came with their *namorados* they mixed with what was already there, the environment was already conducive to this. If the beach had continued to be pretty, organized, and safe, this would not have happened."

For Nelson, the problems have a lot to do with the beach's informal economy, where vendors offer all sorts of products, from food and drinks to sun creams, souvenirs, or CDs. It is this informal economy, for him, that fostered sex tourism in Ponta Negra:

The environment has a lot to do with this. I mean sex tourism did not just develop on its own. It's because the ambience was already slightly deteriorated. And now we're working hard to try to reverse all this. We're working on a project to

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<sup>86</sup> The *Vila* refers to the oldest and poorest part of Ponta Negra, and is located behind the Morro do Careca.



completely change the street [by the beach], to transform it into a wide promenade. Our idea is that it would become like a shopping mall, like a large public stroll. Beautiful, interesting, with nice shops (...), a cool thing! Safer, because it's going to be something private. The street will be public, of course, but the security, cleaning, and organization will be private.

In his project, in addition to banning the use of sound systems to sell CDs (it is already illegal but the law is not applied), all food products and drinks would have to be sold by authorized restaurants along the street. His goal was not only to prevent sex tourism, but also to ensure the end of the informal economy by the local working class:

My idea is not only [related to] the question of tourism, [it's also for] the people of Natal to have a good place to go, because today people in Natal don't have an area of good quality they frequent. There's none. It was Ponta Negra, and it's no longer. So the idea is that it would return and be a definitive thing, you know, of good quality, and that the people from Natal, the middle class, would come back to frequent it. Because there's no public space in Natal for the middle class. There are the shopping malls, but outside of them, there are no other places. There was, already, there was this tendency, and I want it to come back today.

In other words, it was a proposal for gentrification, allowing the return of the middle class in *their* space (Ross 2010), not only invaded by gringos and garotas, but by the *ambulante*, the itinerant sellers trying to make money from tourism using the informal economy. This project has yet to materialise, but it hints at the class tension exacerbated by sex tourism, and the sense of spatial threat members of the middle class experience generated by the visible presence of the 'lower' classes in a middle class space. Garotas de programa have thus come to embody the perverse effects of mass tourism and to signal the degeneracy of this middle class space.

The work of James Holston (2008)<sup>87</sup> on civic participation in Brazil provides an important conceptual framework to think about the spatial inscriptions of these

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<sup>87</sup> In his work on civic participation in São Paulo, Holston (2008) documents how spatial practices in apartment buildings contribute to enforcing a sense of privilege and deference among the middle class and

campaigns. Holston documents historically and ethnographically “differentiated citizenship” notorious to Brazil’s democracy, a citizenship he describes as “universally inclusive in membership but massively inegalitarian in the distribution of rights and resources” (2008: 284). He also analyses the exercise of “insurgent citizenship” by those who occupy the margins and who, to paraphrase him, “disrupt the differentiated” (2008: 275) through spatial struggles. As a formerly privileged space of the middle class, Ponta Negra has become particularly contentious with the advent of sex tourism; the presence of mixed-race/black and poor women engaging in sex tourism disrupts notions of belonging and civility for the middle class accustomed to spatial exclusivity. Holston’s analysis is particularly useful to think about the tension between the middle class in Natal accustomed to spatial exclusivity and the *garotas de programa* disrupting these privileges.

The tensions over space were extremely palpable when I conducted fieldwork. In the Alto de Ponta Negra, it was possible to find, side-by-side, bars catering to very different clienteles, creating tensions. Indeed, whereas some business owners sought to benefit from, or even foster, “sex tourism” (by offering cheap entry fee or free drinks to women) other commercial ventures claimed to repudiate it. Diverse restaurants and clubs in the area had thus begun to post signs opposing sex tourism.<sup>88</sup> Other establishments have adopted practices meant to reduce their undesirable clientele and target their privileged one, as Manolo the owner of one of the first pubs to open in the area explains:

We have a special client card for any resident of Natal affiliated with a business or going to university. If you don’t have this card, the price to enter is very

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elites, as different entrances and elevators form part of the design of apartment buildings. While this unique spatial practice was intended to differentiate between owners and their domestic workers, service providers or staff, recent shifts produced new proximities and anxieties as owners and their employees are brought into the same elevators and entrances doors. These new proximities result in spatial struggle disrupting those who occupy privileged positions.

<sup>88</sup> In this case, sex tourism usually refers to prostitution and not to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism.

expensive. (...). The regular entry price without any discount is 40 reais. It's an expensive price to get in, so in this way we stop people we don't want to come in. It's not that we stop them from entering but we make it more difficult (...). Some people, some of the girls who are involved in sex tourism pay 40 reais but it's rare, so we are able to maintain the level in this way.

Several other business owners catering to the elite and middle class echoed Manolo's vision. Some of them came together to form the association AME Ponta with the aim, as the president of the association, Eduardo Bagnolli, explained to me during an interview in May 2008, of fighting the "problems of violence, sex tourism and pollution." Originally from São Paulo, Eduardo opened a hotel with a restaurant in what remains a quiet area of Ponta Negra, where the most expensive hotels are situated. Much like Manolo, Eduardo found the change in Ponta Negra since the advent of mass tourism upsetting and drastic. While the campaign of AME Ponta Negra is mostly against mass tourism and its environmental consequences, sex tourism occupies a significant matter of concern for the association – a problem seen as deriving from the overall "degenerate" state of Ponta Negra. Outside the door of this hotel and restaurant, a sign opposing sex tourism is visible (see Figure 10 and 11). Eduardo explained his strategy to prevent the occurrence of sex tourism inside his hotel and restaurant:

E: If he [a tourist] stays in the Manary, and goes on a buggy tour, there is no chance to see [prostitution] but if he goes outside, he'll see it there. But in theory, you can't really promote this, here it's a "prostituta free"<sup>89</sup> zone. You can't do this.

ME: What do you do then, to distinguish...

E: On our website, we explicitly state... we have it written there as a rule that we repudiate any form of sex tourism. If you come here and go to the reception desk, or if you come to the restaurant, which is open to the public, it's written there, "no sex tourism."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Original expression used as such, in both Portuguese and English.

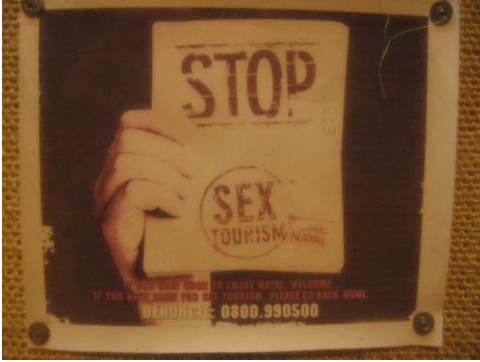
<sup>90</sup> He used the expression "No Sex Tourism" in English.

ME: And meaning any form of sex tourism?

E: Any form: adults, children. So much that here in the Manary, you can come here at any time, you'll never see a prostitute inside here. Because they know we don't let them in. There is someone outside that will say: "do you have a reservation? You don't, well it's all booked today". (...). If someone comes here with a prostitute, we don't let her in, in any way. (...) We even had some fights, and had to call the police. (...) Given it's not a crime. Here [in this restaurant] it's forbidden to get in with a mini-skirt. In Fortaleza, owners and managers of hotels who refused to permit prostitutes were sued in court because there is always a lawyer bad enough to say "you have rights, you are black (...) or you are Indian, they did not let you in due to racial discrimination, we have to file a suit against the hotel"



Figure 10: The Entry of Restaurant in Ponta Negra (photo by author)



**Figure 11: Enlarged Section of Figure 10**

Manolo also explains how he prevents some women from entering his pub when suspecting they are *garotas de programa*, usually identifying them by their race, class, clothes, and body language:

We cannot say “you can’t enter” to discriminate against prostitutes, Blacks. It’s a serious infraction, and it could lead to an expensive trial. I was on trial already as some people accused me [of discrimination] because I didn’t let them in because they were wearing short skirts. I didn’t want to say that they were *putas* (whores), but I said their skirts were too short, and they sued me. Several times it happened to me but each time I won. But we prevent them from entering with the price. If they look like a prostitute, or if they are foreigners we don’t like, we charge the full price of 40 reais.

The use of “sex tourism” – purposefully left undefined by these business owners – gave legitimacy to backlash against prostitution.

Several of the women I interviewed who self-identified as *garotas* experienced not being allowed inside a bar in Ponta Negra – usually under the pretext of what they were wearing. Yet they are well aware of the underlying meaning of such practices and often expressed their critical view of them. As Perla explained to me during an interview in December 2007, speaking about one of the bars that denied her entry because she was wearing a mini-skirt:

There, it’s all *garotas de programa* disguised. Because there are a lot of university students, they come there to work [as *garotas*] but they are more discrete. They

don't go directly to the Água de Coco they go to the Samba,<sup>91</sup> but I see them only with foreigners. Anyway so I talked with the owner of the Samba. There was a foreign woman with a short skirt, when she was dancing, you could see her underwear. I told her "we can't get in, but foreign women can come in, dance, show off and expose their underwear, and you say nothing!"

As Perla was aware, the reason for not letting her in the Samba had nothing to do with her skirt, and everything to do with her race, class, and sexuality. She also referred to the Brazilian women frequenting this bar sarcastically as "*filha de papai*"<sup>92</sup> who, according to her, pretend not to be prostitutes "many of them say 'oh, I'm not a whore', but they go to the shopping mall [with a foreigner] and buy a pair of shoes for 150 reais". Perla thus hinted at one crucial stigma. In Natal, a woman who is identified as *morena* (like Perla) or as black and found in the company of a tourist is almost automatically seen as a prostitute, whereas white, middle class women are not. The following comments by Ana Paula, from the NGO Resposta, also suggests a similar process of racial discrimination: "If you see a Black person whose appearance, let's say, indicates some poverty with a white man who may also be poor but who is white, everybody will say that it's prostitution. Who reinforces this discourse? I'll help you here: the campaign from the public authorities!"

The tensions over race, class, sexuality, and proper respectability were also manifested in the minutiae of everyday life. In the restaurants, bars, nightclubs and at the beach, the fight against sex tourism translated into different practices of discrimination against black or mixed race women dating and/or engaging in commercial sex with foreigners. During my fieldwork, I witnessed instances of these exclusionary practices.

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<sup>91</sup> The Água de Coco is a bar associated almost exclusively with *garotas* and *gringos* whereas the Samba has a more varied clientele.

<sup>92</sup> Literally, daddy's daughter, meaning a woman from the middle or upper class.

Upon hearing about the topic of my research, my landlord, a Brazilian woman whose (white) daughter was dating an Italian, asked me never to bring “one of these women here.” She then added that not long ago, members of the Italian mafia had been arrested in Natal, making an indiscriminate connection between criminality and women engaging in commercial sex with foreigners. Meanwhile, my roommate, a Swedish woman working for an NGO active in the struggle against the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, requested that there be “no prostitutes” at home, and when I suggested that she come with me to my fieldwork, she refused to accompany me to the bars catering to *garotas de programa*, claiming she would feel too disgusted in such an environment. On more than one occasion, waiters and customers gazed disapprovingly at locally known *garotas de programa* who walked into bars full of university students and young professionals. On my last night out in the field, I invited friends from different backgrounds (including women engaging in commercial sex) into a small bar catering to a mixed clientele. The night was particularly tense for my middle class friends dating foreigners – Clara, a 25-year-old lawyer, dating an Italian who owned a hostel, and my neighbour, Lisa, a former hairdresser dating a French man working in real estate. I had previously noticed how both women sought to distinguish themselves from *garotas de programa* and had heard several discriminatory comments including “*puta um dia, puta pra sempre*” (whore one day, whore forever), by Clara, who explained that putas could not be honest nor ever truly in love, and thus were self-interested. On this last night, things got particularly heated: hostile looks were exchanged, and both Clara and Lisa refused to speak to women deemed *garotas*. Eventually, Lisa, whose French partner had recently cheated on her with a local sex worker, declared “I hate this race”, leaving me on

my final night with a lasting taste of the tensions generated by the presence of black and mixed-race women in spaces previously frequented exclusively by the local, predominantly white, middle class. This is thus the political field of power in which the Brazilian women I write about here act, where notions of race, class, and sexuality come to define spatial belonging and exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

What upsets the moral codes in Ponta Negra has a lot to do with race, class, power, and sexuality. There is an important tension generated by the presence of women seen as “out of place” in Ponta Negra because of their transgressive use of sexuality and because they disturb local, spatialized hierarchies. In effect, young, dark-skinned, poor Brazilian women now frequent the same neighbourhood, sometimes the same restaurants, bars, and nightclubs as the (predominantly) white middle class. The campaigns against sex tourism are thus the expression of other anxieties about the place of poor, black or mixed-race women. Furthermore, the rapid changes following mass tourism brought socio-spatial transformations crucial to understanding the significance of the massive opposition to sex tourism. Many inhabitants of Natal resent the presence of western tourists and the consequences of mass tourism. Yet the focus on sex tourism prevents a critique of the model of economic development favoured by the state and the inequalities it (re)inscribes, as it puts the blame on the individuals. The opposition to sex tourism is thus the channel through which anxieties over the threat of mass tourism, globalization, neo-colonialism, and national sovereignty are also articulated.



In this chapter, I have described the complex political interests that collude in the fight against sex tourism in Natal, and I hope that by exposing these, it becomes possible to disrupt narratives that leave unquestioned the “good” involved in these campaigns against sex tourism. Inspired by the work of scholars of sex work tracing the geography of prostitution, I have begun to expose the spatial tensions and complex sets of political interests allowing for the creation of troubling alliances between the state, civil society, and the private sector. The conflation of sex tourism with the exploitation of children and the traffic in women justifies intrusive interventions by the police, as well as by other state and non-state actors, in the name of rescuing women (and children). Yet, these interventions are often times directed at foreigners and construed as anti-imperialist discourses, hinting at the fear in foreign ‘investments’ – not only in terms of land, capital, or property – but also in terms of the nation’s women (even if these women are impoverished and/or stigmatized).

By exposing the contradictions in these campaigns, my hope is to begin unravelling the fault lines in these relations of domination, in order to expose the power of those invested in defining oppression and acting upon it. In this project, I am aware of my own limits, as I re-present the interests of these women. Indeed, the question of who can speak for whom is a highly contested and problematic one. As Agustín aptly suggests: “A great deal has been written about the need to bring out voices that are silenced or marginalised, but there are dangers when, as Gayatri Spivak argues, it is assumed that everyone can ‘speak’ in the same way.” (2007: 175). And indeed, in the context of sex tourism in Natal, everyone cannot ‘speak’ in the same way. For one thing, the Brazilian women involved in commercial sex with tourists in Natal are not invested in

the production of knowledge about themselves, nor are they involved in the many public discussions and debates on sex tourism. Unlike sex workers in the rest of the city and country, they do not form part of any association,<sup>93</sup> nor do they seek to organize as “workers” or defend their rights or counter the stigma attached to commercial sex with tourists. In short, they do not speak in the same way as the dominant social actors in Natal. By no means outside of the production of knowledge about sex tourism, I am aware that my engagement is, after all, just one possible articulation among a new political sphere of debates and knowledge and thus open to challenge.

In the next chapter, I turn to the complex ways in which Brazilian women imagine foreign, Western men. I read their aspirations to form relationships with foreigners as an expression of their recognition of the status and capital Western foreigners represent. Their engagements with foreigners are thus far more complex and creative than the victimizing accounts and rescue discourse of the campaigns against sex tourism would lead us to think. As I discuss in the next chapter, foreigners, too, are engaged in practices that disrupt common depictions of “pervert sex tourists” invoked by the state campaigns against sex tourism in Natal.

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<sup>93</sup> According to Maria de Andrade, the head of the local association of sex workers ASPRO-RN, women in Ponta Negra are not interested in joining the association as they make a distinction between servicing local men (which they often times despised) and servicing foreigners. None of the women I interviewed identified with the association as discussed further in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 4: ‘Gringo, but not Macho’: Intimate Others, (Paid) Sex and the Conquest

*“I much prefer coming to Brazil five times a year than having a girlfriend in Portugal”, Paulo explained as we were chatting in one of Ponta Negra’s main nightclubs. Paulo, a Portuguese man in his late twenties, was on his second short trip to Natal. He did not like dating in Portugal, because, as he said: “It’s very complicated to have sex with a Portuguese woman: it’s dinner, then cinema, then shopping. And then, she’s tired and she wants to go home. The Brazilian woman, she’s different, she gives to a man what he wants: first, the caring; second, the affection, and third, the sex.” As Paulo was telling me this, several women were dancing on the counter of the bar, in a fashion reminiscent of rap videos, with a lot of hip shaking and sensual movements. Pointing to the women dancing, Paulo said: “this would never happen in Portugal, a place like here. It’s because women in Europe are cold, well, with the exception of the French and Spanish women.” When one of his friends introduced a Brazilian woman to him, she took his hand, and Paulo turned to me saying: “a woman in Portugal would never do this. The Brazilian woman, she’s really hot and friendly. It’s the climate, you know!” As a result, he continued, “sex is easier in Brazil.” When I said to him, “but I thought you have to pay for sex here,” implying that it was not that easy to have sex with Brazilian women in Ponta Negra, he replied, “it’s not paying, it’s helping.” Having probed the idea further, I later realized that this was an important distinction; one crucial to his own sense of conquest, manliness, and superiority, as a (white)<sup>94</sup> European foreigner in Natal.*

*Excerpt adapted from my field notes, September 19<sup>th</sup> 2007*

In her influential work on sex tourism in the Caribbean, Kamala Kempadoo proposes that “the exoticization of the Third World ‘other’ is as equally important as economic factors in positioning women in sex work” (Kempadoo 1998:10). The connections between imperial representations of sexualized otherness and the production of sites and sights of sex tourism have been widely documented, especially in the context of the Caribbean (Brennan 2004; Gregory 2007; 2003 Kempadoo 2004; 1999; 1998; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 2005; Padilla 2007), but also elsewhere, including Brazil (Piscitelli 2007b; 2004; Veissière 2007; Williams 2010). In his compelling ethnography of the global political economy and its local ramifications in the

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<sup>94</sup> Although Europeans from the Mediterranean region are sometimes considered non-whites (especially in North America) in Natal they are commonly seen as white Europeans. Notions of who is seen as white (and non-white) shift depending on location; here, whiteness is closely associated with the European continent.

Dominican Republic, Steven Gregory (2007; 2003) also draws on these connections but turns to what has remained less theorized in scholarly analyses of sex tourism, namely the process whereby Western identities are also refashioned in sex tourism. More specifically, Gregory explores what he terms “imperial masculinity” – a form of hetero-normative masculinity he observed in the Dominican Republic among tourists from North America and Europe. These tourists, Gregory argues, had traveled “in search of women over whom they could exercise sexual and domestic discipline as potential husbands, ‘boyfriends’, or as clients in the sex tourism industry” (2007: 133). According to him, this imperial masculinity is a form of “practiced ideology” (2007: 135) encompassing discursive practices that privilege, support, and naturalize white, Western male power.

In this chapter, I draw on Gregory’s arguments to explore what I call “gringo masculinity”. My use of the term *gringo*, rather than imperial, points to the historically grounded yet dynamic and dialogical construction of the relations between the North and Latin America (see Adams 1999; Nelson 1999; Veissière forthcoming). Like the term ‘imperial’, *gringo* acknowledges the relations of power embedded in the history of colonialism, imperialism, and conquest, while also including perspectives from Latin America. In this way the term *gringo* allows for an examination of forms of collective masculinity produced from the perspective of Brazilians in Natal that go beyond monolithic understandings of imperialism. The term *gringo* indeed reflects the ways in which Brazilians in Ponta Negra commonly refer to foreigners, especially (white)

European tourists<sup>95</sup> and captures the ways in which these men are spoken about and understood in the local (female) imagination.

Similar to how Gregory describes the context of Boca Chica in the Dominican Republic, in Ponta Negra, foreign men from Europe and North America also seek to affirm their power over women they exoticized and eroticized as “other”. Yet there is more than imperialism at work in the forms of collective, Western masculinity enacted in Ponta Negra. In addition to the exoticization/eroticization of Brazilian women, many foreign men also seek intimate relationships that affirm their desirability as men and ideally transcend commercial exchanges of sex for money. They seek what as come to be popularly known as the “girlfriend experience” a form of commercial sex that is on the rise, and that involves money, but also intimacy and authenticity (Bernstein 2007). There is thus a tension between othering (an erotic/exotic other) and intimacy (with a woman) suggesting far more diversity than what the typical accounts of “sex tourists” allow for. In the opening vignette, Paulo’s comments hint at another tension foreign men commonly experience, with the distinction he makes between *paying* and *helping*, which allows him to maintain his sense of desirability and sexual conquest while paying for sex. Given that foreign men imagine Ponta Negra as full of readily available women sexually desiring them as men – and not for their money – paying is fraught with several tensions. It is these tensions I examine in this chapter, using the metaphor of the conquest to hint at men’s negotiation of (paid) sex while also seeking to conquer (i.e. seduce) a woman.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Gringo, like other identities, is constructed in articulation with otherness, alterity and difference and thus shifts over time/location. In Natal, due to the massive presence of white European tourists, it is commonly used to refer to them, in addition to North American tourists. Yet in other contexts, gringo refers specifically to US citizens (for instance, at the Mexican border); and while associated with whiteness, may include Afro-Americans or foreigners from other Latin American nations.

<sup>96</sup> It is, however, crucial to begin this discussion of gringo masculinity with an important qualification. My intention is not to elide the differences among the foreigners who come to Ponta Negra, including their age,

In order to grasp the tension that foreign men experience between (paid) sex and the conquest, it is important to begin with the ways in which their masculinity is privileged, celebrated, and idealized in Ponta Negra. In Ponta Negra, local Brazilian women imagine foreign men in distinct, idealized ways; in other words, there is a *co-construction* of mutual desire and idealized otherness at work between gringos and Brazilian women. This chapter begins there, before turning to the ways in which gringos imagine Brazilian women as ideal exotic/erotic others. In the remaining parts of the chapter, I examine the tensions between (paid) sex and the sexual conquest for foreign men who imagine women as endowed with a tropical sexuality and who come to think of themselves as good men ‘helping’ these women. This chapter is thus divided into two main parts: first, I discuss the process of mutual idealization between Brazilian women and foreign men<sup>97</sup>, and then I turn to the tensions foreign men experience in this ‘tropical’ paradise.

### **The Fetish of the Gringo**

*M-E: And did you ever have this dream of marrying a foreigner?*

*Larissa: I do. I do. I have this dream. I don’t know if it’s just a dream or if you from the first world... I don’t know if it’s the majority, but your men, they are gentlemen!*<sup>98</sup> *They*

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nationality, race, class, purpose for travel and so on. My interest is neither in defining an essential “type” – the sex tourist – nor to elaborate a typology of men, such as vanilla versus hardcore sex tourists (Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson 2005). Instead I seek to point to the ways in which foreign men are spoken about in the local (female) imagination and how these foreign male tourists imagine themselves in contrast to Brazilian men. I prefer an approach that explores masculinity rather than typifies men into the category of ‘sex tourists’ as it facilitates a shift in thinking about sex tourism as the sign of psychological or emotional malfunctioning, to the social and cultural constructions of ideal masculinity that are invoked and exercised in Ponta Negra.

<sup>97</sup> This co-construction of idealized otherness is not unique to Brazil or to the universe of sex tourism. For instance, Campbell (2007) coins the expression “cultural seduction” to refer to the cross-border attraction of Mexican women and American men, which relies upon ethnic representations. He proposes that this mutual desire for the ‘other’ is what sustains many encounters across difference, particularly those of sex tourism and international marriage market. Similarly, Constable (2003) documents the mutual attraction and idealized otherness in the cross-border marriages of Filipina and Chinese women and American men.

<sup>98</sup> She used the word *gentlemen* in English.

*have this way to treat a woman. It's so rare for a Brazilian man to act in this way with a woman because they're 'machista'.*

*Tape-recorded interview, December 2007*

Instead of the 'pervert sex tourists' commonly depicted in the media, by the state and some NGOs in Brazil, women in Natal commonly described foreigners as ideal men in contrast to local men. They are, in Larissa's words, "gentlemen": unlike their Brazilian fellows, "they have this way to treat a woman." They are gringos, not machos: their whiteness and 'European-ness' signal wealth, mobility, and quite significantly, a distinctive masculinity. Foreign men, as many women in Ponta Negra would say, treat them like "princesses." Unlike their local Brazilian counterparts, they bring them to middle-class restaurants, buy them fancy drinks in the many bars and nightclubs of Ponta Negra, invite them to their chic hotel rooms, and give them an impressive amount of gifts including flowers, jewellery, sunglasses, bikinis, shoes, clothes, iPods, cell phones, TV sets, DVD players, furniture, and English lessons in private schools. At times, these gifts include a flight ticket to Europe. While the gringo is commonly assessed in material terms, women also say there is more to the gringo than his money.

On countless occasions, Brazilian women in Ponta Negra have told me: "*desisti do brasileiro*" meaning they have abandoned the idea of dating a Brazilian man. Local men, especially *Natalenses* (inhabitants of Natal) are commonly referred to as worthless, unfaithful, ugly, macho, and irresponsible. "*Não presta*" (they suck) was ubiquitous in reference to them, and used as if self-explanatory. Many women also said "*gringo para casar, brasileiro para transar*" (gringo to marry, Brazilian man to have sex with) as a way of explaining the difference between gringos and Brazilian men. They would then

explain that gringos are nicer with women, more faithful when in love, are usually better looking and make more responsible providers than Brazilian men, who are seen as worthwhile only in bed. Mácia, a 32-year-old woman who dated a Norwegian for two years and went to Norway three times before becoming a *garota de programa* explained the difference in these terms: “The brasileiro, he’s great, he’s affectionate (...) when he has money he helps, he makes love wonderfully, but he’ll go with your own sister if she were to let him. So love ends there. The gringo, if he likes you, he only has eyes for you.” Her friend, sitting with us, added, “*Miss Brazil* could appear here, he would not even want her!” Thus Mácia continued, “that counts a lot to me, that counts. The money is good, but it’s not everything.” What matters to her was what she describes as a distinctive, superior masculinity: Mácia thought of gringos as superior to brasileiros – a sense of superiority that was also invoked by foreigners in Ponta Negra, as we shall see.

The idea that foreigners are ‘gringo but not macho’ also expands into the realm of paid sex, where the ‘animalistic nature’ of the Brazilian man is contrasted with the loving, caring, and respectful attitude of the gringo. When I asked Raquel, a 26-year old *garota de programa* whether she saw a difference between foreign and Brazilian men, she replied:

The difference is that Brazilian men are stupid, ignorant, they don’t know how to give value to a woman. They don’t know how to give her the value she deserves. You understand? And the foreigner, no. Many times he pays and he acknowledges she’s doing this out of necessity. He knows that [the money] is very little, that it’s nothing. And he treats you like a princess.

She added, “the Brazilian man, is good only in bed” – a comment that was echoed by several other women, who often contrasted the “animalistic” nature of Brazilian man to the more well-mannered, polite, (*educado*) or gentlemen-like attitude of foreign men.



Flávia, a 24 year-old Brazilian woman, was on a short trip to Natal when I met her. She had spent the last seven years in Italy with her Italian boyfriend, and was in the process of sorting her separation paperwork. When I asked about whether she thought Italian men were different from Brazilian men, she still offered:

Brazilian men are very, very *animais* (animal, wild), they're gigolos. And *estrangeiros* (foreign men) especially Italian men, with whom I married, they're very sweet, very gentle. They treat a woman like a princess, you know, not only in the sense of giving you material things, but also as a person. They give you more value as a person, Brazilian men, [they give you] less [value]. Even in bed, [they are] very different: Brazilian men, they just want to know about sex. They go, they're done, and there: 1, 2, 3, pronto! Italian men, no! Italian men, when in bed, it's more for pleasure, to make love, and then to caress you, understand? (...) Brazilian men, they're bastards, they're not *cavalheiro* (gentlemen), they're stupid, they're very aggressive in front of women.

While not explicitly said in this way, women commonly seem to embrace the idea that Brazilian men are closer to nature, and Europeans, to culture. The image of the gringo as gentleman is indeed contingent upon the ways in which Brazilian men are also imagined as more animalistic and as driven by unrepressed desire. This image, at odds with the campaigns against pervert sex tourists, is consistent with imperial representations of sexualized otherness in the New World and the idea that Brazilian men are closer to nature and their instincts than the more civilized, modern, educated Europeans in the *Velho Mundo* (Old World).<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> There are similar processes of racialized sexuality in various locations across the globe, and the connections between ethnicity, race, nationality and sexuality are indeed manifold (see Nagel 2003). For instance, Chong-suk Han (2006) considers the racialized sexual dynamic among white and Asian American gay men. He proposes that in American narratives and media images, white gay men are depicted as 'masculine' and dominant, while Asian gay men are portrayed as stereotypically feminine and passive. These portrayals, Han argues, draw upon Orientalist discourses that feminize the East and that depict a domineering, superior, conquering West. For another example, see Phua and Caras (2008) whose work engages the 'ethnic branding' of white American and Brazilian sex workers, in this case whiteness signaling privilege, and Brazilianness, exoticism and liberated sexuality.

Notably, the appeal of the foreigners was not exclusive to poor women or to those engaged in commercial sex. Many middle-class professionals, such as lawyers or NGO workers, shared this preference for foreigners, especially for Europeans. One of my close female acquaintances in Natal, Clara, a lawyer, would never date Brazilian men, while many of the NGO workers with whom I talked would complain furiously about local men while simultaneously reifying foreign men. My neighbour in Ponta Negra, Lisa, a 35-year-old Brazilian woman, met her French partner two years before we met, while working as a hairdresser in a shopping mall in Ponta Negra. It was her first time seriously dating a foreigner, and she never engaged in any form of commercial sex. Yet, like many other women in Natal, she shared many of the dominant, local views on the intrinsic differences between Brazilian men and foreigners:

It's something I'm discovering, also, with foreigners. The Brazilian man, I don't know if you've paid attention, if you've been able to get to see how the brasileiro is: the Brazilian man, he's married, his wife has children, he has a spouse at home, a mistress outside, and he still goes with other women (...) [Foreigners], in terms of romanticism, they're more romantic, more affectionate, more attentive, more faithful.

Even though Lisa was not involved in commercial sex, she still benefited greatly from her relationship with her French partner. She had left her low-paid job in the shopping mall to work for him in a real estate development project, she was living in a nice furnished apartment with him, and both were planning a one-year, round the world boat trip. Perhaps more significantly she also attributed a lot of importance to him being European and to the status that came along with it. Like so many other Brazilian women in Natal she placed a high value on Europe and the Old World. She felt a strong attraction for Europe, as she said: "I have such a desire to go there." For Lisa, being in a

relationship with a French man represented improved social mobility and cultural capital, as well as the fulfillment of a strong desire to align herself with a Western culture and lifestyle.

This process of idealization, or ‘the fetish of the gringo’, is similar to what Karen Kelsky describes as “the fetish of the white man” (2001). Kelsky analyses the discursive practices of “internationalist” Japanese women, that is middle-upper class women who seek to work or study abroad and to engage in romance with Western men. She argues that much like the body of the Oriental women, the body of the white Western man is globally commodified and infused with meanings that are racialized and sexualized. These meanings, she insists, “have nothing to do with either the good will or the political impulses of individual men, but are deeply imbricated in histories of modernity, colonialism, and white hegemony in the West and globally” (2001: 154). The fetish of the white man, thus, refers to the process whereby Western men’s bodies come to denote status and wealth, and act as “commodity markers of upward mobility in the global economy” (187). By using the term fetish, I point to a similar pattern in Natal, where the gringo has become a symbol of cultural capital and mobility.<sup>100</sup> In the spirit of Kelsky, I read the trope of the “gringo as prince charming” as an expression of women’s recognition of the status and capital Western foreigners represent. In other words, the

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<sup>100</sup> Rather than implying that all relationships are defined by racial desires, Kelsky seeks, as she proposes, to reveal how “Japanese women (and men) operate in a world in which ‘Westernness’ and ‘whiteness’, conflated, are not simply objects of fantasy and desire but hegemonic constitutive elements of want, if not need.” (148). Similarly, I am not suggesting that all mixed-race relationships between white Western foreigners and Brazilian women are rooted in racial desires or should be seen as suspicious, but rather, I am arguing that desire does not operate in a vacuum and as such, is mediated by global forces.

mobility and money these men represent is recast in terms that celebrate their masculinity.<sup>101</sup>

In Brazil, popular cultural representations have glorified white Brazilian men for decades, and fed a ‘Disney’ romance of interracial sex that bespeaks racism and century-old whitening ideology. In effect, the fascination for the gringo is deeply rooted in Brazilian race relations and popular images of interracial romance *in* Brazil. The tale of the young, mulata or black women falling in love with a whiter, richer man is a popular trope in media representations produced in Brazil, especially in *telenovelas* (soap operas) including in ‘*Xica da Silva*’, ‘*A Cor do Pecado*’, or ‘*Paraíso Tropical*’. Soares (2008) identifies a pattern in her genealogy of representations of black women in Brazilian telenovelas whereby black women are commonly portrayed as domestic servants, slaves, or morally corrupted characters, with a strong sensual appeal and an irresistible attraction for white men to the detriment of black men. For instance, in *A Cor do Pecado* (2004) the main character, a young, poor, attractive woman from the Northeast of Brazil falls in love with a white, rich man from the South, after rejecting a black suitor. These representations, albeit played out within the Brazilian national imaginary, both participate in the reification of Eurocentric standards of beauty and whiteness as a desirable quality, and inscribe interracial romance as the path for black women toward social mobility.

Donna Goldstein (2003) traces the discursive manifestations of this trope among low-income, black women in a Rio shantytown, through the fantasy of seducing a *coroa*,

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<sup>101</sup> There are major differences between the Brazilian women I discuss in this dissertation and the internationalist Japanese women in Kelsky’s *Women on the Verge*: to begin with, these Japanese women occupy the upper echelons of a wealthy nation and experience the West through travels, writings, or magazines. Furthermore, for these Japanese women, the body of the white man signifies *male potency* in addition to upward mobility – a key difference with the ways in which Brazilian women imagined foreigners as romantic gentlemen, rather than erotic, sexually driven men.

that is, a whiter, richer, older man. This fantasy, according to her, “plays with the ideology of whitening [and] illustrates a perfectly ambiguous romantic relationship in which women expect to gain materially while they play out the sexualized role of mulata” (2003: 124). In Natal, a similar glorification of gringos happens where women capitalize on their body and play out the sexualized role of the imagined tropical Brazilian women. However, this fantasy takes a particular twist in Natal, as it is also fuelled by images of Europe (and North America) as a place of modernity, progress, and civilization, where social mobility seems more attainable than in Brazil. The trope of the ‘prince charming’ is thus played out on a global stage, building upon the privileged space that Europe occupies in the national imagination. In other words, while this ‘Disney’ romance relies on images of whiteness as a desired quality and interracial romance in Brazil, it also builds upon constructions of Europe and North America as embodying a different, superior, liberated lifestyle, and the place where opportunities lie.<sup>102</sup> Thus, women emphasized intrinsic differences between foreign men and Brazilian men that point to how they imagine the body of the nation.

Similarly to the ways in which internationalist Japanese women distinguish Western white men from Japanese men, women in Natal commonly contrast and denigrate local Brazilian men. The trope dominates conversations among women, and is reinforced by women’s jokes, sayings, and constant commenting on the failings of

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<sup>102</sup> Indeed, O’Dougherty (2002: 22-23) documents the process whereby Brazilians from the middle class turned to the foreign and especially to Europe and North America in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the working class. It became difficult, for the middle class, to establish their capital power due to the economic inflation of the 1980s and early 1990s, after Brazil’s “Economic Miracle”, which saw the expansion of the middle class. This turn to the foreign included, among other things, the consumption of foreign products, trips to Disneyland, or the frequentation of foreign universities. These practices participate in the construction of Europe and North America as ‘better’ places, where opportunities lie. Similarly, the telenovela *América*, initially broadcast in 2005, reveals a similar reification of the United States as a land of economic opportunities.

Brazilian men and successes of foreigners. Even women who have experienced considerable disillusionment with foreign men kept this ideal intact. This was the case of Ledina, one of the few women I met who did not express a preference for a gringo over a Brazilian man as a potential future partner. For her, the only important thing was that this man should be “*um homem de deus*” (a religious man). She was 25 years old when I met her, was “*nessa vida*” since she was 18, and was returning from Italy after trying to live there with her Italian boyfriend, whom she met while doing programa and with whom she also had a child. Her experience in Italy was difficult, mainly because her mother-in-law saw her past in the sex trade as unacceptable. Eventually, after only three months in Italy, Ledina came back to Ponta Negra seeking to make ends meet, and to provide for their child and another child from a previous union. Speaking of her experience doing programa with foreigners, she explained that initially, when she began working the bars and beaches in Ponta Negra, things were different:

You know, before, I had an illusion. I thought that gringos were romantic, that they knew how to treat a woman better than a Brazilian man, but, the truth is, they're monsters. They have sex now, they come, and they ask you to leave right away, because they're very snobby (*fresco*). They're used to [be like that] with the women there, [they're] cold. They're very cold. Sometimes, they abuse you with words, and they humiliate you, and they say you're ugly. They say a lot of things, you know, things that they shouldn't say. And they humiliate. And Brazilian men, it's the same thing. I don't want anyone. I don't want anyone. There are no differences.

Ledina was the only woman I interviewed who made such a harsh critique of gringos. Yet, in spite of her previous claim, she still saw a fundamental difference between gringos and brasileiros. When I asked her to elaborate more on gringos and Brazilian men, proposing “but before, you thought foreign men were more romantic?” she replied:

Yes I thought, because I was younger. Now I'm 25 years old so I'm more experienced, I see that it's all the same thing. It changes only because they have more money. It's the same thing, nothing changes. Now yes, when the gringos love a woman, they love her for real. They don't cheat on her, they do everything for that woman. It's different from the Brazilian man in this way, when he's in love. Now when he just wants to have fun, he likes a lot to humiliate.

Similarly, Leila, who had lived in Italy for two years while married to an Italian man and who also had a very difficult time there, still entertained the idea of the superiority of the gringo over the brasileiro. During the time she lived with her Italian husband in Italy, she experienced different forms of abuse, including rape by her husband and domestic violence by her in-laws (especially the father of her husband). Also, she felt she was living in a prison: “I could not have friendships, I could not go out without him or his mother or his brother. It was like a life in a prison, as in prison, practically.” But when discussing the differences between foreign and Brazilian men, Leila too, saw in them a better version of masculinity:

The brasileiro, he’s very demanding, he seeks to humiliate people. And the estrangeiros they treat us super well, like a queen. They treat me not only like a person, but also like a queen. Even the opposite, it’s us, who dominate them, just say “do this” and they’ll do it, and for this reason many girls here take advantage of them.

We could read this statement in many ways and point to the ways in which Leila was positioning herself as a subject, not as victim, with the ability to manipulate foreigners. What is significant, for the analysis here, is that women such as Leila invoke foreign men’s distinctive masculinity as the reason for their engagement with them. Likewise, Adriana Piscitelli documents the mutual imaginings at play between gringos and garotas in Fortaleza, the capital city in the neighbouring state to Natal. She argues that Brazilian women engaging in commercial sex distinguish between styles of masculinity, opposing the local men “invariably perceived as ‘macho’” (2004: 16), to European men, seen as embodying a “manliness characterized by romanticism, tenderness and care” (2004: 16). These imaginings linking masculinity to nationality are

not limited to the context of Brazil. For instance, in her ethnography of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, Brennan (2004: 9) finds a similar pattern:

Dominican sex workers often dismiss foreign men's imperfections and instead described them in idealized terms – versions of the type of men they always wanted to marry. This romanticized construct contrasts with the women's described perceptions and failings of Dominican men, particularly their drinking and womanizing.

Indeed, similar critiques of local men and positive assessments of foreign men are found in various locations across the globe, including in border towns in Mexico, among middle, upper class women in Japan, or for Russian women seeking American husbands (Campbell 2007; Kelski 2001; Patico 2009; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). In her work on cybermarriage between middleclass Mexican women and American men, Schaeffer-Grabel aptly proposes that “women's opposing constructions of men from Mexico and the United States demonstrates the power of their increasing interpellation as consumers, where commodities – including men – become fetish objects or signs that promise a new ‘self’ and alternative lifestyles” (2004: 40). Similarly to how Anglo-American men are depicted as more sensitive and Mexican as machos, women in Ponta Negra racialize masculinity and see in white foreigners softer men than Brazilian men.

Yet with the massive campaigns against sex tourism in Ponta Negra, foreign men from Europe and North America have had their share of bad press, and representations that caricature them as either sex tourists or criminals also challenge their reified masculinity. Women in Ponta Negra thus do not simply fetishize any gringo. Indeed, they make sharp distinctions to emphasize their preferred style of gringo masculinity. They distinguish between those in love versus those coming for sex, younger versus older, those paying well versus the cheap ones (colloquially referred to as *cafuzo*), Italian versus



Spanish men, or Dutch versus Portuguese men. Bebel, for one, saw Spanish tourists as drug addicts, preferring Italians to them: “they’re nicer, more affectionate, sweeter.” Spanish tourists, according to her, “are very ignorant and gross (...). [Spanish tourists] are drug addicts, they take a lot of drugs. So I don’t get too close to Spanish [tourists].” Not all women agreed, and there was little consensus over which nationality was the ‘best’. Yet an important distinction remained for a majority of women – the difference between gringos and brasileiros – as the following exchange with Perla reveals:

ME: Do you get along with certain nationalities or with any gringo? Or do you like more Norwegians than Italians, or for you anything goes?

P: I prefer the Dutch, the Norwegians who are more serious, more respectful. I don’t like a man who’s very... who speaks loud, who says dirty things (...) I don’t like it. I like men who are well-mannered. There are a lot of Italian men who are well-mannered also but to me, many of them are useless. (...) P: Portuguese, I don’t like them because they pay little.  
(...)

ME: And brasileiros?

P: Brasileiros, no way! No way! Because if they’re going to pay for sex – but again it’s not all, but the majority – they want to do everything in bed: “I’m paying, you have to do everything”. Foreigners, no. They’re affectionate, they’re more romantic. And even if you are a *garota de programa*, they respect you, the foreigners. Brasileiros, they don’t, you know. And in bed, they just want to feel pleasure and they don’t care about the woman.

Whereas the global sex trade re-inscribes dominant structures of white, western male power, for many women in Ponta Negra, it also promises an escape from a heterosexist, patriarchal, and racist society<sup>103</sup>. The gringo, then, is in some respects a figure that is actively desired not so much for his sex appeal but for his distinctive masculinity and the possibilities he signals in terms of upward mobility for Brazilian

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<sup>103</sup> In Chapter 6, I examine further this aspect and I propose that their essentialist constructions of both gringos and brasileiros also act as a critique of the national body, especially of patriarchy and the racial, class-based inequalities the women I interviewed experience.

women. Gringo, but not macho, foreign men in Ponta Negra enjoy a special status in the local imagination of Brazilian women. Whereas the fetish of the gringo is rooted in material relations and broader aspirations of upward mobility, the gringo is ultimately celebrated and cherished for his way of 'being a man'. In other words, if money and upward mobility figure prominently in their choice of partner, Brazilian women insist that they desire gringos *primarily* as men and thus reinforce men's own sense of conquest and desirability. As we shall see, this has far reaching implications for white, foreigners visiting Natal, who enjoy, in Ponta Negra, a popularity they may not commonly experience in their home countries.

### **Brazilian Women as 'Glorified Sex Fetishes'**

Despite the campaigns against sex tourism, many Brazilian women from different parts of the city, state, and country began to frequent Ponta Negra, seeking to meet foreign men. During the period in which I conducted fieldwork, in 2007 and 2008, Brazilian women often outnumbered foreign men: at times in the bars and nightclubs there were four women for every man. Foreign men thus received a lot of attention in Ponta Negra. They were smiled at, gazed at, and flattered by young, good-looking Brazilian women. Some women would also dance erotically to attract men, whether at the beach in their bikinis, in the bars along with their friends, or on the counter of the bar in the nightclubs. Many women initiated the flirtation through a gaze or by striking up a conversation sometimes even touching a man's bodily parts to indicate an interest (hand holding, grabbing hips, and 'ass-pinching' were quite common occurrences). In the nightclubs, there was what some men referred to as a reversal of typical gender roles. It

was men who were chased by women rather than vice versa. During his first night out in one of the main clubs catering to gringos and garotas, my husband – who blended in quite well in the club as a white, European man in his early thirties – captures this aspect, as he recounted his impressions of the night in his field notes.

Unlike other bars I've been in, the women there all seemed to have an expectant look on their face, as if they wanted to make eye contact with me, which is a new experience of singles bars for me. It's usually the other way around i.e. the men who are doing the prowling and the women who look indifferent. (...) It was mainly the women who did the moves on the men, the men just seemed to stand around, eye up the women, and usually they would approach the men, maybe casually touching them, smiling, etc. It didn't seem like too sleazy a place, and I could imagine a tourist going there and imagining it to be this amazing bar full of 'local' women who wanted to hit on them!<sup>104</sup>

Most foreigners experienced this attention positively and often commented that in their lives back home, they never experienced something like this. *They* were usually the one who had to initiate a flirt and were often turned down by women. Stephan, a Dutch ex-pat and Ponta Negra bar owner in his late thirties expresses this difference clearly in the following comment:

I think the women in Holland, when we try to... for instance when you're in a bar you see nice ladies, you wanna go there it's really hard to start talking with them, really hard in Holland. They don't wanna talk to you, they look at you and they don't want to talk, you have to go to and then take on yourself (...) and there's always a girl friend who doesn't like you so you have to try, and maybe they get nice, there's a click and something... But I'm not there for a click on a Saturday evening, yeah, I just want to talk, you know. For a normal conversation, just having fun, it's really difficult.

Similarly, Luciano, an Italian owner of a surf-oriented bed and breakfast was dating a Brazilian woman for the last three years, and pointed to differences in flirting style between Italian and Brazilian women:

L: I think here if a woman likes you, you notice it. Not that she stays there, you here, (...) if she likes you.

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<sup>104</sup> Flynn, William 2008. Excerpts from his field notes, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008.

ME: Whether garota or not? All women?

L: Yes. In general, women are... I don't know if it's the climate, the culture, they're more open. If she likes you, you don't have to court her. If she likes the guy, she would go and talk to him, or at least she would give him a sign that she's into him.

In Ponta Negra's bars, nightclubs, restaurants and beaches, foreign men not only felt desired in ways they may not have experienced in their home country, but they too entertained a fetish: that of the exotic/erotic Brazilian woman. Foreign men commonly contrasted Brazilian women with European women, as Stephan and Luciano did, and usually saw in them an ideal version of femininity. They contrasted the warmth, natural beauty, and sensuality of Brazilian women to the coldness, frigidity, and demanding nature of European women.

A conversation I had with Francisco, an Italian in his mid-thirties and on his first trip to Natal after traveling in the South of Brazil, further reiterates this point:

M-E: Why do you think Italian men are here looking for Brazilian women?

F: Because Brazilian women are more easy. [The] mentality: sex is much different than in Europe. Here, it's much more easy to have sex with girls than with some European girls. European girls you have to date, to bring out, to go... Italian women, especially, are quite hard.

M-E: Really?

F: Yeah. And because there's a lack of beautiful women and a lot of men. This is why Italian men [come here]. So it's one of the aspects that's important. And also speaking with people, usually if you have a girlfriend in Italy or a wife, usually [your] sex life is not very strong and enjoying. And here, it's different: for them to make sex is much more easy, it's more normal, and so it's not a problem.<sup>105</sup>

Oliver, a German in his late fifties, also had Imagined Brazilian women as radically different from women in his home country. In a conversation we had, after

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<sup>105</sup> Original in English.

meeting a couple of times over the period of a few weeks, he described what he saw as distinctively Brazilian about women in Brazil. He explained he had chosen to look for a girlfriend in Natal because Brazilian women: “like sex very much” and “they are very sexy, I don’t know if you can see that, as a woman.” According to him, “Brazilian women are more ... nature. They are more nature than in Europe. Here, a lady is a lady. She identifies herself as a lady.” A lady, when I asked, was meant in all senses of the word, a lady is “jealous” and would fight another woman, she wants children, and she “sees in a man the person who supports [her].” In sum: “her role is more basic, including sex.” In Germany, women are more about “emancipation” and “career” because “if your basic instinct is filled, you have time to think about emancipation (...) it’s a luxury they don’t have over here.” Oliver summarized the differences between Brazilian and German women in these terms: “for the German woman, her pussy is a box of treasure, for the Brazilian woman, her pussy is a box of pleasure.” In addition, his nature/culture dichotomy was rooted in the assumption of Brazil’s unique “ethnic temperament,” as he explained: “Portuguese and African mixed together, so people here have loads of black blood inside” even those looking “white.” According to him this was unique to Brazil, and ‘explained’ the natural propensity of Brazilian women to be both more traditional and sensual.

Piscitelli similarly found that in the context of sex tourism in Fortaleza “foreign tourists are usually attracted by the idea of sexual encounters with women perceived to possess an intense, racialized ‘tropical sexuality’ and who embody traits of ‘traditional’ femininity” (2007b: 493-4). Oliver visibly sought a traditional woman endowed with a tropical sexuality, women he described as closer to nature, their instinct, and their

reproductive role. His words reveal a deep-seated anti-feminism and a backlash against German women's massive entry into the labour force and their claims to equality, economic independence, and control over their bodies. In effect, he contrasted the state of nature of Brazilian women and their embodiment of a 'traditional femininity', with the emancipation of career-oriented German women. Brazilian women are thus imagined as genuine women not yet tainted by modern capitalism and feminism. In addition, Oliver also entertained deeply racialized ideas about the nature of Brazilian women's sexuality, which drew on ethnic representations of sexualized otherness that have a long history.

The idea of the sensual Brazilian woman living in a 'tropical paradise' is a powerful trope about Brazil, one that can be traced back to early colonial writings and paintings in which the nakedness of the native women figured prominently. If the ways in which her licentiousness and sensuality have been imagined and depicted has changed over time, early Dutch, Portuguese, and French colonial representations of naked Indians awaiting the newcomer on the shore still resonate with many European tourists visiting Ponta Negra. Stephan, struggling to make sense of why Brazilian women are more 'sexually liberated' than their Dutch counterparts, offered the following explanation, clearly reflecting the impact of early colonial writings on today's travelers to the continent:

I don't know if you have read the book of when the Portuguese or the Dutch came to here, to Brazil, 600 [sic] years ago the girls were naked on the beach, waiting for those new comers, and that's real history, I think, yeah... Where it comes from? I don't know where it comes from. And in the Amazon, it's the same, they still like it, Indians still like it, they don't feel ashamed for making love.

This comment is quite reminiscent of the ways in which Native women came to be imagined in Brazil by influential ideologues, such as Gilberto Freyre. In *The Master and the Slaves*, originally published in 1933, Freyre (1986: 85) wrote:

No sooner had the European leaped ashore than he found his feet slipping among the naked Indian women, and the very fathers of the Society of Jesus had to take care of not to sink into the carnal mire; for many of the clergy did permit themselves to become contaminated with licentiousness. The women were the first to offer themselves to the whites, the more ardent ones going to rub themselves against the legs of these beings whom they supposed to be gods. They would give themselves to the European for a comb or a broken mirror.

Similarly, in the famous *Retrato do Brazil: Ensaio sobre a Tristeza Brasileira*, (Portrait of Brazil: Essay on Brazilian Sadness) first published in 1928, Paulo Prado famously wrote: “The climate, the man free in the jungle, the sensual Indian, encouraged and multiplied purely animalistic unions. The Edenic impression that assaulted the imagination of the recently arrived, was further excited by the enchantment of the total nudity of indigenous women” (cited in Gregg 2003: 28). With the importation of African slaves in the 16<sup>th</sup> century on, these “animalist unions” continued, according to him, with the willing participation of the African female slaves:

Being a feature so peculiar to the ethnic development of our land, the sexual hyperesthesia that we have seen in the course of this essay avoided the segregation of the African element that occurred in the United States dominated by racial prejudices and antipathy. Here lust and social laxity brought together and united the races. Nothing and nobody repelled the new afflux of blood. Except for one or another aristocratic objection, that no longer exists, the amalgam was freely made, by chance sexual meetings, without any physical or moral repugnance. (...) The seduction of the Portuguese settler by the *negra* and the *mulata* would become legendary. (Cited in Parker 1991: 19)

The image of the exotic/erotic Brazilian women is thus deeply rooted in the ways in which Brazil came to imagine itself as a sensual nation resulting from its mixed-race heritage (Parker 1991; Gregg 2003).

As discussed previously, the mulata, seen as the perfect embodiment of racial mixture, became emblematic of Brazil’s racial democracy. Starting in the 1930s, her body was turned into a national spectacle through carnival and samba and eventually

displayed worldwide through films, writings, tourist advertisements, and Internet web sites (Gilliam 1998; Goldstein 2003; Pravaz 2003). As “ideal representatives of (black) sensuality” (Goldstein 1999:567), the mulata is a racial signifier, yet what defines her is more than her “race” – it is also her sensuality, voluptuous body, and hypersexuality. In the words of Mexican journalist Guillermoprieto “*mulatas* are glorified sex fetishes” (1990:180) in Brazil. By this, she alludes to the mythical nature of the mulata, taken as ‘proof’ that miscegenation in Brazil was consensual and pleasurable for all, but more importantly for our discussion here, seen as the embodiment of the perfect racial mixture for male erotic pleasure. Mulatas, who are neither black nor white, are also, in Guillermoprieto’s words, “sanitized representations of what whites viewed as the savage African sex urge” (1990: 180). Furthermore “the white skin also serves to lighten a sexual force that in undiluted state is not only threatening but vaguely repulsive, and at the same time, the myth goes, irresistible” (1990: 180).

This sex fetish expands beyond the borders of Brazil, and takes on new meanings in the crossing of transnational borders. Indeed, if the mulata is “a product of national ideology” (Goldstein 2003: 112) she is also, in the words of Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, an “export product” (Bennett 2001: 232). In important ways, the mulata thus came to represent the Brazilian nation and to suggest to the outside world that Brazil is an erotic paradise where racialized women are readily available for male erotic consumption. As a result of the dissemination of her image worldwide as an ideal representative of Brazil, the sensuality once reserved for the mulata is now extended to all Brazilian women, as they have come to be globally imagined as ‘hot’ and sensual by virtue of their Brazilianness.



The Brazilian woman is thus imagined and represented in terms that celebrated her as a sex fetish. Much like the mulata, it is her racial mixture that signifies her hypersexuality in this global circulation of images about Brazilian women. In pornography, rap videos (most famously in Snoop Dogg and Pharell's "Beautiful" song), blogs, guidebooks, websites, and discussion forums dedicated to travel and the single man,<sup>106</sup> Brazilian women, not only mulata, are 'glorified sex fetishes'. For instance, on the opening web page of the Brazilian Sex Guide, the following caption appears, meant to entice the viewer to go further:

BTW, have you ever had sex with a Brazilian Garota [girl] from Rio or Sao Paulo before? Yes or no? Ahhh, you dunno because you were so drunk, I guess. No problem, just book a flight to Brasil asap and book a nice love hotel once there. The sexy garotas will queue up to have sex with you every day :-)

This excerpt suggests that sexy Brazilian girls would just line-up to have sex with any man coming from abroad. These representations and ideas profoundly shape the ways in which tourists have come to imagine Brazil. Williams (2010) discusses a similar idea within the context of sex tourism in the city of Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil. There, she encountered Ahmad, an African American tourist taking pictures of Brazilian women's behinds, to show to his friend back home "that what we thought was true, because all my men back home think the same [about Brazil]: chicks with thongs who are ready and willing to have sex" (2010: 92). While Ahmad was not interested in having sex, his experience of Brazil was still mediated by his understanding of what "authentic" Brazil was all about. Ahmad told Williams that "everything he had ever heard or seen

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<sup>106</sup> These Internet forums include, among others: the World Sex Archives <http://www.worldsexarchives.com>; Travel and the Single Male <http://www.tsmtravel.com>; The International Sex Guide <http://internationalsexguide.info>; The Rio Sex Guide: <http://www.riosexguide.com/>

about Brazil suggested that it was a place full of ‘loose, ready to engage in sexual activity women’” (2010: 89). Pornography was one medium through which he cemented this idea, as he explained to her: “there’s a whole section of porn just for Brazilian women...I had one tape of Brazilian women and it spread around the neighborhood – that tape is revered...There’s one Brazilian woman [porn star] with a huge ass and tattoo of a spider on it...It’s legendary. That’s what we think of Brazilian women: tan lines, cocoa brown skin, big asses, and ready to fuck” (2010: 89). Like other tourists in a variety of contexts, Ahmad was thus invested in bringing back home a ‘souvenir’ of Brazil: pictures of racialized women in a tropical paradise, endowed with a lustful sexuality. Silva and Blanchette, in their research on sex tourism in Rio de Janeiro, likewise find that “many foreigners ended up in [the nightclub] *Help* because sex is understood as a necessary component of a successful visit in the city, something that is closely akin to a ‘typical souvenir’ of Rio” (2005: 262).

In Natal, too, women were celebrated sex fetishes that tourists sought to experience as typically authentic.<sup>107</sup> This longing for authentic experiences with Brazilian women is clearly rooted in racial desires and in the essentialization of Brazilian women as exotic others. In effect, it is their belief in radical alterity that sustains their desire for sex with this imagined other (see also Williams 2010: 84). Yet, in their accounts, several men also point to a tension they commonly experienced between an imagined tropical paradise, full of readily available women sexually desiring them as

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<sup>107</sup> It is important to note that in addition to this broad imagining of Brazilian women, tourists also eroticize Brazilian women according to localized differences, especially when they are more experienced travelers: while Salvador is closely associated with images of Afro-Brazilian women and Rio de Janeiro with the famous *mulata* and *sambista* (women dancing samba), in Natal, much like in Fortaleza (Piscitelli 2006) women are commonly eroticized as *morena* (brown women). Furthermore in my conversations with foreigners, they most commonly drew similarities between Brazilian women and women in other imagined tropical destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Columbia.

men (and *not* for their money), and the commercial nature of most interactions. In effect, there were tensions in paradise as men sought to reconcile the image of the authentic, tropical women willing to have sex with them, and the material and gift based relations that sustained their relationships with these women. Their quest for authenticity was thus fraught with tensions, especially when they sought intimate connections beyond what they considered as a crude exchange of sex for money.

### **Tensions in Paradise: The Search for Authenticity with Intimate Others**

Many foreigners imagined the interactions they had with Brazilian women as an aspect of a ‘typical experience of Brazil’ rather than part of commercial sex or tourism. Thus, in these spaces where women flirted with them, deployed their eroticized bodies and showed friendliness, foreigners would commonly consider these interactions as characteristic of a Brazilian ‘mentality’ and thus understood these attributes as national or racial qualities. They imagined Brazilian women as endowed with a tropical sexuality that has little, if anything, to do with commercial sex or the “staged authenticity” characterizing tourism (MacCannell 1976). This does not mean that foreign men were unaware of the commercial nature of their interaction with Brazilian women in Ponta Negra, whether through tourism or commercial sex. Indeed, when arriving in Brazil, many foreign men expected to have instant access to sensual, friendly, and beautiful Brazilian women but without having to pay for their company. Among the foreign men I encountered and spoke to during my fieldwork, several expressed a desire to meet what they described as “normal” women (meaning women who were not engaging in commercial sex). Their experience of what they imagined as a tropical paradise with

plenty of readily available women was thus extremely disappointing to them. To their own surprise, the sexy, young, and attractive women approaching them were asking for money, which was something many described as a big turnoff.

For one, Francisco was particularly disappointed by the commercialization of sex in Ponta Negra. During one of his first nights in town, he went out to the main nightclub catering to gringos and garotas: “It’s a little bit like a zoo, so at the beginning you know it’s interesting, but it’s boring because people are there only for sex.” He thought that there would be some prostitution in Natal, but he did not expect what he experienced in the nightclub, where women kept coming at him, eventually asking for money or saying “do you want to do a little *festa*?” Francisco was not in Ponta Negra for paid sex, but he was nonetheless interested in meeting a Brazilian woman and was turned off by the commercialization of sex he encountered in Ponta Negra. He condemned the many foreign men paying for sex, seeing them as “poor”, explaining in broken English, that the “the most nicest thing,” is “to conquer a woman.” Yet, he had troubles conquering a woman without paying and could only explain his difficulty since he had arrived four days earlier by his own refusal to pay for sex. When I asked him whether it was difficult to engage in flirtation with women in Natal, he replied “Here in Natal, because there’s no normal people.” It was impossible to meet a “normal” woman, according to him, because “here, is 100% prostitution and 0% else.” Yet Francisco, during the same conversation, made constant references to the sexual easiness of Brazilian women, referring to them as “hot” and “more easy,” even saying “here it’s different for them to make sex is much more easy, it’s more normal, and so it’s not a problem.” Rather than confronting the possibility that Brazilian women were not that “easy” in this tropical paradise, or worse,

that he was not that desirable, he entertained the idea that Brazilian women in Ponta Negra were all ‘hookers’. Francisco could only make sense of his lack of success with women by attributing it to the commercialization of sex, not to his essentialist vision of Brazilian women as endowed with a lustful sexuality or to his own failings. In other words, Francisco kept the fetish intact.

Luciano, the owner of a bed and breakfast who had been living in Ponta Negra for the last four years, explained that he felt good when he first arrived in Natal given the attention he received from young, good-looking Brazilian women. They would come to him, saying “hey, you’re Italian” before engaging further in conversation. Luciano initially enjoyed the attention but this feeling eventually faded away:

It’s cool, it’s a great feeling when you arrive, it so good! You feel [good], with that attention. But you have to be aware that this is fiction! For the majority [of women], it’s not true. They have other interests underneath. It’s not because you’re handsome and nice, it’s not for this [that you receive attention]. Because it would be absurd that here you have all this success, and there, not. Why?  
(laughing)

Billy, my husband, wrote in his field notes during his first few nights in the nightclubs he had difficulty “to separate the fantasy from the reality,” adding that “it’s a powerful fantasy, all these women giving off the signals that they want to talk to you.” Later he added: “The difficult thing for me is the blurring in my mind between normal sociability and performed or artificial sociability. It’s a convincing performance! But is it just prostitution with an unrecognizable face? Kind of, but not reducible to that.” The question of authenticity was not easily resolved for him, and remained a crucial tension in the accounts of several tourists I encountered, as they sought to determine whether a relationship was based on feelings of mutual attraction and/or affection or mediated through the market. In effect, the strong capitalist belief in a rigid separation between

affect and money led several men to doubt the authenticity of their interactions with the Brazilian women they spent time with, whether dating them, courting them, or having sex with them, because of the money involved.

This tension was central to their experience, as many men ventured into Brazil for sex and tourism in search of authentic experience with women seen as untainted by modernity, feminism, and ruthless market relations. This search for genuine women is thus predicated upon the notion that money corrupts intimacy and is articulated as a response to the perceived excessive demands of liberated women corrupted by capitalism and feminism. This search thus reflects broader global pattern of hegemonic masculinity that relies upon entrenched breadwinner ideology. As a case in point, Schaeffer-Grabel describes the way American men seeking cybermarriages with Mexican women construct these women:

Latin American women are imagined as untainted by modern capitalist relations while also in need of being saved from anachronistic nationalism. Men in the U.S. imagine themselves as the benevolent force saving globally ‘disadvantaged’ middle-class women (docile laborers) abroad as well as saving the U.S. nation from the so-called disintegration of the family brought about by feminism, women’s entrance into the labor force, and U.S. women of color, who are stereotyped as welfare recipients (viewed as unruly and lazy laborers)” (Schaeffer-Grabel 2006: 333-334)

Thus these men similarly rely upon notions of traditional femininity in their search for foreign, non-modern, exotic partners. The ideal of a rigid separation between intimacy and money is particularly important to grasp what brings European men to Brazil, in search of what they often coined as more genuine relationships outside of their nations and away from “women who do not reciprocate with docile bodies in exchange for a capitalist and patriarchal order in the workplace and at home” (Schaeffer-Grabel 2006: 34). Yet men find themselves in highly commoditized spaces where tourism and

commercial sex both strive in manufacturing “authenticity.” In tourism, the commoditization that takes place is seen as transforming the sites and the experiences of tourists, making them “unreal” or fake, whereas in commercial sex, paying is often deemed to somewhat diminish the relationship. In sex tourism, then, the question of authenticity is quite significant. On the one hand, tourists seek to assert whether the sites they visit are ‘staged’ (MacCannell 1976), including the nightclubs, bars, beaches as well as the people that interact with them in these sites. On the other hand, they worry that paying women prevents them from having genuine relationships.

A 35-year-old businessman from Norway, Mark was on his second trip to Natal. He was aware of the potential for staged performance in Ponta Negra’s tropical paradise, as he told me:

For the first time, looking at all the girls at the beach it's ... stunning. It's just... I just went around saying ‘this is paradise, this is just amazing’. And so the first holiday was really exciting. It's so, so different. And I guess on average, I don't know, on average the Brazilian girls, I guess compared to Norway it's just amazing. And that kind of naïve look at it, it's gone on the second vacation.

He added he was well able to see “the stage theater” during this second trip. Yet, Mark also felt that some relationships simply could not be staged, and that even in the context of tourism and commercial sex, he could still be experiencing something ‘real’ and this was fundamental to his pleasurable experience. By ‘real’, he meant a relationship that was separated from the market and motivated by authentic feeling of attraction and/or affection.

I met Mark through Monica (Bebel’s cousin), a 20-year-old woman from Recife who worked as a garota de programa and whom I had known for a couple of months. One day as I was walking along the beach, she invited me over to their table in a bar-

restaurant, asking me to translate their conversation from English to Portuguese and vice versa. Mark was among the few men who spoke at length with me. Intrigued by my research, he found amusement, but also discomfort, in the topic I was enquiring about. The first time we spoke together, he admitted finding it difficult to talk with me about what he was doing in Brazil, feeling, as he said, “ashamed” yet he kept the conversation flowing. Indeed, he asked me several questions, to the point that Monica turned to him exclaiming: “now it’s you the anthropologist!” Later, when I met him in one of the nightclubs, he jokingly introduced himself as “the research subject” to my husband. Mark was particularly curious about the Brazilian women he had encountered in the bars and at the beaches and asked me whether they earn good money selling sex to tourists and whether or not they enjoyed what they did. His main interest, however, was in learning more about Monica. Mark was unsure about the nature of their relationship and I ended up translating many conversations between the two of them. The main issue, for Mark, was to determine to what extent his relationship with Monica was genuine. Given his awareness that his experience was mediated by the commercialization of sex, yet not necessarily invalid or inauthentic for that reason, he later told me in a tape-recorded interview:

There is a limit to how you might professionalized [*sic*] <sup>108</sup> the whole thing, this is not Disney world! If I think it’s genuine, yeah, I think they [the women] like to dance. I guess there are real cultural differences in the sense they’re free, living like it’s the last day of their life. They have a lot of happiness.

He also entertained the idea that Monica was really into him:

I was looking for her in the first few days and she was looking for me, I could see it, and I can see like she does like me more and more I think it's getting...

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<sup>108</sup> With this statement, I think that Mark means that there is a limit to the extent to which women can perform love or stage feeling of genuine attraction/affection/ pleasure.



[Yesterday] we had a very nice night, and I have a feeling she likes me, and actually she would love to come to Norway.

One significant thing, for Mark, was that unlike many other women he had talked to, Monica did not seem to enjoy commercial sex, and for him, this was a sign that she was genuinely into him:

M: I manage to talk a little bit with her, this is only a temporary situation, she wants to get away from this, she doesn't like this at all, maybe even more curious because the other girls that I meet here they are pretty much... it seems they have a good time you know, it seems that they don't mind what they are doing.  
(...)

ME: so you think she is different?

M: She is. Yeah. I think. Maybe it's naïve but...

ME: No, no. Because she does not pretend she likes it?

M: Yeah... she's genuine.

In addition to paying 200 reais (100 US\$) for her daily companionship, Mark offered her private English lessons for six months, gave her a mini-DVD player, paid for her drinks at the beach and in nightclubs, invited her to eat sushi in an upscale Japanese restaurant, and provided her with an additional 200 reais every time they had sex. One night, while we were out in a nightclub, both Monica and Mark asked me to translate their conversation. Mark was trying to determine whether Monica was sincere and committed to their relationship and thus he asked whether she was willing to bear his children. Monica was offended and replied: "What? Does he want a machine producing babies?" For Mark, to know whether Monica would eventually have children with him was a way to gauge her seriousness. Mark explains further how he saw their relationship:

You know I really like her and she's smart. I understood that she didn't want to like me because if she did it means she would have emotions and she doesn't

want that. But then she sort of takes the other way, she likes me, she wants to go to Norway and all that stuff. And I just told her she'll have to learn English first of all, and then if she came to Norway she would have to go back to school. I would pay of course for school so that she could be independent, but I don't want her to be independent the way the Norwegian women are, because if she's able to make her life for herself but (silence). I don't know what to say. I am an old school kind of guy. I think that guys should carry the heavy loads and takes charge and the women should take care of the children, you know what I mean. It's kind of old school. (...) But it's not like I want a housekeeper (silence). A more traditional one I would prefer that.

Mark was thus seeking a woman who could embody traditional femininity, not “a housekeeper,” but a woman that would accept his “old school kind of guy” view of gender relations. This is particularly fascinating, especially when Monica's desires to be independent, to buy a house, to party at night are juxtaposed to Mark's view of “a more traditional” woman.<sup>109</sup> Like other foreign men, Mark was interested in an intimate, authentic relationship with a woman he imagined as drastically different from Norwegian women, and it was this radical differentiation that was at the root of his desire for her. Mark was indeed attached to the idea of a “real” woman, defined against women in Norway but also in the West: “The girls in western countries become more and more like men. Here it's different, they don't drink alcohol a lot, [they are] very careful drinking, they are a lot more approaching and intimate in their way of being, a lot more feminine, you know. I don't think you see that in Norway.”

Mark thus exhibits a traditional view of women that reflects a deeply entrenched breadwinner ideology (rooted in industrial capitalism) and a patriarchal view of men as provider and protector of women in the context of heterosexual marriage. He was

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<sup>109</sup> Scholars writing on sex tourism and cross-border marriage in a wide range of contexts have noted the paradoxical imaginings across differences and the ways in which these may not always coincide. Most commonly, these scholars show that women in the South or Third World are imagined as traditional by western men while men in the North or West are seen as modern by these women (see for instance Constable 2003; Campbell 2007; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004; 2006 )

attached to the idea of a femininity, as Piscitelli, aptly suggests, “coated in traits of authenticity, [which] fulfills a submissiveness, now long gone in Europe” (2004b: 100). Indeed, Mark had quite a lot to say about why men turn away from Norway (and other western countries) in search of uncorrupted women. For Mark, this translated into the “old-school kind of guy” attitude, predicated upon patriarchal ideas of women’s proper place and gender roles. In this view, women’s career should never take over their role as mother and women should accept men’s control of their bodies in exchange for being provided for:

I think a lot of the guys, I do know a lot of the guys because they tell me the development in industrialized countries women get equal opportunity it's making it a lot more... How do you say? It's becoming a problem for a lot of guys. Actually I've seen studies of it too, women get kids later, later, and [they get] education and performance, and work. [They] get everything: their career, education, etc. And it's becoming a demographic problem too, and like... In Norway there's a big discussion like the guys are losing at school, they have bigger problems in school they are the ones who have the biggest problems like relationships issues, suicide, alcoholism, all that shit. This [Brazil] is different. This is more old school, I think guys like this.

Then he added:

I see younger girls in Norway, like the liberation movement and all that shit it's young girls and they're very much against it and they dress very femininely, so it's sort of back lashing and I think it's a big moral paradox for women. Fortunately we [men and women] are different, we [men] can't have babies and we have all the biological stuff and all that shit you know what I mean. [To] have a good education, a good work career, and a happy family life, I don't think you can have all that. I mean I have a good position at work myself and I do know I have to work and (...) I don't think you can do all that. And I see all those posters, pictures of women like CEOs in businesses and being successful and having kids and it seems like very pale. I think it's very unrepresentative.

In many ways, then, men’s search for authentic Brazilian women is contingent upon what a certain segment of the male population in Europe (and North America) sees as a sense of loss of ‘real’ women back home due to the advent of modern capitalist

relations and “the liberation movement”. In her study of correspondence marriage between U.S. men and Chinese and Filipino women, Constable similarly reports that “U.S. men, many of whom were divorced, cited bad experiences with Western women, whom they characterized as too feminist, career-oriented, or independent to make good wives” (2005: 168). Mark thus expresses an important dimension of men’s desire for Brazilian women, and reveals the significance of the search for authentically traditional women imagined *outside* the nation by several North American and European men beyond the context of Ponta Negra.

The question of authenticity was also manifested in men’s search for forms of companionship they frame as more “natural” or “normal.” During my conversations with these men, the professional approach to prostitution was seen as less authentic and commonly spoken of as a big ‘turn off’ for them, as in the case of Francisco discussed previously. On a night out, one of Mark’s friends, Steve, confided to my partner Billy that he did not like the “crude discussion of money” when he was with a woman, and that if a girl “started to act like a prostitute” which meant talking directly about money and just wanting to do the sex act, he would end everything right then. He clearly had a problem with the professional approach to sex work and perceived it as a less authentic form of relationship. In Norway, too, he preferred to pay for everything discretely rather than discussing money upfront. He would thus invite the women for drinks, pay for their food, bring them home, have a drink, listen to music, kiss, have sex, and spend the night with them. In the morning he said that he would often see what would happen and possibly go out for breakfast, pay for the taxi, and sometimes, put money discretely in the purse before the woman in question would return home. Yet, he insisted, this particular

approach was purely a matter for him to decide and depended solely on his will and desire. If a woman were to directly mention money, it meant an immediate end to the relationship. According to him, the difference between Natal and Bergen, his hometown in Norway, was that in Natal, he could do the same thing but for much less. Another significant difference was that he considered women in Natal as doing sex work part-time, as a means to secure money due to their difficult conditions, and thus, he saw them in a more sympathetic light than “real,” “professional” prostitutes back in Norway.

He told Billy of an incident that happened just the previous night in Natal. He had met a girl in one of the nightclubs, who was a friend of Monica's. After flirting for a little while, he wanted to go to his hotel room with her but there was a mix up in communication, and Monica, who acted as an intermediary between them, told her friend to leave, as she understood Steve did not want to go with her friend. In order to make up for her mistake, Monica found two other women for Steve, ready to leave for his hotel room. Steve was outraged by this. He seemed to imply that rather than have his choices mediated through purely financial means (i.e. because he was paying, he could get any woman, even two, and just have sex) he wanted a degree of “normality” to the whole process: he wanted to meet a woman in a nightclub or at the beach, flirt with her, and eventually bring her back to his place. For him, this was an elaborate play whereby all the signs and meanings of recognizable prostitution were erased. In other words, there was no explicit contract, but rather an informal agreement that was never directly spoken about. For Steve it was also important to have a “connection” and to feel that he could seduce a woman and that she would be with him not only for money but also because she felt something for him.

One afternoon, I bumped into him and he told me about his disappointment with a Brazilian woman, who had in his words “fooled him.” In his complex game, where all the signs of the monetary transaction had to be erased, he could not accept to be simply one of many. Thus, when he realized that after accompanying him to his hotel room and having sex with him, this woman had left and returned to the nightclub in the hope of making more money with other tourists, he refused to be with her again in spite of her insistence and many excuses. Yet, he insisted that he was *not* interested in a ‘romantic’ relationship with her, but rather he wanted a degree of authenticity.

Steve’s approach to (paid) sex is quite reminiscent of Bernstein’s study (2007) of the “girlfriend experience”, a form of commercial sex she links to recent transformations in the sex trade in the West. In particular she highlights the growing invisibility of street prostitution as well as the increase in indoors establishments associated with middle class prostitution. According to Bernstein, this shift allows for the development of more private forms of sexual exchanges in which intimacy features prominently as opposed to the “quick impersonal sexual release associated with the street sex trade” (2007: 194). Based on ethnographic research, Bernstein also proposes that the male patrons of sex workers are increasingly looking for what she terms “bounded authenticity” which she defines as “the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection” (2007: 103). In other words, men purchase more than a sex act: they pay for an intimate connection too, yet one that is bounded by the money involved in the exchange. Likewise, Steve was interested in relationships without commitment but still premised upon intimacy and authenticity, but within limits set by him and defined in his own terms. Yet in the context of sex tourism, the terms are not always clearly negotiated and thus, the form of

authenticity men search for is not always 'bounded' given their desire for a typical Brazilian woman. What becomes apparent is that foreigners, including Steve, also attach stigma to commodified sex and downplay the money exchanged in order to feel their seductive power and ability to conquer a woman. Within the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra this is a crucial aspect as we shall see in the next section.

### **(Paid) Sex and the Conquest**

In Ponta Negra paying for sex constitutes a highly stigmatizing practice for European men, even in a space where many other men engage in such activity and could provide a community of fellow "sex payers." Indeed, as Francisco, an Italian tourist in his mid-thirties commented, men are more likely to entertain the idea that they are able to conquer these beautiful, sensual Brazilian women without having to pay, rather than to admit money does change hands, even among themselves: "the worst thing is that they go back home to their friends and they say 'Brazil is amazing, the women', but they don't say all the truth," all the truth being, he then added, "that they pay the girls." Many foreign men insisted on their ability to 'conquer' a woman even when recognizing that they, at times, also pay for sex. For instance, Mark once exclaimed while surrounded by young, sexy, good-looking women, one of whom was Monica who he eventually hired for three weeks and paid at a rate of 200 reais a night, "I see all these old men, 'cause I'm not old I think I can fit nicely hanging around with these girls. The older men don't. They don't." By 'fitting nicely' Mark implied that even without paying, he could still be with these women, and thus, that he was a desirable man, unlike these 'old men'.

In the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, Gregory points to similar collective masculine constructions and argues that foreign men, “sustain the fantasy that it is their masculinity and not their money that is the source of their power. In short, male tourists want women to affirm their desirability as *essentially* men” (2003: 350). In Ponta Negra too, many men seek their desirability *as men* to be affirmed. One German man in his late 50s said to me, puzzled: “I don’t know why younger girls fall in love with me” implying that it was not his wealth, whiteness, or mobility but rather him, as a man, that these women fall in love with. Or when I asked Francisco, “why do you think Brazilian women are attracted to the white foreigners?” he replied, as if it was the most obvious statement, “because the men are good-looking!”

The issue of paying for sex was thus fraught with tensions, at least for some men who adopted the widespread view that if you pay, it must be because you cannot “conquer” a woman. In her work on men who frequent strip clubs in the United States, Katherine Frank (2002:133) aptly proposes:

Critiques of capitalism and commodification have seeped away far enough into public awareness that (...) many of the customers realized that paying for it, whether it be female attention, conversation, or sexualized services, would at best be seen as inauthentic (and perhaps pathetic) and at worst as perverted or exploitative.

Similarly to these U.S. customers in strip clubs, foreign men who pay for sex in Ponta Negra are also aware of the stigma associated with paid sex, and at times seek to justify or rationalize their payment. For some, the legitimization comes from the idea that paying for sex in Brazil was seen as not so different from dating and the expenses associated with dating in their home countries. For instance, Mark, referring to his experience of dating in Norway, asked:



Like my friends say, you know, you meet a girl back home, it's even more expensive. What's the difference? And also what's the difference between [paying for sex] and binge drinking and you pay for the girl's drinks and you have one-night stands and unsafe sex?

Likewise, Luciano explained how money was part of the dating scene with women in Italy. There, he explained that in order for a man to date women: "You must have a car, money, a job. You must have this kind of life." He added, contrasting Italian to Brazilian women:

Sometimes, they're worse: they're more whore (*puta*) than whores here. Because with the whores here, you know how much they'd charge to have fun. There you spend much more, but in the end you don't even go to bed with her.

These men thus see paying as part of a continuum of relationships that are not located outside the market but imbricated in them. If this parallels the feminist argument that even marriage is a form of exchange, here these men downplay the inequality at the root of their ability to buy cheap sex with Brazilian women. By equating and equalizing the purchase of cheap sex in Ponta Negra with paying to bring a woman on a date in their home country, these foreigners tend to reconfigure the inequalities that allow them, in the first place, to travel for sex.

Other foreigners naturalize paying for sex by making it something that is overwhelmingly common in Brazil and thus simply part of the relationship with local women. In these instances paying is understood as something that is integral to the experience of Brazil as this conversation with Stephan, the Dutch ex-pat, reveals:

S: The morals are a little bit different over here sex for women and men is much easier over here it's fun. Like eating, drinking, sleeping, dancing you know so....

M-E: It's more liberal here than in Amsterdam or Holland in general?

S: Eh, it's more liberal than anywhere in the world I think! In total Brazil. Not just... If I go to another place, with more Brazil... with normal women, they are

much more easier, you have fun, you have a good evening, but you always pay for it. You are going left or right, but you always pay as a man, that's normal. That's normal over here.

Gregory (2007), too, finds that foreign tourists in the Dominican Republic naturalize paid sex as rooted in their beliefs in the sexually driven nature of Dominican women. He argues: “by naturalizing their relationships with sex workers, male tourists denied their coercive character and, in the process, elided the gender, racial, and economic inequalities that make them possible” (2007: 163). This does not mean, however, that paying for sex was not fraught with tensions and contradictions, as we have seen.

Indeed, other men recognized that while they do pay for sex they still represent a superior style of masculinity in contrast to either the ‘Brazilian macho’ or the ‘pervert sex tourist’. They frequently remarked that Brazilian men do not treat women well, are predominantly violent and do not take responsibility for the children they father. For instance, when I asked Mark, (whose story with Monica I recounted earlier) what he thought of Brazilian men, he exclaimed: “Brazilian men, they screw around like rabbits, that’s what I’ve heard! Men are men. Men are pigs. It's a very macho culture.” By distinguishing gringos from brasileiros, Mark contributes to the collective construction of foreign men as better men. Similarly, commenting on the state campaign against sex tourism, Stephan, a Dutch ex-pat in his mid-thirties asked:

Who’s the bad guy over here? And the Brazilians go with the girl just 12, 13 years old and who’s...? I don't have a problem with sex tourism: those are guys 19, 20, 30 years old, 50 years old. They treat the girls really nice, give them a really good time, the girls working here. Who is the bad guy? The girls, when they were young: 10, 12 years old, where they came from, inside the country they were treated bad by the older men. That's why it happens. And now the tourist gets to be the bad man? I don't think so. Every city, every city in Brazil has whorehouses,

wherever, ask any Brazilian "do you go to a whore, do you take girls out", "yeah" not a single one who doesn't go.

In his comment, Stephan hints at a tension felt by men paying for sex in Ponta Negra, who see themselves as the 'good' men (or at least as better men) in contrast to local men. Foreign men not only sought to distinguish themselves from macho brasileiros, they also frequently invoked their moral superiority in contrast to other tourists. It was common for men to distinguish themselves from "typical tourists," "the majority of Italians," "sex tourists" and even from the label "gringo." Thus, while they acknowledged paying for sex, in their view their practices were not to be confounded with these other, far more problematic, practices. Here, nationalities, but more frequently styles of masculinities, served as a key marker of difference. For instance, Mark described himself in these terms: "I don't think I'm very representative [as a tourist], I'm a pretty calm person, an intellectual person." Mark also pointed to some of the ways in which he and his friends could be seen as different from the 'pervert sex tourists':

We are very clear on that, we treat the girls nicely, we try to have more of a party situation, you know, to have a good time and to make them also having a good time. It's not this hardcore sex thing, at least for us so... You saw my friend last night, Steve, he got annoyed because he got fooled by a girl. He liked her.

He was not the only one to think of himself as "not representative," and to seek to distinguish himself from other male tourists in Ponta Negra. Oliver, a German in his late fifties, was not a "typical tourist" because even when paying he ostensibly was looking for a girlfriend and not for sex per se. Silvio, an Italian in his early forties, saw himself as a 'traveler' and not a tourist and furthermore thought of himself as "curious to know people" and "getting to know the person," unlike "the majority of other gringos around who come not for the beach, not for a chat with Brazilians, but only for a woman today,

another tomorrow, and another, another, another.” If he had himself paid for sex, it was “nothing” compared to other gringos. It was, in his case, only for two days with the same woman whom he knew from a previous trip. Moreover, he was not here for “sex tourism,” he insisted. Likewise, João, a Portuguese man in his early thirties, on his fourth trip to Ponta Negra in less than a year, was, in his own words neither a typical tourist nor a gringo, refusing a label that was associated, in his mind, with those foreigners who don’t know how to behave properly:

For me, a gringo, is the one who goes looking for women, he shows off, he’s a pork, he uses women. I come here because I like Brazil. I like to come here on holiday, I like people in Brazil, and if I get interested in a woman, I’ll work in a way she’ll enjoy.

This constant iteration suggests the awareness these men had about the stigma associated with paying for sex, and reveals their attempts to posit themselves as morally good men.

Quite significantly, many male tourists, in their struggle to make sense of their relationships with Brazilian women, also re-cast their payment as a form of help, and thus, as something unquestionably ‘good’. They insisted that the money they gave to women was not the same as paying for sex: it was more of a humanitarian gesture. Silvio, an Italian man, told me that it was about being a good man, or “having compassion for a woman.” By reframing the exchange that takes place as ‘help,’ foreigners maintain their ability to conquer a woman, avoid the stigma of being considered a sex tourist, and act as a good man or as a ‘provider’ who understands that if a woman is in sex work, it is because she needs the money. As Stephen explains: “it’s not about pay, it’s more like helping them, with your 50 reais [25 US\$]. I don’t want to pay 150 [75US\$] because I can’t pay it, I can’t afford it. But OK pay 50, no problem, we go out, have a good drink, watch a movie, make love.”

These statements echo Paulo's comment in the introductory vignette of this chapter, as he exclaimed, in response to my assumption he was paying: "it's not paying, it's helping." I eventually probed further what Paulo meant by this, during a follow-up tape-recorded interview with his friend João, and Lita, a Spanish post-graduate student in sociology. Speaking about Paulo's girlfriend, João commented how much Paulo liked her, then added that her life was complicated for being *nessa vida*. This comment suggests that Paulo was probably paying his girlfriend, but he avoided answering Lita when she asked him directly: "But are you paying her or are you courting her? I don't understand!" Eventually, assuming he was paying her, Lita shifted her question:

Lita: And you don't have a problem paying?

Paulo: It's not paying, it's helping!

M-E/Lita: What's the difference?

João: The difference is you giving to her something so that she would survive and buy something she likes for herself, no? It's another thing for you to pay to make love to her, or have sex, as they say. (...) Many times I wanted to sleep with someone but without having sex. I didn't make love to her. And I was giving her money so she could buy something for herself.

Later, as a way to summarize the difference between paying and helping, João added to his explanation: "it's a small donation, for a good person." By making it a voluntary donation, he was able to maintain his sexual reputation intact and to reconfigure the exchange as one in which he makes the choice of helping a woman, rather than having to pay for sex. The idea of a voluntary donation was indeed a powerful one. For many men, it helped to make the relationships less commercial or "professional" as they would say and thus all the more authentic. João explained this idea in more detail:

In order for me to win a woman, I have to conquer her. I don't go after her for 50 reais. I hate that. It has already happened to me a couple of times to like a woman,

to look at her, to talk with her a lot, and then she would tell me she wants a job, all that, not like one of these girls. Then, when the time of having dinner and going out together would come, she would say, like this “listen, I charge 150 reais”. Look, there, she ruined everything.

Similarly, Mark, the Norwegian in his mid-thirties who was dating Monica revealed the significance attached to paying without making it something upfront:

M-E: I know some men they come here, they try not to pay or they don't want to pay.

M: No, no, no, we don't do that. What we do is that we don't want to discuss it upfront.

M-E: With the girls?

M: No. We know what the prices are and hum... We know the running prices, and we find it more voluntary if we don't discuss the prices before, it seems more professional like that's kind of big turnoff for us. (...). I don't discuss it, but often I pay 150 reais, 200, many times really, really it doesn't bother me: the more money they get, the better off they are.

Later, Mark made the following observation, making it clear that he was aware of the inequalities structuring global sex tourism:

I guess here at the beach, the girls, they're not rich, there is a lot of poor girls (...) here it's a very poor place. Like Monica. Actually I saw her place [the one she wants to buy] on Google Earth, you know Google Earth? (...) 17 000 reais... I saw it on Google Earth it's like a shack, it's in shantytown.

Mark was thus seeking to position himself as a good guy helping Monica, a poor woman, rather than as a man paying for sex, or worst, a sex tourist or a client. It was thus crucial for him to establish the authenticity of his relationship with Monica, in order to assume the role of benefactor. Mark sought to establish ties belonging more to the realm of a gift economy than a market economy (Mauss 1967; Wilson 2004). By paying, he hoped to establish long-term ties of reciprocity and mutual obligation with Monica, being both concern for her well-being and self-interested. Wilson (2004) similarly discusses the

ways in which Western customers in Bangkok seek relationships belonging to a gift (and not a market) economy. She suggests, “part of the attraction of Thai women as opposed to Western sex workers is that their labor is not rationalized or commodified” (2004: 98). Similarly, Mark and other foreign men in Ponta Negra were attracted to Brazilian women because they imagined them as poor women in need of money feeling a genuine attraction for them, rather than as greedy hookers. Thus, the authenticity of their relationships was particularly salient, and meant to establish ties of reciprocity and mutual obligations (Mauss 1967).

In his compelling ethnography of same-sex relationships between gay tourists and Dominican men, Mark Padilla (2007) discusses this tension between the pursuit of intimate relationships and the money given in exchange for sex and companionship. Jeffrey, an American tourist, captures this tension in his correspondence with Padilla, when he asked him whether it all comes down to “No Romance without Finance” (2007:157). Elaborating on Jeffrey’s ambivalence, Padilla (2007: 157) proposes that:

The idea that his remittances were “put ... to good use” seems to be one of the primary ways that he was able to reach a tentative resolution to the “what-if” dilemma of his financial contributions. This is because his focus on the conditions of poverty and deprivation allowed him to psychologically reconfigure his payments as a kind of humanitarian assistance, rather than (or, perhaps, in addition to) compensation for sex, affection, or companionship.

In a similar fashion, European tourists in Ponta Negra also see their payment as a form of help, and think of themselves, to paraphrase Padilla, as “empathetic benefactor rather than as sex tourist” (2007: 157). They too reconfigure the meanings of the money exchange along the lines of: “it’s helping, not paying,” as João and Paulo said. It was, as we saw, “a big turnoff” if they discussed the prices upfront making the relationships far

too “professional” and therefore less authentic, as Mark suggested. In this complex reconfiguration, what matters is the preservation of their sense of desirability as they affirm their masculinity even when paying for sex. For many of these men, “helping a poor woman” was a means through which they resolved the question of authenticity and exploitation. By ‘helping’, these foreign men made a ‘voluntary’ decision, and thus avoided confronting the possible thought that without their financial support, and the promises of upward mobility that their gringo-ness indicates, it is rather unlikely that the women would still have sex with them or be their girlfriend.

Schaeffer-Grabel evokes similar collective masculine constructions, in the context of cybermarriages between Mexican women and American men. She suggested that men “hope for a fresh start in Latin America through their search for better wives and mothers while constructing a heightened moral and class status within the global world order as the ‘good guys’, heroes, or sensitive ‘new men’ crafted against the macho Latin male stereotype” (2006: 333). Thus, patterns of male privilege and collective masculine constructions in the context of sex tourism and cybermarriages bear striking resemblances with the form of gringo masculinity observed in Ponta Negra. The tensions men experience there speak of a larger, global phenomenon whereby European and North American men increasingly look to the foreign in search of partners upon whom they can exercise their beneficiary control and engage in intimacies with women (and men) imagined as authentic, untainted by modernity and feminism, and the traditional ‘other’.



## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that there is a process of *mutual* fetishization at play between Brazilian women and foreign men that results in a particular form of collective, white Western masculinity – what I have termed “gringo masculinity”. This form of collective masculinity is crucial to understand the interactions that occur between Brazilian women and foreigners. Through what I have described as the ‘fetish of the gringo’, we have seen that local Brazilian women imagine foreigners as better men than Brazilian men and participate in the reification of their masculinity by imagining them as gringo, not macho. In turn, men involved in sex tourism experience being desired in ambiguous ways. The entanglement of men’s desire for both otherness and intimacy creates complex relationships with Brazilian women where what is usually conceived as rigidly separated spheres such as affect/money, leisure/work, private/public, exotic/intimate, authenticity/performance, among others, become particularly blurred. I argue that these ambiguous intimacies allow for a more satisfactory appreciation and analysis of the complexities at work within sites of sex tourism as well as a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of ‘gringo masculinity’.

Drawing on the co-construction of idealized otherness at play in Ponta Negra and the complex negotiations of paid sex for men, I now turn to Brazilian women. In the next chapter, I engage further with the ambiguous intimacies that foreign men seek to forge with them, especially the notion that they are ‘helping, not paying’. How do Brazilian women in Ponta Negra negotiate these ambiguous intimacies? Do they think of the men as ‘helping, not paying’? And if foreign men represent markers of money, upward mobility, and cultural capital, as I argue in this chapter, are these women engaged in

processes of distinction, then? As we shall see, Brazilian women capitalize on men's search for authentic, traditional women. While they certainly market their hypersexuality, women in Ponta Negra also try to establish themselves as proper women, displaying a respectable femininity that is predicated upon the potential for ambiguous intimacies. Women, too, are actively constructing their feminine identity. However, they are invested in complex discursive strategies and processes of identifications/disidentifications as they seek to secure long-term transnational relationships with foreign men. This leads to far more diversity than commonly recognized in the study of sex tourism.

## **Chapter 5: “I’m (not) a Garota de Programa”: Of (Dis)reputability, (Dis)Identification and Distinction**

In the late afternoon, Lucia, a 27-year-old woman, used to frequent the *Marine Sea Hotel* one of the few recognized points of encounters between gringos and garotas by Ponta Negra’s beach. I would commonly find her there with her usual group of friends – Bebel, Júlia, Monica and Sônia – sipping drinks while flirting with foreigners, in the hope of securing a date for later. One day, in early December 2007, while I passed by the street adjacent to the Marine Sea Hotel I heard my name being shouted and recognized Lucia, sitting alone. She invited me to join her, explaining she felt uncomfortable to be there on her own without her fellow colegas, adding: “nessa vida there are not many friends” – a common utterance among women who engage in commercial sex with foreigners in Ponta Negra. I could understand her discomfort as the majority of women in the Marine Sea Hotel were gathered in small groups of two, three or four, none alone. After I joined her, Lucia was mostly paying attention to the men coming in or sitting behind us. I was accustomed to the flirty atmosphere of the place and knew Lucia was there primarily to interact with foreign men. I thus sat discretely, willing to play my part as her ‘pal’ for the next couple of hours.

I had met Lucia a couple of weeks before this chance encounter, through Bebel and her group of friends – all of whom boldly identified as garotas de programa. I presumed that Lucia was no different: with them, she would frequent the bars, nightclubs, and at the beach, flirting with men and dancing provocatively to attract them. I often saw her leaving with a man at the end of a night out in the nightclubs. Lucia had told to me she had a bad habit of compulsory buying and had contracted a huge debt she was trying

to repay. She had said that coming to Ponta Negra was one such way to repay her debt, adding she was hoping to soon “*acabar com essa vida*” (be done with this life). I thus believed for weeks that Lucia positioned herself as part of the foreign sex trade. Hence my confusion when she interrupted me during an interview I did with her two weeks after our chance encounter, because I had used the term “garota de programa” in reference to her. She explained she did not consider herself as such and expressed her disapproval towards her colegas. In other words, she sought to disidentify (Skeggs 1997) herself from the label garota de programa and its negative connotations in an attempt to distinguish herself as more respectable. Lucia explained to me that she would feel too ashamed to ask a man for money but would never refuse his financial support if offered. She preferred to think of the money as a “help” like the foreign men I discussed in the previous chapter. For Lucia, asking for money was disreputable in itself and thus she sought to distance herself from this practice.

I later realized that this was a tense subject between Lucia and her colegas – Bebel, Júlia, Sônia, and Monica – all thought that Lucia did not “assume” (*assumir*) herself as a garota de programa. For them, there was no difference between themselves and Lucia, and they did not understand why Lucia would identify otherwise. They insisted that asking for money was a way to give oneself value and avoid being exploited by foreign men. In many ways, I realized that they, too, discussed what they did in terms of value, respectability, and distinction. Lucia’s friends would commonly speak about their sexuality as respectable and contrast it to what they described as truly disreputable, deeply vulgar, or definitely revealing a lack of taste. Interestingly, like other women who identified as garotas de programa, they usually contested the category profissionais do

sexo (sex worker), because they associated the term with the local scene and street-level prostitution. While they adopted the identity of garotas de programa, they still refuted what they perceived as less reputable, and they thought of their commercial engagement with foreigners as drastically different from, and superior to, street prostitution with local men.

In this chapter, I seek to engage with these various discursive strategies and processes of identification/disidentification. In the previous chapter, I argue that Brazilian women in Ponta Negra consider foreigners, especially European men, as catalysts for social mobility, cultural capital, and economic gain. In this chapter, I expand on this claim. I propose that women in Ponta Negra are engaged in various practices of distinction resulting from the tension between the stigma associated with sex with foreigners and the potential for social and economic mobility that comes with it. Through their participation in sex tourism, Brazilian women are thus simultaneously stigmatized locally and valued by foreigners. Scholars of sex work have documented the ways in which racialized women put their “hypersexuality to work” in the global sex industry (Miller-Young 2010). Here, I build on these claims to argue that women in Ponta Negra are putting their “femininity to work” in the ambiguous context of sex tourism. They thus market both their *hypersexuality* and *respectability*, capitalizing on foreign men’s search for a hot, but traditional woman. This is not without paradoxes and tensions, as women negotiate ways to signal both their sexual availability and their respectability. As will become apparent in this chapter, women rely on various processes of (dis)identification and distinction in order to establish their respectability and negotiate ascriptions of stigma. Yet these processes are more than attempts to resist stigmatization – albeit

certainly serving that aim too. Indeed, these processes are closely tied to women's project of social, spatial and economic mobility. Femininity is thus a form of embodied capital (Skeggs 1997), one of the few resources women have at their disposal.

This chapter begins by situating the production of disreputability discursively in Brazil, considering the ways in which women who participate in sex tourism in Ponta Negra are defined as disreputable and thus stigmatized. I suggest that different discourses on race, gender, and sexuality come together to position women in sex tourism as vulgar, shameful, or dishonourable. Then, I turn to the ways in which women seek to disidentify from local ascriptions of disreputability in order to establish their respectability in their own terms in a highly sexualized environment that values their hypersexuality. But first, some detours into the meanings of femininity, and its connection to respectability and distinction, are in order.

### **Femininity as a Cultural Resource**

My understanding of femininity as a cultural resource and form of embodied capital draws on the compelling insights of Beverley Skeggs. Drawing herself on the canonical and influential work of Pierre Bourdieu (especially his focus on the connections between embodied practices and forms of capital), Skeggs (1997; 2001) argues that femininity is a cultural resource upon which working-class women rely. If femininity is enacted and re-enacted and as such, is an achievement, it is also, in her analysis, what she terms an "investment" in that it constitutes a form of capital. As Skeggs explains (1997: 101-102):

When you have restricted access to small amounts of capitals, the use of femininity may be better than nothing at all. Investments in femininity may be

able to accrue relatively high profit in some arenas (the institutions of marriage and heterosexuality) whilst being simultaneously devalued by others (the labour market, the education system). Femininity is as powerfully an economic imperative as a cultural one.

Thus while femininity is commonly understood as an individualized personal disposition it is also classed, according to Skeggs (1997: 100). But what is femininity, then? For Skeggs, it encompasses both “the labour of looking feminine” (i.e. appearance) and “the labour of feminine characteristic” (i.e. conduct). Notably, in Skeggs’ framing, femininity, respectability, and class are closely intertwined. As she aptly puts it (1997: 1):

Respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class. It informs how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others, what we study and how we know who we are (or are not). Respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it. Respectability would not be of concern here, if the working classes (Black and White) had not consistently been classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect. It would not be something to desire, to prove and to achieve, if it had not been seen to be a property of ‘others’, those who were valued and legitimated.

In her work on working-class women and their relationship to femininity in North West England, Skeggs documents their production of femininity as tied to avoidance of vulgarity. As she proposes: “it is the desire to avoid being positioned by the vulgar, pathological, tasteless and sexual, in order to prove their respectability, that the women of the study make investments in femininity (...) To do femininity they have to both appear and *be* feminine” (1997:100). While Skeggs analyzes femininity as a resource for working class women in North West England, her insights on the sign of femininity as always classed (1997: 98) provides a useful framework to understand the women discussed in this thesis. Indeed, as they are motivated by projects of social mobility, women in Ponta Negra who participate in sex tourism seek to convey the signs of proper respectability, yet in a world where they are hyper-sexualized and associated

with the lower classes. The tensions experienced by women generated complex discursive articulations of their practices. As we shall see, women engaged in processes of differentiation and (dis)identification that are closely tied to their attempts to use femininity as a form of embodied cultural capital in projects of social mobility.

Similarly to Skeggs, I explore the value judgments women make about themselves and others, in order to grasp the ways in which their positioning as hypersexual is tensely mediated by their attempts to appear respectable. Because of their engagements in sex tourism, women are locally seen as disreputable and more crudely so when black or mixed-race. Discourses associating sex work with degeneracy are longstanding historical articulations meant to separate women, not only as moral subjects but also as classed subjects, as several authors have shown in a variety of contexts (e.g. Razack 1998; Walkowitz 1980). Social historians have also engaged with the process whereby the figure of the working-class prostitute came to be associated with disease, degeneracy, and dirtiness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attributes that came to be inscribed onto the body of black women as well (Gilman 1985). The conflation of black women and prostitutes with degeneracy was important in delineating the proper womanhood of white elite women both in the colonies and inside colonial powers (Stoler 1989). In Brazil, femininity has been and is still currently similarly articulated through both processes of class formation and processes of racialization that construct women as sexual subjects and establish distinctions between disreputability and respectability. As will become clear, however, the production of femininity in Brazil is intimately connected to a process of nation formation and its foundational discourse about the “nature” of Brazilian



women. This discourse creates paradoxes for women of colour in Brazil, as valorization of blackness is contingent upon its sexualization.

In her work, Skeggs proposes that “to claim respectability, disavowal of the sexual is necessary and constructions, displays and performances of feminine appearance and conduct are seen as necessary. The women are positioned at a distance from femininity but claim proximity to it” (1997: 115). Additionally, she suggests that “their awareness of their positioning by default as sexual, vulgar, tarty, pathological and without value meant that they felt they had to continually prove that they were different” (1997: 115). In other words, they engage in processes of disidentification. If this is the case, then, we began to grasp the ways in which Brazilian women in sex tourism experience tensions: in both the national and transnational imagination, Brazilian women are seen as hypersexual – an ascription heightens in the context of sex tourism. How is respectability established in this context?

Indeed, in Brazil, eroticism and tropical sexuality are seen as constitutive of the national identity (Parker 1991). This is due, in part, to the foundational and mythical discourses on the nation that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s and remained unchallenged until the 1970s, shaping the national consciousness in important ways (Rago 2001). In this context of national identification with eroticism, however, everything is not permissible: ultimately Brazil’s permissible sexual culture is deeply gendered and racialized; respectability is highly tied to sexuality. I now turn to the constitution of this national narrative and its implications for our discussion.

### **Tropical Femininity and Respectability: an impossibility?**

As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, the notion that Brazilian women are endowed with a tropical sexuality is a historical discourse that takes root in early colonial representations of both African female slaves and indigenous women. In effect, early colonial representations of Brazil by colonizers, missionaries, and influential European writers and painters portrayed both Native and African women as animal-like, lascivious, and sexually insatiable. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these imperial representations were re-appropriated by Brazilian intellectuals seeking to unify the mixed-race population in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery and the newly gained independence of the nation. The mulata became an ideal representative of the nation, especially following the influential writings of Brazilian ideologue Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s, and the populist policies of President Getúlio Vargas during the same period. Writing against eugenics and racial purity, Gilberto Freyre celebrated rather than condemned the hybrid character of the nation, emphasizing the lascivious character and sensuality of both the Native – “the first to offer themselves to the white” (85) – and the African slaves. He also eroticized the female progeny of interracial sex, the mulata, as illustrated by this widely cited statement:

With reference to Brazil, as an old saying has it: ‘White woman for marriage, mulatto woman for f-, Negro woman for work’ a saying in which, alongside the social convention of the superiority of the white woman and the inferiority of the black, is to be discerned a sexual preference for the mulatto (1956[1933]: 13-14).

The writings of Gilberto Freyre were tremendously influential in Brazil: as already discussed, they paved the way to a new national ideology based on racial mixture. They also generated the myth of a racial democracy in Brazil, where race relations were deemed harmonious on the basis of interracial sex, of which the mulata was the perfect

embodiment. President Vargas (1930-1945; 1951-1954) adopted this narrative of miscegenation to create a sense of national unity and racial harmony. Under his presidency, as Pravaz (2003) notes, the mulata was “elevated as the epitome of national identity in the realm of the imaginary, representing mestiçagem [miscegenation] in the objectified form of ‘woman’”(127). After Freyre, the mulata became a national symbol whose sensual, dark-skinned body and ability to dance samba were displayed nationally and to the outside world, in novels, films, carnivals, and *show de mulata* (spectacles in which ‘mulata women’ dance). The mulata has thus come to stand for the racial ‘harmony’ of the nation (Goldstein 2003; Pravaz 2003) and quite significantly, her sensuality now extends potentially to all Brazilian women (Gregg 2003).

The hegemonic discourse that posits Brazilian women as sensual goes mostly unchallenged in Brazil, where the tropical paradise of earlier colonial representations survive in what Goldstein aptly terms a “carnivalisation of desire” (2003: 228). According to her, even the groundbreaking work on male homoeroticism in Brazil did not lead to a more sustained critique of gender relations and heteronormativity, and a masculinist vision of Brazilian’s tropical sexuality has prevailed and remained difficult to challenge. If the discourse on the ‘hot mulatta’ represents a significant field of discursive power in Brazil, other competing discourses simultaneously operate, yet these are often made invisible in this celebration of bodies, sensuality, and liberated sexuality. In this tropical paradise, not everything is permissible, playful, or liberated as Parker (1991) implies in his early work on the Brazilian sexual universe, which he sees as characterized by sexual transgression and play. Goldstein thus proposes that “transgression, finally, seems to be patterned by traditional gender relations” (2003: 233). In other words, men

and women are differently situated in this sexual universe: while men are encouraged to play and transgress, women are often times taught to show “restraint” in an attempt to tame what is believed to be their hypersexual nature.

Indeed, in contemporary Brazil, there is a double standard that posits that women should be faithful and remain virginal as long as possible, while men’s infidelity is naturalized and sexual experimentation encouraged at an early age (Goldstein 2003: 236-246; Gregg 2003: 34-39; Rebhun 1999b: 102-3; 134; Simpson 1993: 31). Some anthropologists (McCallum 1999; Gregg 2003) have delved into the tension between sexual respectability and the discourse on the ‘hot mulata’ and argue that women are subjected to both, that is, constructed as insatiable sexually, and thus, as in need of being sexually restrained precisely because of their sexual appetite. For instance, Jessica L. Gregg (2003), in her research on cervical cancer in a shantytown of the city of Recife, in Northeast Brazil, argues that “the hypersexuality of all Brasileiras provides a rationale for the need for male control of female sexuality” (33). Thus for Gregg, the discourse on the sensual mulata and the discourse restraining women’s sexuality are, in fact, “two sides of the same coin” (33).

This discourse on restraint derives from the patriarchal plantation of colonial Brazil and the control of white elite female sexuality, as a man’s honour depended upon a woman’s virginity before marriage and on her fidelity after it.<sup>110</sup> In contemporary Brazil, the Catholic Church has contributed to firmly entrench the values of virginity, sexual

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<sup>110</sup> The honour and shame paradigm, originally applied to Mediterranean societies, has received many criticisms for its reification of female sexuality as a marker of respectability; for considering women as passively defined by their sexual conduct and role as wife, mother, daughter thus as exclusively the ‘other’ of men; and finally for downplaying the relevance of work in achieving respect (Cole 1991). I share these valid criticisms. My goal, in this chapter, is to consider the prevalence of this paradigm and the significance it holds in contemporary Brazil, as a *discourse* shaping norms of respectability. As discourse it shapes (but does not determine) how people negotiate its grips and produces norms of sexual respectability that are both reproduced and challenged.

restraint, and reproductive sexuality, and the spread of Evangelism throughout Brazil has not altered, but rather reinforced, this discourse. Furthermore, while all women are imagined as both hypersexual and in need of control, sexual disrespectability is inseparable from race and class. Rebhun (2004) finds that given the legacy of slavery and patriarchy in Brazil, “attributions of sexual misconduct” by men and women are defined “in accordance with racialized and male-defined ideas” (186; see also 1999a; 1999b). Yet stigma is “more complicated than a straightforward community reaction to actual behaviour” (185). Thus, while signs of Africanness bear negative connotation (African descent is linked with tropicalism, exoticism, ‘hot-blood’ and hypersexuality), it is not enough to produce the stigma of sexual disrespectability. Indeed, Rebhun suggests it is often associated with class and/or occupation. Likewise, Gregg (2003) points to the class-based and racial nature of both the discourses on insatiability and respectability to which Brazilian women are now subjected: while both emerged during the colonial period, especially with the sugar plantation economy, the former discourse was initially elaborated in relation to the black female slaves; the latter on sexual restraint, with regards to the white wives of the plantation owners. Thus, these competing discourses delineate different moralities according to race and class, yet in contemporary Brazil, as suggested by Gregg (2003) “women of all social classes are subject, though perhaps to lesser or greater extents, to both ideals” (33). What are the implications, then, of these discourses for the Brazilian women who engage in various forms of commercial sex with foreigners in Ponta Negra?

## Negotiating the ‘Whore Stigma’ in Ponta Negra

In Ponta Negra, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is an “atmosphere of ‘normalcy’” (Piscitelli 2007b: 492) resulting from the spatial and relational ambiguities of a sex tourist economy packaging romance for sale in the tropical South. Women strategically use these ambiguities, both because they know it is what some tourists come looking for and because they seek to frame their practices within the limits of the morally good. The ambiguity allows them to negotiate the stigma that commonly accompanies their relationships with foreigners. In effect, in Ponta Negra, being a woman of colour and in the presence of foreigners is enough to signal one’s disreputability, yet there is also the possibility to reconfigure the relationships within more acceptable cultural scripts.

*Vergonha*, or shame, was one of the most recurrent themes in my various encounters with women and many of them struggled hard to maintain their identity unspoiled, using different devices to make the relationships they had with foreign men look, as they would say, as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ as possible (which meant, for them, relationships deprived of monetary interest). In Ponta Negra, sex with foreigners, whether explicitly commodified or not, brings with it the “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1993) – and more crudely so for poor, dark-skinned women already seen as less sexually respectable due to the racialized, class-based gender scripts operating in Brazil.

In his influential work, Erving Goffman (1963) argues that stigma is constituted through social relations, and that both those stigmatized and those considered ‘normal’ are involved in its production. He points to the ways in which frequently, those who are stigmatized express ambivalence toward their own self as they too are subjected to social norms. Thus, in spite of not conforming to these norms, they still apply them, sometimes

leading to feelings of shame (Goffman 1963: 107-108). The whore stigma does not escape this process, as sex workers themselves sometimes embrace it, subjected to the dominant discourse that posits the selling of sex as wrong.

Similarly, women in Ponta Negra seek respectability in spite of their sexual transgressions and embrace the dominant discourse on the 'whore stigma'. Their references to *vergonha* reveals one of the main tensions in their narratives, namely the ambivalence to which Goffman alludes to: the tension between their sexual transgressions (through paid sex with foreign men) and their will to achieve respectability. The women I met and interviewed commonly accepted both ideals of sensuality and restraint characterizing Brazil, and experienced a tension between their transgressions and their will to achieve respectability. References to shame were omnipresent among the women I spoke to and many would narrate how they felt ashamed when they began to do *programa* with foreigners in Ponta Negra.

Often times, their vision of themselves as hot and sensual coexisted with a sense of shame due to what they perceived as an immoral sexuality. For instance, Eliane declared to her friend and me: "Many of them told me that in Brazil women are more... hot!" and then laughed, delighted at the thought of being seen as hot. Yet in the same conversation she also expressed her shame for having sex with several men for money. As she said: "It's better to do something else, because a life like this one, it's ugly." Her friend added to this "it's shameful," and Eliane went on saying, "It's a shame for the family, to do something like this." When I asked "why is it bad?" she continued: "It's not just that it's bad. A woman who dates men for money, not for love, twice a night, leaves with one, then comes back and gets another. People keep watching, imagining

things.” For her, both the money exchanged for sex with foreign men and the many partners she had were a source of shame. Thus, due to the potential shame associated with sex with foreign men, women in Ponta Negra commonly seek to recast their practices in a different light, creating distinctions between what they do and *more* vulgar practices. This in turn reproduces discourses of stigma, even as women seek to minimize the stigma for themselves.

The discrimination suffered by women was constant, as we get a hint in previous chapters. Many women who did programa proudly introduced themselves as garotas de programa, yet these same women would also hide from their relatives and loved ones their commercial engagements with foreigners. For instance, Felicidade, a black, tall, 36-year-old woman, had introduced herself as a garota de programa the first time we ever spoke at the beach. It was uncommon for women to openly identify so boldly, especially during a first, informal conversation. Indeed, Felicidade was particularly vocal about “assuming” herself, claiming even her 10-year-old daughter knew about her life as a garota. But there were limits, even for Felicidade, in “assuming” herself due to the potential discrimination she could suffer outside of the main spots catering to gringos and garotas in Ponta Negra. I had been looking for a place to exercise and Felicidade invited me to join her gym for some aerobic dance classes. We began going together, but on our first day there, she requested my discretion at the gym frequented mostly by middle class women. After I went alone one time, she asked me whether I had said anything about her to the other women and made me promise to never speak about her activities in the nightclubs. Indeed, most women I spoke to were hiding from their relatives their whereabouts in Ponta Negra, at times claiming that they work as waitresses or that they



simply hang out with their friends. This suggests that, as Goffman argues, women may experience ambivalence toward themselves, and thus reproduce the stigma surrounding prostitution by embracing it.

Indeed, women in Ponta Negra negotiate in different ways the ‘whore stigma’ at times simultaneously challenging and reproducing it. Leila, a 28-year-old woman who identified as a *garota de programa* and was formerly married to an Italian man met in the context of sex tourism, illustrates this aspect. While discussing the good sides of life in Ponta Negra, Leila interrupted the flow of her narrative abruptly and said: “But the bad side is that we need it. Prostituta, this isn’t pretty.” When I asked her why, she answered:

Because... being a prostituta, it’s really vulgar. It’s very vulgar to do this, you are with a man now, the next day you are with another, and then again the next day. You are with a man now, an hour later you go out, then you are in bed with another. You understand? This is ugly. When I got married, I said “Thank God, I’m off this life, I don’t do *vício* (vice, wrongdoing). I dedicated myself just to one man”.

Yet Leila had since then divorced, after spending three years in Italy, and was back doing *programa* in Ponta Negra. While she emphasizes the vulgarity of prostitution, she also said, watching some Brazilian women passing us with some European tourists while sitting in a coffee shop by the beach:

This one in the middle, she says she is not a prostituta, but she goes out with this one and this other too. What’s the difference? She goes for free. She says she is not a prostituta, but she goes out with this one and this other. She does the same thing as we do, but us, we get the money in our hand and she doesn’t. She doesn’t even have money to go out on the next day! People, we have to understand that these men come here precisely for this! Before using me, I am the one who will use them. Is she crazy?

Leila was thus both adopting and challenging the whore stigma and the ascription of disreputability given to her. Here, to “assume” oneself was seen as more valuable than to engage in practices less strictly defined, due to its potential for exploitation.

Isabella, like Leila, felt tensions while negotiating the ‘whore stigma’. When I met her for the first time, she was working in a small convenience store by the beach. She quit the job after her patron expressed suspicions she had stolen money from the cash register implying that because she had previously worked in the sex trade with tourists, she was a bad girl: “I return to be a puta because I didn’t want to be subjected to an entire life of work from which I would never get the respect nor the trust of my boss.” Isabella understood that being a *garota de programa* was badly seen, yet she contested this conflation. She was also critical of the ways in which prostitution creates problematic forms of identification. When I asked her “how do you consider yourself: *garota de programa*, *prostituta*, *profissional do sexo*...?” She replied:

No. I consider myself as a person who wants to pay her bills, and it does not really matter how I achieve this. I see many people *que se corrompe* (who corrupt themselves) way more for much less, and who don’t live a dignified life. You understand? I considered myself worthy (*digna*) even if I have to satisfy others to get what I want. Everything is an exchange in this world, everything is an exchange. We all exchange, in order to put ourselves in a better situation or to have more opportunities.

Isabella thought that there was nothing distinctive about what she was doing, insisting that ultimately she was seeking to pay her bills and that what she did was like other forms of exchange. Yet, paradoxically, for Isabella, commercial sex with tourists was somewhat wrong, as in the same interview, she later commented that “feeling something” for the men she had paid sex with helped her to make it more acceptable. The following conversation reveals the ambivalence and the tensions she felt:

M-E: And so doing *programa*, how does it work? You go out at night?

Isabella: I do it in my own way. I don’t go attacking, on top of anyone. I prefer to reserve myself a little bit, but I am so extraverted when I want to get some attention, I’m extraverted even when I don’t want to be! So the one who approaches me, or the one who shows interest, when I see that he’s interested I do

a sign, we chat, we talk about us. It's not this cold thing, no. It's like as if you were meeting someone you have an interest for, it's a way to show you're interested, that you're not just thinking about the money. You need to have something that motivates you, if not, it doesn't work (*não rola*), even if he's the most beautiful man of the night (...)

ME: So, you go with a man only if you feel something?

Isabella: No, sometimes, I go out also because I need the money, but most of the time I tried to feel something, even if just a feeling of attraction. This is why I don't go out with older men, from 40 on, maximum 50, which would be this quick thing, with the least contact possible, because sincerely, I think it is not a good thing, this thing of programa.

M-E: Why?

Isabella: I have some prejudices, a vision that's very religious.

Yet, while she considered programa “not a good thing,” she also saw herself as worthy of respect and still decided to quit her job where her identity was marked as bad for being a former garota de programa. Like many other women, she thought that by “feeling something,” she could legitimize what is otherwise heavily stigmatized and morally condemned. However she embraced, as she herself said, the prejudices associated with commercial sex due to her religious vision – in her case, a Catholic one. Thus, her narrative points to some of the tensions women engaging in sex tourism faced in Ponta Negra: while feeling ashamed and stigmatized for doing programa, she also resisted the disrespect of her former employer. She ascribed her own value and meanings to her practices, in this process challenging the whore stigma and reframing her practice as no less shameful than any other form of exchange. Perhaps even more significant for my analysis is that Isabella also experienced a tension between the whore stigma and the value of her engagements with foreigners, including a chance at upward mobility. Isabella had two foreign boyfriends sending her money on a regular basis and hoped to

marry one of them. Like other women I met in Ponta Negra, she had entered the sex trade thinking she could eventually find a man she could marry and with whom she could achieve a better life in Europe, where being a *garota de programa* would not result in prejudices against her. She believed that there, people “don’t want to know where you are from, nor what you do, nor what’s your work. Here, people seek too much to get involved in your life.” Isabella was thus willing to trade her honour locally for the potential that sex with foreigners holds in terms of social and economic mobility. There were thus competing values associated with sex tourism and complex – at times even paradoxical – processes of identification/disidentification.

### **(Dis)Identifications and Respectability**

The old-age discourse that conflates prostitution with a loss of value takes a particular twist in the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra, where a (mixed-race or black) woman’s worth is significantly lessened if she is seen in the company of white foreign men because she is assumed to be a prostitute. Yet simultaneously there is also a discourse of value deployed by women, in which being with foreign men is seen as a positive, valuable, desirable thing (see Chapter 4). Both processes operate simultaneously, and often times, in tension. Women’s negotiations of stigma are thus complex and complicated by the different values that operate in Ponta Negra’s sex tourist scene. Thus women engage in different discursive practices of identification and disidentification, which I see as connected with notions of value, respectability, and distinction, and anchored in projects of social, economic and spatial mobility. I now turn

to these processes, beginning with Lucia (who introduced this chapter) and her disidentification from the label *garota de programa*.

*It's not Programa, it's a Help*

The search for respectability and the stigma associated with (paid) sex with foreigners sometimes led women to reconfigure the commodified aspects of their relationships with foreign men. Similarly to the way various male foreigners come to think of the exchange as helping, not paying, some women see the money exchanged as a form of help. As I narrated in the opening to this chapter, I wrongly assumed that Lucia was a *garota de programa*. When I used this term to refer to her, in the course of a tape-recorded interview, she interrupted me, saying, “I don’t consider myself as a *garota de programa*, I don’t.” As I explained, I was puzzled because I had come to know Lucia in the many bars, restaurants, and nightclubs considered points of encounter between *garotas* and *gringos*, where she could be found among a group of women who boldly self-identified as *garotas de programa*. Thus during the interview, I asked her: “How do you consider yourself, then?” to which she replied:

*Garota normal* (as a normal girl). Because when I meet a man, I say to him “I’m not [a *garota de programa*] but if you can help me, I would accept with all my heart”. I don’t go with any man, I go only when I like the man. Many times, I went with some foreigners and they didn’t pay me, because I wanted to know them as normal people, you understand? Because... I’m ashamed to ask for money.

The conversation then went on, but she returned to this topic later during the interview:

Lucia: I don’t consider myself [as a *garota de programa*]. Sometimes, the other girls say to me “Lucia, you don’t assume yourself” but I won’t assume something that I am not, you know. Because I’m not, you understand? It’s not because I encounter a man today, I go out with this man at night, then to his place, it doesn’t

mean that necessarily... Unfortunately, Ponta Negra is... it's a nice place but it's also a place where people think it's for programa...

M-E: But you're not doing programa

Lucia: I don't. I may say 'look, I need help, if you help me, fine'. Because I'm ashamed of asking for money, sincerely.

Lucia was Evangelical, married to a Brazilian man for the last 10 years, and had a 4 year-old boy. She lived with them in the *Zona Norte*, on the periphery of Natal. She was hiding from her husband she was coming to Ponta Negra and often referred to punishments she was receiving from God for her "misconduct", including a recent miscarriage. "I'm not in an environment that is good for me, you know, I'm in an environment of prostitution, with people using a lot of drugs, smoking a lot (...). So I'm going out a lot, and even if I don't do anything there, it's not a place for me. My place is at home, with my husband and my son, sleeping." The way she could reconcile herself with her transgressions was to think of it as a form of "help" which legitimated the exchange of sex for money as she felt ashamed to be explicit. Moreover, "a help" meant that it was up to the man to give: it was a voluntary act and thus she was not guilty of asking for money. Although it was a way for her to maintain her respectability, other women, including her colegas, saw this as a deceit and challenged her to "assume" what she was doing as programa. While her position was fairly uncommon, I met other women who share a similar understanding of their practices, not all of them being Evangelical, religious, nor married. They felt vergonha and would not charge money, hoping men would still provide a help in one way or another. Indeed, many women consider it more legitimate to engage in commercial sex with foreigners if couched in the language of needing the money. By talking about necessity, it made it acceptable to be engaged in

something as shameful as programa and provided an explanation or justification to what many women saw as a wrongdoing.

### *Necessity not Luxury*

One of the main reasons cited by women for entering the sex trade in Ponta Negra was money. Yet when discussing money, women sought to distinguish themselves as more respectable by insisting they were not after luxury, but *nessa vida* out of necessity. It was common, for women, to refute the assumption that theirs was an easy life motivated by gain. The discourse on necessity (*necessidade, precisar, por precisão*) thus served as a way to disidentify from the widespread figure of the greedy prostitute choosing an easy lifestyle. Women seemingly embraced the whore stigma and sought to refute it by distancing themselves from the image of the ‘real’ whore. For instance, Bruna, who self-identified as *garota de programa*, saw what she was doing as morally wrong, and over the course of a tape-recorded interview, returned several times to her desire to “sweat, work, make efforts, and earn money honestly” rather than doing programa. She did not consider what she was doing as work because she saw what she was doing as immoral. As she explains: “what we are doing here is for necessity, because we need this money. It’s not work, we are not working, we are using our body as work, but you should never let your body be used for work.” When I asked her why, she answered: “because *não é certo*” (it’s not right) – as if so self-evident that she did not need to explain further. Bruna also sought to distance herself from women having sex de graça with foreign men, a sign that necessity was not their prime motivation:

I’m a *garota de programa*. He pays me, I go with him. If he doesn’t pay me, I don’t go, he may be young, he may be old. I have many colleagues here whom I

see on the beach, they're with many young men, very young. The men come here they're 16, 17, 18 years old, they're handsome, they have beautiful bodies, faces. These women go with them de graça. I don't go, I don't go, I don't go. When the men approach me and say "I don't have money to pay, I don't have money for you," [I say] "Not me! So go look for another woman, because I do this because I need to."

Her sister Eliane, whom I interviewed separately, expressed a similar view on the distinction between necessity and luxury: "It's because you're in need, isn't, you go [on programa] because you're in need. There are some women who go [on programa] and don't need the money, they do it just to go around well dressed, with nice shoes." When I asked what she thought of these women, she answered: "I think they don't need to do this. If it was not for necessity, I wouldn't do it." Leandra a 24-year-old woman, further reiterates how *precisar* was important to distinguish women. When I asked her how she identified herself, she replied: "many people say that this is prostitution, but I don't consider myself a prostituta, I consider myself like a woman in need, a woman in need of knowing someone different, who's not Brazilian." As a woman in need, she could therefore legitimately ask for money.

Necessity was often contrasted to luxury, seen as disreputable. For instance, Teresa made a distinction between women selling sex for luxury and women selling sex for necessity, the former being wrong, the latter, acceptable in her moral order: "I think that a lot of women who come here are in need, but others, not. They do this to go to the shopping mall, buy this thing, but not me. I'm here because I need to (*porque preciso*). I have two children. And later I want to have my own business." Those in this for luxury are in her own words, "*filhinha de papai*" (daddy's daughter) pointing to their economic privileges. These women, Teresa continued, "don't think of themselves as *garotas de programa*, but they are the worst of the worst." In other words, if she does *programa*, it is



not because she is a 'greedy prostitute' seeking an easy lifestyle but rather because she is a self-sacrificing mother working hard for her children. Motherhood was frequently invoked by women as a legitimate reason for selling sex and articulated as part of this discourse on "precisar." For instance, Raquel, a 26-year-old widow and mother of three children, explained she did not identify with any "label," including the more common *garota de programa*, because "I don't feel like that, no. I feel like a person who wants a thing, which is the best for my children. I don't feel like a prostituta, no. A prostitute, it's this person working not for *necessidade* [necessity]" but rather because "she likes it, she has pleasure." In addition, Raquel was puzzled by women claiming they enjoy prostitution:

There are some women who even say 'I like it'. It has to be for necessity. There are some women who don't have children, who are married with good-looking, handsome, rich husband helping [them] and still, they go out at night to work. This here... I don't know. It's... I don't even know how to explain this. I think this has no explanation. It [doing programa] has to be for necessity, really, I think.

Rivers-Moore (2010) similarly argues that in the context of heterosexual sex tourism in Costa Rica, motherhood is discursively deployed by sex workers to counter the stigma that comes with sex work. Like women in Ponta Negra, they opposed necessity to luxury and framed the limits of acceptable consumption within the exercise of motherhood. In other words, motherhood allows these women to mediate stigma and claim respectability by refuting the assumption that prostitution is a pleasurable and easy lifestyle motivated by greed. Yet women faced a tension between their claims to engage in prostitution for survival and their desire for economic advancement and middle class consumption. Motherhood thus allows these women to engage in consumption: whether for their children's education, to purchase them gifts, or to enjoy quality time with them,

“consumption is also crucial, though still focused plainly on children” (2010: 727). Thus, Rivers-Moore found a similar process of disidentification that relies on an important distinction between acceptable and excessive consumption whereby motherhood legitimates consumption beyond mere survival. As long as for the good of their children, sex work is seen as acceptable by Costa Rican female sex workers while “sex workers who do not have children are assumed to enjoy sex work and the opportunity for conspicuous consumption, and are therefore the targets of contempt and derision” (2010: 724). In Ponta Negra, motherhood was an important marker of acceptable consumption, as Raquel and Teresa’s comments suggest. Similarly, women without providers were seen as legitimately doing programa with foreigners, while women financially stable or married were commonly seen as exceeding the limits of acceptability.

While it was fairly common to hear women distancing themselves from luxury, what ‘necessity’ and ‘luxury’ meant seems rather difficult to distinguish at times. Indeed, I never met a woman who would claim ‘luxury’ as the reason for her participation in sex tourism. However, consumption was an important incentive for many women. Whether it took the form of transnational travels, private language classes, housing, furniture, private education for themselves or their children, iPod, sun glasses, jewelleries, clothes, fancy drinks, or refined meals in middle class restaurants, consumption featured significantly in women’s participation in sex tourism. Moreover, they pursued dreams of social mobility that were deeply mediated by their access to global consumption. Yet in their discursive practices, women sought to distance themselves from the figure of the greedy prostitute in order to establish themselves as respectable women needing money to make a living.

Thus, for some women in Ponta Negra claiming their need for money, rather than looking for luxury, helped to counter the stigma associated with paid sex with foreigners.

The line between what Rivers-Moore (2010) describes as acceptable and excessive consumption was thus thin. While none of the women I interviewed ever mentioned being in this life for luxury and emphasized the necessities that brought them to sell sex to foreigners, they simultaneously emphasized the better financial gain provided by sex with foreigners to other available opportunities such as paid sex with local men, factory work, domestic work, and other jobs in the service sector such as manicurist, hairdresser, or clerk. They also mentioned the possibility to consume as an important incentive. The following conversation with Perla is worth quoting at length as it reveals the complex ways in which luxury is distinguished from necessity, while also pointing to the contradictory ways in which consumption is also articulated as a mode of feminine distinction:

There are many women who do programas because they *necessitam*, (they need to). Others do this 'cause they want to, 'cause they want to. For me, they're *safadas* (naughty). Many who are married and they come here to do *programa*. Others are engaged [with foreign men], every month the men send money to them but every day they're in the nightclub, doing *programa*. So this for me already... They do it because they're *safadas*. You understand?

ME: What does *safadas* mean?

P: *Safadas* is because you do [programa] because you want to, because you like doing it, understand? For me, it's like that.

ME: So if you had a *namorado* sending you money, would you stop [doing programa]?

P: If he were to send enough [money] I would stop. I've had an Italian boyfriend, I was with him for a year. He sent me money every month. Every month, he sent me 1000, 1500 reais. I worked only in a restaurant, I wasn't going there [in the nightclub/bar area]. I was going to the nightclubs sometimes, dancing. I wasn't going to do programa. Anyway, he split up [with me] and the money from the

restaurant wasn't enough to sustain myself. I like to go out perfumed, I like expensive perfumes, I like good-quality shoes. If I buy a cheap pair of shoes, after a month they're detached, broken. I don't buy these. I'd rather buy a good one that lasts longer. I don't like to buy a perfume and half an hour after I've used it, there's not smell coming off it. I like a perfume that lasts all night and when I wash my clothes there's still a smell coming off it.

In this comment, Perla hints at a tension between acceptable and excessive consumption: while she condemns women who are married and thus not needy enough to engage in programa, she also details her practices of consumption beyond mere survival. It seems that while necessity was invoked, consumption was particularly important for women and for the production of their feminine self. Thus, there was more than a negotiation of stigma in Ponta Negra: women also sought to distinguish themselves by putting their femininity to work in order to capitalize on men's search for a girlfriend or wife, an aspect I will return to below.

Beyond the distinction between necessity and luxury, women also disidentified from what they describe as truly "vulgar" as embodied by the figure of the "real" prostitute. By discursively deploying this image, they sought to challenge ascriptions of vulgarity to their practices and to establish their respectability. In this process, the local hierarchy of different forms of paid sex played an important role and women commonly made important distinctions between *garota de programa* and *profissional do sexo* as well as between street-level prostitution with local men and programa with foreigners in the tourist district of Ponta Negra.

*"I May be a Prostitute or a Garota de Programa, but I'm NOT a Sex Worker"*

Wendy Chapkis notes (1997: 97-106) that sex work reflects social hierarchies and social locations. She contends that the experience of sex workers in various locations is

highly mediated by class differences and status, as well as by race, age, and physical appearance. As she aptly says: “while all sex workers struggle with the social stigma attached to the sale of sex, not all are equally burdened with the whore stigma. Those whose work more closely resembles non-commercial sexuality generally occupy a place of higher status than those engaged in less mystified forms of sex” (104). In Ponta Negra, too, a hierarchy of sex work operates, as women would commonly adopt the identity of *garota de programa*, *prostituta* (prostitute) or even the derogative *puta* but would almost invariably refute the identity of *profissional do sexo*. The term *profissional do sexo* was rarely used unless I would bring it up myself, and women would usually explain the differences they saw between themselves and *profissional do sexo* in terms of what they saw as their moral superiority over these women’s vulgarity. This conversation with Leila makes this distinction clear:

M-E: you consider yourself *garota de programa*?

L: Yes M-E: *Prostituta*? L: Yes

M-E: *Profissional do sexo*?

L: No!!! *Profissional do sexo* no, *profissional do sexo* is the one who is really vulgar. And there is a time to get into the room, a time to get out. And the sex worker doesn’t go to any places with the man, a sex worker has to be like that. I am not a sex worker. I consider myself a prostitute. Why? Because I go out with them, but I go for the money so this means I am a prostitute. But I go out with them to the restaurant, even to their hotel to sleep over there. Yesterday, I went out and I went to sleep with one of them. (...). I also go to the beach with them, on a stroll, so I’m more like an escort (*eu sou uma prostituta mais de companhia*), you understand? I can make them company, for instance, if a man comes here for 15 days, and for these 15 days he wants to stay with me, I stay with him.

Leila made an important distinction between herself and the *profissional do sexo*: although she received money and thus considered herself a *prostituta*, she was making company to these men and approximating the work of an escort. She thus saw herself as

more respectable than a sex worker, a comment that hints a process of class distinction, as Leila alludes to the restaurant, hotel, and beaches she frequented with foreign men. Gabriela too, identified herself as *garota de programa*, but not as *profissional do sexo*, and explained the difference in these terms: “The professional (...) accepts everything a man does: if a man asks to be on all fours, if a man asks, how do you say, to humiliate. Understand? And I’m not like that. If I see a guy humiliating me that much, I tell him to go away. He can give me 1000, 2000 reais I don’t accept this in any way.” For her, the distinction had to do with her ability to exercise choices and to be selective with both the men she had paid sex with and the practices she engaged in.

When asked whether they would also engage in paid sex with local Brazilian men women commonly express their disgust for paid sex with Brazilian men. Most of the women I interviewed had worked exclusively with foreigners which, as discussed in previous chapters, was seen as more glamorous than with local men. They thus commonly made a strict distinction between sex work (local, in the street, with Brazilian men, on a contractual basis) and *programa* with foreigners (fluid, not contractual, company more than sexual services), a distinction similar to the one traced between street prostitution and the escort business in other contexts (Chapkis 1997). Women thus tended to associate the *profissional do sexo* with street-level prostitution, with local men, and with the inability of women to exercise choice.

This sense of demarcation between *garota de programa* in Ponta Negra and *profissional do sexo* was also present in the discourse of the head of the local association of sex workers (ASPRO-RN), the only sex worker association in Natal to my knowledge. ASPRO-RN restricts its work to prevention of HIV/AIDS and to the distribution of

condoms to the areas of the city where the *local* sex trade scene thrives, excluding Ponta Negra from its work of prevention and education. According to Maria de Andrade, the head of the association, members are exclusively sex workers from the local sex industry, none of them working in the tourist area of Ponta Negra. When I asked her why she thought this was the case, she explained, referring to women selling sex in Ponta Negra:

MdA: My sense is that... I don't know what they think, but what I am able to see is that the majority of women I know [working in Ponta Negra], they went outside (*p'ra fora*), they learn other languages, they study. Not much, but they study. They didn't go to university but still they study, you understand? So they see the association as an association of needy prostitutes (*prostitutas carentes*), you know? (...). Those whom I know, I've asked them to come and work for us [the association], you understand? It's not us working for them, but them working for us, because they have a... a different gaze, something different they got and could bring to these women [the local sex workers] you understand? I think they must have observed there, outside the country where they went, some different things we hear about here. (...) But they are so preoccupied, so concerned with themselves [they don't come], you understand? So I think like that, I think the association is for needy women (*mulheres carentes*), for prevention, for work....

M-E: With street prostitution?

MdA: Exactly, work [to prevent] violence, a lot about this, no? This story about... you know, violence. They [garotas de programa in Ponta Negra] feel like... they aren't submissive you know. They've learned there. The foreign man (*o homem de fora*) made her feel so good about herself, made her self-esteem so high, she cannot feel so diminished (*tão pequenininha*), you understand?

Maria de Andrade thus sees garotas de programa in Ponta Negra in a much better structural position than street-level sex workers working with local men and thinks it is unnecessary to perform the preventive work of the association with these women. There is little, if no contact, between women in the sex trade in Ponta Negra and women selling sex elsewhere in the city outside of the tourist district of Ponta Negra. This comment reveals how hierarchies of sex work are produced in Ponta Negra and Natal and indicates

that women there may be seeking to distinguish themselves as aspiring middle class women by disidentifying from those they see as truly disreputable, vulgar, needy: the women working in the local sex trade. Their lack of participation in the association of sex workers bespeaks an important process of differentiation, whereby working with foreign men in bars and nightclubs is seen as far more respectable compared to selling sex to Brazilian men in the street. Yet these processes of distinction are more than the expression of a hierarchy within sex work. As we shall now see, distinction in Ponta Negra is also highly connected to projects of economic, social, and spatial mobility.

### **Putting Femininity to Work in Ponta Negra**

While processes of distinction are common in the context of prostitution (Chapkis 1997) what is unique in Ponta Negra is that women are seeking to establish their difference on the basis of their femininity in the hope of securing long-term transnational relationships and achieve social and economic mobility. Given the ambiguity of sex tourism, women have interest in selling respectable femininity (and not just their hypersexuality) in order to capitalize on foreign men's search for a hot but traditional wife. There is thus more than a negotiation of the whore stigma happening for women in Ponta Negra, as sex with foreigners also carries a positive value and may lead to marriage across borders as well as to economic, social, and spatial mobility. Women in Ponta Negra thus put both their hypersexuality and respectability to work and in the process, use their femininity as a form of embodied cultural capital (Miller-Young 2010; Skeggs 1997). In other words, there is more to the process of identification and disidentification



described here, as the value of paid sex with foreigners is somewhat contradictory, bringing both shame locally and value transnationally.

Bourdieu's work on cultural capital (1977) is particularly relevant to think about the processes of distinction that come to be expressed in the context of sex tourism in Ponta Negra. In effect, he proposes that cultural capital takes value and is given legitimacy within particular social space, or fields: it is where capital becomes symbolic. Drawing on his insights, Skeggs proposes that:

This is the benefit of using Bourdieu's (1986) model which allows an interrogation of how different types of capital gain and lose, when and where. In different spaces (which Bourdieu identifies as field) the values may change and other groups will benefit. This is why the capital constitutions and disruptions of different groups always have to be contextualized. Matters of distinction are always context-based (1999: 216).

Bodies have thus different values depending on the capital they embody and the social space in which they find themselves. Ponta Negra, as a transnational space, engenders competing forms of value. Thus, women negotiate different meanings associated with their femininity: they find value in what is locally seen as disreputable because they are able to establish themselves as 'respectable' with foreigners through subtle processes of identifications and disidentifications. As discussed in the previous chapter, one key area of tension, for men, is money and they would often reconfigure the money paid as a help. These men value the ambiguity of sex tourism and find it more acceptable when relationships with Brazilian women abide by normative prescriptions. They also look for a particular woman, at once sensual and traditional. For women this generates a space where both their reputed hypersexuality and traditional femininity are highly valued. As the opening vignette and Lucia's narrative suggest, signs of

respectability can be conveyed by reconfiguring the money given as a help too, and by insisting that their engagements are for necessity, not luxury.

In a highly sexualized environment, signs of respectability are at times extremely subtle, and it took me a long time to register the ways in which women were invested in producing themselves as respectable subjects. I did notice quickly the importance of appearance given the centrality of the body and of displaying hypersexuality in sex tourism. The ritual of preparation before going out was extremely elaborated and women would spend several hours getting ready for a night out, applying make-up, doing their hair, and selecting their clothes. Looking typically Brazilian and producing oneself as tropical and hypersexual was quite important. Women would get hair extensions, cut, colouring, or straightening in addition to wax, manicure, and pedicure in the many beauty salons of Ponta Negra. While lighter skin colour is commonly sought in Brazil due to a positive valuation of whiteness, in Ponta Negra several women sought to darken their skin colour by spending hours at the beach to tan their skin in an attempt to look ‘typically’ Brazilian, knowing that men were looking for non-white women. For instance, Bebel explained that when she arrived in Ponta Negra, her cousin Monica initiated her into *essa vida*. The first thing she told Bebel was that if she wanted to be successful with foreigners, she had to lose weight, get a tan, and grow her hair longer to have it curvy rather than curly. When I met her, Bebel had a chocolate skin colour but on a picture of herself just before she arrived in Ponta Negra, she looked slightly darker than I am, and I could barely recognize her with the weight loss and longer hair. Every day, she would spend time on the beach to get her skin darker and eat only soup at dinner time, because “the guys like skinny girls with a brown colour a lot.” Bebel also wore the usual very

short skirts, tied top tank, and high heels, and danced provocatively with her cousin Monica and colegas Sônia, Lucia, and Júlia. She was thus well attuned into the production of herself as “hypersexual”, something that was highly visible and noticeable.

Yet this was only part of the production of her feminine self, and like many other women in Ponta Negra, Bebel sought to marry a foreigner. It was thus important to present herself as a “marriageable” woman – something challenging and quite subtle in a hypersexualized environment. One way of distinguishing herself from other women was her discrete approach in the bars. As she herself put it: she did not like to “*atacar*” (attack) – a word commonly used by women to describe women initiating flirtation or boldly asking for money without even flirting first. Bebel did not like to discuss money upfront either, and would often times go *de graça* in case this could lead to more serious relationships with foreign men. Since many men saw a strict exchange of sex for money as a turn-off, Bebel was careful with the ways in which she engaged with men, seeing assertiveness as disreputable. Her flirting style was more quiet: “I’m not one to attack men, no. There are many who don’t like it. I’m more like looking [at them]: I look, I flirt, I look, I send a little kiss. To attack men, no, no, no, no, no. I don’t like it no.”

Likewise, in their conversations with men, some women would also distinguish themselves from the “bad” ones among themselves: drug addict, robber, vulgar, ugly, unrefined, or stupid in a process of distinction aimed at displaying one’s femininity as a form of embodied cultural capital and establishing one’s respectability through disidentification from the ‘real’ whore. For instance, Angelica kept insisting that a *garota de programa* did not have to be “vulgar” with men, in order to show her sensuality. She was referring to women dancing provocatively in the bars using beer bottles as phallic

symbols and mimicking sexual acts with them. Likewise, Perla mentioned that she knew “how to enter and to leave a place” and that she would avoid wearing clothes too revealing: “I don’t go naked, like with very tiny clothes, I like to wear clothes that are adjusted to the body, sexy, but not too small neither, no.” Some women, she thought, were just “a shame,” for displaying too much of their body. Yet Perla also challenges who the ‘real prostitute’ could be by applying the stigma of promiscuous sexuality to other (middle class) women commonly assumed to be respectable: “We’re considered like a person who’s worth nothing. But I don’t care when people look at me. I don’t care, I don’t. For me, prostitutas are those who are married and cheat on their husband with other men, this to me is a real prostituta.” Perla was aware of her position in Brazilian society and aspired to respectability through her body language and clothes, disidentifying from the stereotypical image of the prostitute as dressed provocatively.

Similarly, Mácia who thought of herself as *uma companhia* because she felt not represented by the term *garota de programa* also thought about ways in which she could convey through her demeanour and body language her respectable femininity. She explained that men coming to Natal make an important distinction between women to have sex with and women to live with. “I think they separate these things,” before further explaining:

I think that many are [with you] mostly because of your appearance and the way you act. Because many have already come to me and my friends, and said: “we can take you out for dinner” because of the way we dress, the way we behave. There are many women who attack<sup>111</sup> (*atacar*) them. So when these women attack them, what matters is money. It’s only: leaving [to have sex], coming back and that’s it. Understand? There are many men who even like this because they’re paying. But they want company, they want to talk, to get to know you a little

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<sup>111</sup> The term refers to women who initiate flirt, quickly ask men to pay for their drinks, and make clear, explicit propositions of exchange of sex for money to men.

more to feel more at ease to do something more. (...) There is a differential among the women, each one with her own style.

ME: What's your style?

M: My style is calmer. I don't like to just leave [with a man], go [to have sex with him] and it end up there. No! I like to talk. I also like to get to know him, because I'm a little observant, I like to see his personality, to know his profile you know, I like to know the person too.

Mácia later added that herself and her friend don't go "attacking, approaching, no.

We are there, flirting, talking, giving a smile. But others, no, they're on top of them, looking for them and leaving with them." Mácia and her friends are, in her words, "reserved" and she thought that some men prefer the signals women like her give to them: "because he saw your style, he liked your profile, your behaviour as you spoke many times. You're different, understand?" Women interested in forging long-term transnational ties thus seek to embody their tropical sensuality in a respectable fashion in order to remain within the limits of what is seen as acceptable for the tourists searching for a wife or girlfriend. It is by refuting the sexual (as in the truly vulgar) and the monetary (as in the truly greedy or self-interested prostitute) that women establish themselves as respectable women.

In many ways then, women participating in sex tourism in Ponta Negra commonly sought to inscribe their practices within normative expectations of proper respectability, while also transgressing them. They attempted to make their relationships with foreign men appear as "normal" as possible which meant, according to them, deprived of purely commercial interests partly because they abided by normative prescriptions and partly because it was through these normative engagements (i.e. as girlfriend or wives) that some of them were able to achieve social mobility. In similar

ways to the work of a high-class escort, being a garota de programa in Ponta Negra was performed through bodily practices that clearly marked them as more refined than either their counterparts in the local street trade in Natal or more ‘vulgar’ women in Ponta Negra.

Furthermore, women would commonly distinguish themselves through their consumption practices, wearing brand names famous in Europe, showing off their Gucci sunglasses, for instance, and walking with their latest iPod in hand. Unlike women working the local sex trade, they often times had seen the Old World, as they would refer to Europe, and could speak at least one foreign language, usually Italian or Spanish, sometimes English, which they displayed proudly when given the opportunity. Many times, indeed, a woman would approach me either in Italian or Spanish, assuming I was European, and would introduce herself by enumerating the places in Europe she had visited or lived in. Among themselves too, women would often times compete to display their knowledge of Europe or the latest item they had received from foreign men. Showing their cultural capital was important in Ponta Negra, as the competition for men’s attention was heavy, and as knowledge of Europe and European languages was certainly an asset.

There were differences amongst women of course, and to an outsider such as myself, these apparent signs took a while to be recognizable. A quiet attitude in the bars could be one such sign, more conservative ways of dressing, another, and finally drinks, such as wine, could be used to distinguish oneself. I remember, at some point, beginning to notice a new trend: some women would wear fake glasses, in what seems to me as another form of establishing respectability and thus distinction. One of these women was

Larissa, to whom I now turn in order to grasp further the connection between femininity, respectability, and distinction.

### **Larissa: Escaping one's Biography**

When is it that a *negra*, a black person from the *favela* (shantytown), from the periphery, will imagine herself living in the *Zona Sul*<sup>112</sup> owning a car, helping her family? When is it that a rich Brazilian man will look at you? Never! This is one of the positive aspects, I think, the foreigner when he comes here he can give you a better life, one you've dreamed of but never imagined would come true.

Larissa, tape-recorded interview, December 2007

These words by Larissa reveal her understanding of her limited access to upward mobility, her awareness of the hegemonic working of race and class relations in Brazil, and her perception of foreign men as the path to *sair dessa vida* as many women would say. In these few words Larissa captures in a nutshell what is at stake for many Brazilian women like her in their engagement in various forms of commercial sex with foreigners. In her comment, she points to the restrictions in Brazil for "a black person from the favela" to experience social and economic mobility through marriage. Thus, the reason why she frequents the bars, beaches, and nightclubs of Ponta Negra, hoping for this "better life" she has "dreamed of but never imagined could come true" in Brazil or with a Brazilian man. Yet there is more to Larissa's narrative: her search for social mobility with foreigners is also closely tied to her sense of respectability. Because she has worked as a *garota de programa*, Larissa thinks she has spoiled her identity, and as a consequence, has no more opportunities left in her hometown. As she explained:

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<sup>112</sup> As explained previously, the city of Natal is divided into the *Zona Norte* (North zone) and *Zona Sul*, (South zone) a division that marks a contrast between the center in the *Zona Sul* (administrative, urban, modern, where the university, NGOs, government offices, shopping malls are located –the domain of the middle and upper class) and the periphery in the *Zona Norte* (the outskirts of the city with bad infrastructures, services, roads, houses, sanitations; and where the majority of the impoverished reside).

And so today I'm 28 years old, and I don't see myself with a future, working, like having a normal life. Not here in Natal. Because as I told you, because there is this thing. This thing is in my mind because I did programa. Like I said to you, a businessman, if he hires such a person, he'll be discriminated against too. And the atmosphere, the place will be badly seen, you understand? So it's a big chain. It's very easy to enter [in the sex trade], very easy, but after... You need to have lots and lots of help from your family. In case you don't have that, I don't know what will be of that person. A marriage. In my case, I think the only thing that could happen to me is a marriage. And not with a brasileiro, with an estrangeiro (foreigner).

For Larissa, marriage to a foreign man meant the possibility to escape her own life, in order to begin anew, in a place where both being a "black person from the *favela*" and doing "programa" with foreigners would not restrain her opportunities. Larissa, aware of the stigma attached to sex with foreign men in Ponta Negra, also saw in it, paradoxically, a way to achieve a respectable status and to access social mobility. It was, for her, a way out, an escape. The tensions between her sense of respectability, her sexual transgressions, and her will to marry a foreign man were not exclusive to her. Rather, her struggle echoes that of many other young, working-class, mixed-race or black Brazilian women in Ponta Negra. Indeed, many women emphasize that unlike their fellow Brazilians, male foreigners like their skin colour and do not mind their social origin. Brazilian men, they say, judge them in terms of their racial and social backgrounds. They are also fuelled by the idea that their chances to experience upward mobility in Brazil are practically non-existent. Marriage to a foreigner is seen as allowing them to realize their dream of social mobility in a respectable fashion.

Given racial and class barriers in Brazil (Goldstein 2003; Hanchard 1994), it is difficult for many Brazilian women to achieve social mobility in Brazil, as Larissa's comments made clear. Moreover, doing programa with foreigners further stigmatized



these women, and in their narratives, as I point out above, women made countless references to the shame they felt for doing something as dirty, vulgar, or bad as paid sex with foreigners and to the discrimination they experienced in their everyday lives. If sex with foreigners brings with it the whore stigma, it also conjures newly imagined possibilities, including enhancing their social status and cultural capital as well as achieving respectability. Thus, in a transnational space like Ponta Negra, which seemed to present new opportunities (both imagined and real), these women come to imagine, and sometimes even succeed in, pushing past class and racial boundaries.

Larissa, when I met her in one of the nightclubs that caters to tourists in Ponta Negra, was 28 years old, had one 4-year-old daughter, and was looking for romantic love, while doing programa. I noticed her, because she stood out in the nightclub with her classy style: short, black hair, no make-up, stylish glasses, and a knee-length black dress not too revealing of her body. Raised in the Zona Norte, on the periphery of Natal, she disliked it there and felt she did not belong. Not because she suffered from “violence” or “alcoholism,” she insisted, but rather because she thought it was not noble (*nobre*) there. Moreover: “for me it was as if really I did not fit in this place.” Therefore, her attraction to the “foreign” began with its closest entry door: Ponta Negra. She initially heard about this place through television, and from then on, going to Ponta Negra became, as she said, an “ambition”: “I knew that this was to become my future” because there, “I would recognize myself as a person.” She explains:

I always had this curiosity for foreign language, I’ve always liked English. I always had this illusion, this fantasy. So I came to work here, at the beach of Ponta Negra, in a restaurant (...). I was a waitress. So for me this was beautiful (*lindo*), this was glamorous (*o glamour*). I saw only the good side of the beach.

Eventually, Larissa started to frequent the nightclubs where garotas and foreigners would meet –at first she simply accompanied one of her friends but quickly was seduced by her life: “She eventually got married to a foreigner. She kept talking of having the life of a princess, a queen. I had never seen such a thing in my life. She was telling me that I didn’t deserve this life, that I deserved better things. So through her, I began to know the nightclubs of prostitution.”

Larissa felt, initially, a strong attraction for *essa vida* but simply observed, until her reputation was spoiled: “it was just a step toward prostitution, just a step (...) I realized that people, the clients of the *barraca* [kiosk where she worked at the beach], Brazilians in this case, they started to look at me with a different gaze, because this is not well seen, prostitution never!” Larissa decided to work as a garota in the nightclubs, hoping she too would live the life of a princess. When we last met, she was still waiting, even if, with more experiences in the sex trade and dating foreigners in Ponta Negra, she felt aware of “the two sides of the coin,” as she said: “the glamour and the decadence.” This decadence comes from the act of selling sex, in her view. She thinks she is “dirty” and as a result thinks she has little to look for in her future:

My ex-husband, the father of my daughter, he told me: “you are already tarnished (*manchada*)”. I think that, in a certain way, you dirty your past, your life. And today what happens? I’m already 28 years old, the job market requires younger people 23, 24, 25 years old, and I’m a person ... If I’m looking for a job, the owner will know me, will know the profile, so this is in my mind, this negative thing, so for me it is as if the road is (silence) I don’t see any future for myself. What I see for my future is to go out at night, meet someone, and who knows, marry? But in terms of work...

When I asked her why, she continued:

Precisely for this, for me, being a prostituta, a garota de programa, as much as I don’t... Because I’m not really bold (*ousada*) I’m not ... I even have difficulty

in this profession, because I don't go after [the men]. I stay on my own (*eu fico na minha*) I wait until someone comes to me, someone that I would find interesting, and with whom there is this flirtation. Because I'm already so dirty, I want things to happen to me like ... hum... in a more beautiful way. I know this is not possible, but in my mind, there need to be this thing, this flirtation, this gaze until such thing happens.

Paradoxically, while Larissa's narrative reveals her strong sense of shame and her pursuit of respectability, it also indicates a sense of value that comes from precisely what stigmatized her. She saw in foreigners the way to get more recognition and value, mainly because the racial, class-based, and gender scripts operating in Brazil took different meanings and value with foreigners. In many ways then, the process through which women in Ponta Negra identify/disidentify also alludes to a search for class distinction and social mobility. These practices of distinction are ultimately meant to establish their respectability as marriageable women, and result from the tension between the stigma and positive value associated with sex with foreigners and its potential for social, economic and spatial mobility.

## Conclusion

In the dominant discourse on sex tourism in Natal, sex tourism as mobility is too often reduced to warnings of danger, in which enchanting princes are transformed into lascivious wolves. If their dream often times echoed the fairytale of Cinderella, as so brilliantly depicted by Joel Zito Araújo in his documentary on sex tourism in the Northeast of Brazil (2008)<sup>113</sup>, women like Larissa are also complex social actors who grasp the structural inequalities they face and strategize to *mudar de vida*, or *sair dessa vida* as they would say. By securing long-term ties with foreign men, women in Ponta

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<sup>113</sup> I borrow from Joel Zito Araújo's film title the metaphor of the fairytale and the image of enchanted prince, wolf, and Cinderella.

Negra enhance their chances of migrating to Europe, or marrying up, something they find hard to imagine, even more experience, in Brazil.

In this chapter, I have focused almost exclusively on the discursive strategies women use in order to establish their respectability and negotiate the tension between stigma (locally) and value (transnationally). This focus allows considering women's strategic attempts at capitalizing on men's search for marriageable women, and I have argued that in this process, women put both their hypersexuality and respectability to work in these projects of social mobility. It would be misleading, however, to conceive of women's project as purely rational, instrumental or straightforward calculation. As we shall see in the next chapter, women's engagements with foreigners are also mediated by affect, as Larissa allusion to "feeling something" reveals.

## Chapter 6: In The Name of Love: The Role of Affect in Brazilian Women's Transnational Mobility

On a warm, sunny afternoon of early August 2007, as I was timidly sitting alone in a bar by the beach of Ponta Negra, a group of three Brazilian women invited me to join their table. There, I met Ana, a 20-year-old woman who grew up in the Vila, with her long-time friend Leila, a 27 year-old mother of two children, and Leila's sister, who was visiting her. I spoke mostly with Ana, as we discovered a shared passion for surfing and as we exchanged on our respective romantic engagements spanning national borders. During this first conversation, she proudly announced to me that she was going to Norway the following month to visit Michael, her Norwegian boyfriend, whom she had met six months earlier at the beach. It was the first time Ana was involved with a foreign man, and her plan was to try living in Norway for an initial three-month period before moving permanently and marrying Michael. She had even met her future in-laws via skype, whom she had introduced to her mother. Then, she also told me how she had injured herself during a surf championship and had thought of getting surgery while in Norway – a medical operation she was unable to afford in Brazil. Perhaps, if everything was to work smoothly, she could also begin a university education in medicine and eventually become a doctor – a plan that greatly pleased her future mother-in-law, who owned a pharmacy. A few weeks later when I met again with Ana on the verge of her departure to Norway, she mentioned being unsure about her feelings for Michael and living abroad, but she thought this was an opportunity she should not refuse, “*para ver se posso melhorar de vida*” (to see if I could improve my life). When I ask her why not stay

in Brazil, she replied, as if stating the obvious: “here? To do what? There are no possibilities here.”

In Natal, Ana and Leila were neighbours and sometimes frequented the bars and nightclubs of Ponta Negra together. Yet, unlike Leila, Ana did not consider herself a *garota de programa* and before dating Michael, had never been involved in any kind of relationship with a foreign man. In contrast, Leila had worked the sex trade in Ponta Negra for several years before marrying an Italian man, migrating to Italy, divorcing him after two years and finally returning to Ponta Negra. While Leila boldly identified as a *garota de programa*, Ana openly expressed disgust for women exchanging sex for money and her friendship with Leila eventually came to an end over the following months given their different take on sex, intimacy and money. While initially, Ana understood that Leila could have turned to prostitution with tourists “because she lived in the street, she had nothing to eat,” now that she had married, lived in Italy, and owns five houses in Brazil, Ana felt Leila should have stopped working in the sex trade, because, as she explained, “she does not *need* to do anything of the sort.” In other words, “before, I did not think it was wrong, because she was needy (...) but she had an opportunity to succeed and yet she still continues the same thing.” Now seen in the company of a foreign white man, it appeared that she needed to establish proper boundaries and distancing herself from Leila became a way to make a statement about who she was, and was not.

While the tensions between the two friends are clearly an expression of the many anxieties generated by sex tourism in Ponta Negra and reflect the processes of (dis)identification discussed in the previous chapter, Ana and Leila also share important similarities and both women exemplify the centrality of love and marriage in women’s

transnational mobility. In the dominant scholarly discussions on sex tourism, women like Ana are usually absent, given their lack of engagement in explicit or implicit forms of commercial sex. Yet her situation was not that different from many of the *garotas de programa* in Ponta Negra I met: she too was seeking to *sair dessa vida* and saw in foreigners, the path toward social mobility. While she sought to maintain her relationship within the realm of locally acceptable cultural scripts, she too blurred the line between love and interest. Like her friend Leila, she made strategic use of the discourse of romantic love in order to achieve other projects – yet in her case, with the approval, even incentives, of her relatives. She also oscillated between love and interest and blurred them in ways reminiscent of her friend Leila and other women engaging in various forms of commercial sex. By bringing her ambiguous intimate practices closer to Leila and other *garotas de programa* in Ponta Negra, my point is not to equate the practices of Ana and Leila, nor to argue that marriage is the ultimate form of prostitution as some would contend (Jeffreys 2009). Rather, I seek to shift the discussion away from interpretations of sex tourism as exclusively synonymous with prostitution, in order to capture its imbrications in the daily, intimate practices of low-income Brazilian women in Ponta Negra.

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In the previous chapter, I suggest that femininity is an important resource Brazilian women draw upon in their search for respectability, cultural capital, and social mobility. Yet my analysis of femininity as a form of embodied cultural capital – while illuminating complex discursive strategies – would be incomplete without a consideration

of the role of affect in mediating women's engagements with foreign men. In this chapter, I argue that while rational considerations definitely shaped women's transnational mobility, the decision to marry and migrate was rarely the result of a simple straightforward calculation. Indeed, it was often times *in the name of love* that women made the decision to move across transnational borders.

In light of the recent groundbreaking work on affect and transnational mobility (Bloch 2011; Cabezas 2009; Cheng 2010) I discuss the role of romantic love as a significant mobilizing force for women and as shaping the circuits of their mobile strategies. While love is often times made to appear as a natural, taken-for-granted, felt, intuited, embodied emotion, anthropologists have documented the ways in which love is indeed culturally constructed, discursively produced, historically and spatially situated, and inseparable from the political economy and from other matrices of power (e.g. Rebhun 1999b; Cheng 2010). Drawing on the insights of pioneering work on the politics of emotions (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990) anthropologists have engaged the complex ways in which structures of feeling (Williams 1973) are contingent upon historical and spatial practices, and provided important insights into love as both an emotion and as a discourse inseparable from its historical, social, cultural and political contexts (Rebhun 1999b; Bloch in press). They thus have examined love as an emotion that is embedded in and mediated by social practices, in addition to constituting a deeply individual and embodied experience.

Furthermore, with the intensification of patterns of global capitalism and the transnational movements of people across borders, anthropologists have produced compelling works that engage the complex intersections of love with global or



transnational processes (Bloch 2011; Cheng 2010; Constable 2003; 2005; Faier 2007; Frohlick 2009; Padilla et al 2007; Patico 2009). They have explored, as Padilla et al. put it, “the various manifestations of love as affect, as subjective experience, as interpersonal relationship, and as the expression of historically contingent political-economic structures” (Padilla et al. 2007: x–xi). Anthropologists have also argued that borders are simultaneously spaces of oppression and opportunity, and pointed to the ways in which those moving across borders negotiate and mediate new forms of power while encountering new prospects. Thus, anthropologists have produced compelling ethnographic accounts of the ways in which sentiments are remade in encounters across cultures and through mobility, while also attending to the complexity of love in movement across borders. Drawing on this innovative scholarship, I propose that ‘love’ does not exist outside the market and as such is implicated in the constitution of social structures and various forms of power. In other words, my engagement with ‘love’ is not a naive examination of love as an emotion simply felt by women for foreigners, but rather, an interrogation of the ways in which love mediates the power differentials between foreigners and Brazilian women (Cheng 2010: 133).

In what follows, I seek to make three main, broad arguments. First, I propose that to understand women’s intimate engagements with foreign men, it is important to locate their practices within what scholars have termed the *political economy of love* (Padilla et al 2007: xii; Rebhun 1999b). I suggest that women are invested in intimate practices rooted in the political economy of the Northeast of Brazil, and thus I propose that ‘love’ needs to be further situated both historically and spatially.

My second argument is that transnational love provides an important cultural script to make sense of one's mobility and thus acts as a productive force. Here, I draw on the work of scholars who have documented how women (re)make themselves as modern subjects through transnational love (Constable 2003; Cheng 2010; Faier 2007; Padilla et al. 2007; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). I suggest that the impetus of Brazilian women's transnational love comes from a desire to achieve what is seen as a modern lifestyle, and which includes, among other things, traveling abroad, eating out in classy restaurants, sending their children to private schools, speaking foreign languages, and so on. This sense of self is deeply contingent upon the ways in which Brazilian women imagine both foreigners and Europe as distinctive and superior.

My third and final argument is that intimacies with foreign men may also be a catalyst to express discontent with their social locations. Albeit couched in a language that essentializes all Brazilian men as machos, the appeal for foreigners reveals a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the patriarchal state and with the organization of gender, race, and class relations in Brazil. As Cheng proposes in a similar context: "intimate longing and relationships with the Other can also be critical commentaries on gender and regional hierarchies within the larger political economy" (2010:10; see also Faier 2007; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). The phrase *sair dessa vida* hints at this sense of estrangement and alienation (Gordillo 2002) for young, low-income, racialized women in Natal. Gringo love is thus an escape away from what is often conceived as a place "*sem futuro*" or with no good prospect for the future and into Europe, a space imagined (and at times remembered) as free of estrangement.

I opted, in this chapter, for a few selected narratives from women whom I have come to know for several months and whose stories illuminate different ways in which love is interwoven into their mobile strategies. The three arguments I seek to make will become apparent throughout these various stories. While I have already discussed the ambiguity of sex tourism itself, I have not engaged with how it is entangled within a moral economy that is also highly ambiguous. In order to grasp the significance of love for women in Ponta Negra, it is thus crucial to situate love historically and spatially. In the Northeast of Brazil, love and interest have indeed a long history of mutual intersections (rather than exclusions). Love was, and still is, both inscribed within complex matrices of power and shaped by the materiality of women's lives – an important aspect to which I now turn.

### **The Political Economy of Love in the Northeast of Brazil**

In the Brazilian Northeast, love has historically been conflated with material benefits whether between partners, relatives, or friends (Carrier-Moisan 2005; Rebhun 1999a; 1999b; Scheper-Hughes 1992:479). In her landmark ethnography of the political economy of love in Northeast Brazil, L.A. Rebhun (1999b) documents the impact of dramatic socioeconomic changes on marriage, kinship, friendship, gender, sexuality, and politics in Caruara, an interior town of the Brazilian Northeast. At the time of her fieldwork in Caruaru in the late 1980s and early 1990s, drastic economic and social transformations in the region, especially the expansion of a cash economy and rapid urbanization, translated into competing moral economies: one, based on gift exchange; and the other, on market exchange. Rebhun describes this shift as resulting in an

“ambiguous economy” where competing logics operate (i.e. gift/commodity, intimacy/the market), and where complex negotiations occur between various actors. For instance, “political relations explicitly follow a kinship model” (1999b: 50) whereby mayors, doctors, and public servants are expected to provide special treatments to those they become familiar with. In the market, ties between merchants and their customers are also ambiguous, as she suggests:

Many of the urban poor, residents of small towns in the rural zone, and rural smallholders operate largely in an old-fashioned economy of tips, favors, debts, and gifts, whereas more established merchants work on the basis of the contractual relations of a capitalist commodity-driven economy. Many inhabit an uncomfortable, ambiguous zone between the two types of exchange, each with its separate morality (1999a: 65).

This ambiguity also operates conversely in the private realm of kinship, friendship, sexuality, and romantic love, where intimate ties are tainted by the logic of the market.

As she proposes:

In an ambiguous economy like Caruaru’s, whether an emotional interaction is a gift or a commodity is both a highly charged moral question and a matter of point of view. For many impoverished women, services such as friendship, love, marriage, and sexuality are the only commodities they have to offer (1999b: 85).

While this ambiguity may not be unique to Brazil, Rebhun argues that love took particular shape in Brazil due to specific historical contingencies. She sees love as “a sentiment of social affiliation” (1999b: 17) of which romantic love is one of its expressions. Among other things, she points to the huge economic and social disparities in Brazil and therefore to the significance of economic interactions based on reciprocity, favours, mutual obligations, and gifts. Furthermore, she argues that in a context of scarcity, recession, and financial insecurity, “sharing resources is not only consequences but also *marker and seal of love*. The economic interest underlying relationships in

families and networks does not automatically diminish the sentiment people feel toward their associate: Indeed, it may intensify it” (1999b: 83; my emphasis). In other words, to some degree, material favours are seen as fostering ties rather than corrupting them, as long as framed within the moral logic of obligation, reciprocity, gift and favour.<sup>114</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), in her ethnography of maternal love in the Northeast of Brazil, also discusses the complex intersections of love and material favours. She, too, proposes that relationships in both the public and private spheres with doctors, mayors, lovers, or friends operate in a realm where love and material interests converge. She argues that people:

work their *jeitos* [way<sup>115</sup>] vertically through alliances with the rich and powerful and laterally through instrumental friendships and sexual relationships. Consequently, personal loyalties are often necessarily ‘shallow’ and they may follow a trail of gifts and favors. Love is often conflated with material favors (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 475).

In both Scheper-Hughes and Rebhun’s ethnographic descriptions, the gendered nature of these ambiguous ties becomes particularly apparent when discussing romantic love, courting practices, and marriages. Rebhun, for instance, claims that: “For men, especially, supporting one’s family economically is a sign of love, and men may be forgiven other transgressions if they are good providers, especially in comparison to other men who abandon their families” (1999b: 83). In other words, men are expected to provide for women and their children, and are assessed in terms of their ability to fulfill that role. Gregg, in her ethnography of cervical cancer in the Northeast of Brazil, also

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<sup>114</sup> In Chapter 2, I draw on Mauss (1967) to consider the kind of reciprocal obligations the gift establishes between *garotas de programa* and *gringos*. Here, I am interested in the gift economy that coexists along with a market economy in the Northeast of Brazil, *beyond* the realms of sex tourism, prostitution, or tourism.

<sup>115</sup> The word *jeito* is rich of meanings in Brazilian Portuguese, and does not translate easily in other languages. Scheper-Hughes defines it as a “quick solution to a problem or a way out of a dilemma” (1992: 472).

found that in the shantytown where she conducted research in Recife “marriage was generally defined less in terms of civil or religious unions and more in terms of economic and sexual ties” (2003: 78). Gregg pushes the gender analysis a little further than Rebhun and Scheper-Hughes and proposes that the ideal of men as providers results from the “patriarchal bargain,” which entails that “male support and protection of women is exchanged for control of female sexuality and appropriation of women’s labor and progeny” (2003: 78). Under this bargain, women are given a sense of worth and value when provided for by men, while men derive authority and control over women’s bodies from their role as providers.

According to Gregg, the patriarchal bargain crumbles in impoverished households as men are unable to fulfill their part of the bargain. This situation results in transitory and flexible arrangements broadly defined as ‘marriage’ even when couples are not legally married. Failure to fulfill the bargain thus legitimates patterns of serial monogamy and it is common, and even socially acceptable, for women to move from one ‘husband’ to the next. Scheper-Hughes echoes these findings, describing how the relationship of a couple came to an end when the ‘husband’ stopped bringing his weekly basket of food to his ‘wife’ (1992: 475). She suggests that “the definition of a ‘husband’ (...) is a functional one” (1992: 323) as men are seen as detachable and replaceable, while women and children form the stable unit. In this context of transitory, serial, and informal forms of cohabitation, what Rebhun terms “as-if” marriages (1999b: 130), the language and ideal of heterosexual, monogamous marriage remains, and couples refer to their mutual roles as those of ‘husbands’ and ‘wives’ even though in most cases they are not legally

married.<sup>116</sup> In Northeast Brazil, romantic love thus coexists with love for interest in complex ways, even *outside* the context of sex tourism.

These dominant cultural norms – albeit never fully accomplished – are crucial to make sense of the practices of women seeking to secure long-term transnational ties with foreigners in Ponta Negra. In effect, the practice of ‘as-if’ marriage and the set of gendered obligations that comes with it shape the encounters with foreigners. The ideal of men as providers is particularly salient especially since many foreigners who visit Natal complain about changing gender roles and resent what they perceived as a loss of power due to women’s economic independence in their home countries. Many men come to Ponta Negra in search of women whom they see as more ‘traditional’ and with whom they hope to play the role of provider, seeking to recuperate the ‘patriarchal bargain’ they feel they have lost in Europe. While Brazilian women in Ponta Negra similarly embrace this ideal, they may at times exploit it, refuse to comply with it or find ways to manipulate it.<sup>117</sup> For instance, some women reported that they were able to secure remittances from foreigners, often times under the agreement that their relationship

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<sup>116</sup> Both Scheper-Hughes (1992:323) and Rebhun (1999b: 129-161) document a similar shift accompanying urbanization in the Northeast of Brazil: marriages between cousins or arranged marriages having been replaced by marriages that are more consensual, flexible, transitory, serial, improvised, and informal. Rebhun reports that cohabitation is more prevalent than either civil or religious marriage (Rebhun 1999b: 155) but is nonetheless framed as “marriage”.

<sup>117</sup> Scholars have shown that Brazilian women made strategic use of this ideal using their sexuality as a resource (Goldstein 2003; Gregg 2003). Anthropologist Adriana Piscitelli proposes that “one important relationship is between a young woman and an older, richer local man who provides money and different sorts of possessions. The *velho que ajuda* (old man that helps) is a widely known, long-lasting tradition all over Brazil, and a recognized means of social mobility for different social classes” (Piscitelli 2007: 496). The *velho que ajuda* is a practice common to women whether taking part in commercial sex or not, and “relationships with the *velho* are considered by those involved to be sexual-economic exchanges, but without overt negotiations of sex for money” (2008:496). In Fortaleza, in the Northeast of Brazil, Piscitelli argues that: “many lower-class women exchanged the local *velho que ajuda* for foreign sex tourists offering more benefits” (2007:496). The practice was spoken about among the women I interviewed in Natal, but the meanings they derived from their engagements with foreign tourists is significantly different from that of older, local men: unlike the *velho que ajuda*, the *gringo que ajuda* is reified and idealized by Brazilian women. In other words, these women may be drawing on the cultural practice of the *velho que ajuda* and making strategic use of their sexuality, but their relationships with foreigners are also deeply mediated by their search for long-lasting, romantic intimacies with them.

would be exclusive and in the case of *garotas de programa*, that they would stop working in the bars and nightclubs. In practice however, women did not always abide by this agreement and some women were expert at securing remittances from several men simultaneously. The idea that men ought to provide for women was so pervasive in Ponta Negra that waiters in bars, restaurants, and nightclubs would almost exclusively present the bills to men. Men would commonly pay for women's drinks and food, even when women were in groups of three, four, or five, and men were alone. Some foreign men – especially those with extensive length of stays in Natal – even complained about the expectations they ought to pay for a woman at all times. The owner of a travel agency, Boris, a Belgian man in his early forties living in Natal for the last seven years, perhaps best captures the extent to which women manipulate this ideal to their own advantage: “I don't have a problem with paying the bill in a restaurant. The thing that I have a problem with, is that let's say you go to the movies, and it cost nine reais, even then, they have nine reais, they can afford a movie, but they don't.” In Europe, things were different, as his previous girlfriend would alternate with him to pay the bills. In Natal, he was expected to pay, as a man, “everything, you pay 100%, you pay everything,” which includes “the doctor, the dentist, the family, the dog, everything, everything!”

Yet for many women, gifts, material favours, and money foster ties rather than corrupting them. Thus, the ideal of men as providers may also take place in the context of romantic love and intimacy. The concept of *strategic intimacy*, as developed by Alexia Bloch (2011), helps to delve into the complexity of the interplay of love and interest in the transnational ties that developed between Brazilian women and foreign men. Like post-Soviet women in Turkey, they too, engage in forms of intimacy that “are



fundamental to their long-term well-being and often blur the divide between emotional and instrumental ties, or between love and transaction” (2011: 502). I find the concept of strategic intimacy useful to consider the practices of women like Ana, invested in securing long-term ties with foreigners as girlfriends or wives, and blurring love and interest in ways that may not be adequately described in monetary or labour terms. Women in Ponta Negra were invested in forging “transnational circuits of mobility” (Bloch 2011) beyond, or *even outside*, the realm of prostitution and the public sphere of work through intimate practices with foreigners that drew upon the ideal of men as providers and the practice of ‘as-if’ marriage. A closer examination of Ana’s story indeed reveals the complex ways she sought to both inscribe herself within the acceptable, dominant cultural scripts of men as providers and made strategic use of them. The concept of strategic intimacy thus allows considering the blur of instrumentality and love, and the complex ways in which love is inseparable from the local and global political economy.

### **Ana’s Strategic Intimacies: “Para ver se Posso Melhorar de Vida”<sup>118</sup>**

In August 2007, a couple of weeks before her departure, I interviewed Ana and then stayed in touch with her by email during her stay in Norway. I also spent time with her once she was back in December 2007, and met her mother on various occasions and eventually interviewed her too in May 2008. Through these various encounters, I came to understand Ana’s strategic intimacies as inscribed within local cultural scripts and to see her attempts to *sair dessa vida* as closely entangled with those of *garotas de programa* and other women engaging in implicit forms of commercial sex.

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<sup>118</sup> Translates as “To see if I can improve my life”.

Ana had met Michael while teaching surfing at the beach. A 36-year-old special educator who had never married, he had heard from a friend in Norway that Natal was a good place to find a marriageable young Brazilian woman, and he had come to Natal with the hope of finding a Brazilian wife-to-be. According to Ana, he was disappointed to see many women engaging in prostitution and was glad to meet a woman who did not ask for money – a ‘normal’ woman, in his words. He had been watching her surfing for a couple of days before approaching her and had eventually invited her for lunch, which Ana had initially refused: “I did not want to approach him because here, in Ponta Negra, the way people look at a Brazilian woman with a gringo, you know what it is, no? It’s a puta, right?” After a few days of the same scenario, Ana eventually agreed to date him. Yet as a *morena*, young, low-income Brazilian woman, her engagement with a significantly older, wealthier, and whiter foreign man could potentially be seen as suspicious by her relatives, friends, and neighbours. Ana’s stepfather worked at a food stand by the beach, which contributed to her hesitation to date him. Once Ana began dating Michael, the assumption was that she must have become a *garota de programa*, a rumour that Ana struggled hard to dispel: “where I lived, people were gossiping.” Furthermore, “everyone at the beach was looking [at us]. He was even scared ‘what’s going on, Ana?’ Everyone is looking at us!’ (..) So I explained to him the whole situation of the beach here.” Ana was thus reluctant to introduce him to her relatives and friends:

I took him to my house, I was afraid of my family’s reaction. How would they treat him? What would they think? The people in the streets, when I would pass with him, *galego* (Galician), with blue eyes, and me, *morena*. So I was expecting a reaction, and I got another: everybody liked him!

Ana thought Michael was different from all her previous Brazilian boyfriends and shared with other Brazilian women the dominant view of foreigners as gentlemen (see

Chapter 4), as she says: “Michael treats me much better, he’s more polite, he’s more romantic.” For instance, she explains: “If I’m sitting here, and one of those guys selling roses passes, he doesn’t buy a rose, he buys all of them.” He would also give her a lot of attention. Her former Brazilian boyfriends were less caring according to her: “They gave me attention, but not like him, you understand? He was much different. The concern that he had... If I had a cold, he was already with a medicine, with a doctor. (...) The other, if I had a cold, he [would say] ‘it will pass, it will pass, buy a medicine. So it was different.” Six months after Michael’s first two-week visit, he came back to visit Ana for another two-week period. When I met her in August, he had just left and they had recently decided she would visit him next in September, on a tourist visa. She would go for the maximum period allowed, three months, and this would serve as a trial to see whether Ana could see herself moving to Norway permanently. After this first period, she planned to return and marry him.

After Michael left on his first visit, he had asked Ana to stop working in Ponta Negra’s shopping mall. Ana had been working since she was 14 years old as a clerk in various shops or as a waitress. She had contributed her wage to the household expenses, living with her mother, stepfather, and four year-old brother. Michael asked her to stop working because he was jealous of the foreign men she could potentially meet while working in the mall. As Ana explains:

So because we are morenas, you understand these things about being morena? When the gringos come [to the shopping mall], they go buying but sometimes [they say] ‘give me your phone number’, ‘you’re very pretty’. So [Michael] saw that too. (...) He didn’t like it. He thought it was better for me to stay home. Normal. I agreed.

In exchange, he sent her the equivalent of what she would have earned in a month (400 reais), fulfilling the expected role of provider. Thus for the previous four months before our interview in September 2007, Michael had sent money once a month, and even more when Ana requested, freeing her from work and allowing her to help her mother with the care of her younger brother, household chores, and the small convenience store her mother ran from her home:

If I were to need something before in the month, he would send [more money] anytime I need. I just have to talk to him 'I'm in need of such and such' 'Okay, okay Ana'. He goes and he sends [the money], because he met my family, he saw my house, he saw that I had no luxury (...) that I needed to work. So if he was pulling me out of work, he had to provide for me (*ele tinha que me manter*). Because .. because I make a living from work. I live in my mother's house, understand? So that's why [he sends me money].

In her decision to stop working and leave for Norway, Ana was encouraged by her mother who saw Michael as a good potential husband for her daughter. While there was a lot of stigma associated with dating foreigners, Ana's mother, Maria, readily agreed to their relationship. Foreign men, as we saw previously, were also imagined as better men than local men, and Ana's mother thought that her daughter would have better opportunities in Europe: "Because here, there's not much to offer." She told me "there's nothing here" adding that with her convenience store, she was barely making it, doing it "to just survive." Indeed, for Ana's mother, the instrumentality of the relationship did not alter her vision of this relationship as legitimate and respectable as long as remaining within the moral economy of the gift exchange. Furthermore, it was important for her mother that Ana would eventually travel to Norway in order to dispel rumours about her daughter, as among her neighbours, "a woman who go out with a gringo, it's a

prostituta”. Thus she strongly encouraged Ana to travel to Norway “so that the people would stop talking.”

Interestingly, while Ana expressed disgust and disapproval for her friend Leila because she was selling sex, she did not profess feeling love for Michael nor deny her own interest such as the possibility to study and to have a stable and secured future. Indeed, she told me of how she liked Michael (*gostar*) but did not love him (*amar*), and it seems as if there was no stigma attached to the gift, money, or material benefits she could secure from him, as long as framed within the acceptable role of men as providers. She thus explained to me she decided to go to Norway “*para ver se posso melhorar de vida*” (to see if I can improve my life). In addition, she said that it was her turn to help her mother, and that she was tired to see her mother overworked: “my main goal is to give *uma vida melhor* (a better life) to my mother. I don’t want her to still have to kill herself with work. I want her to be chilled (...) I want to give *uma vida boa* (a good life) to my mother. The rest doesn’t matter.” Ana was following in the steps of her mother, who was living with a Brazilian man she did not like, but whom she considered a good man for helping her financially. In the words of her mother: “I don’t like him [but] I’ve never lacked anything because I have him in my life.” She explains why she ‘married’ Ana’s stepfather, right after Ana’s father abandoned them, 19 years earlier: “I didn’t marry for love, no. I married to raise my daughter. (...) I wanted to give her a place, and I don’t regret it... even today!”

Ana thus thought that it was now her turn to contribute to the household expenses, following on the path of her mother by looking for a good provider: “my mother did everything for me, now it’s my turn.” Ana too was worried about what people in her

neighbourhood thought. When she finally received the flight ticket by email, she printed it and circulated it in her neighbourhood as it represented a proof of the authenticity of her relationship with Michael. She could now show she was, after all, a respectable woman on her way to visit her future husband. In other words, to accept Michael's invitation to Norway meant inserting herself into a respectable, hetero-normative conjugal arrangement fitting with local cultural scripts.

Until her departure, Ana remained anxious about leaving Natal and made sure she would have a plan in case things did not work out with Michael. She had a Brazilian friend living in Oslo who would come to the airport to meet her and Michael, and they would initially stay with her for a couple of days. As Ana was going to be residing in Bergen, several hundred kilometres away from Oslo, Ana and her friend also made plans to visit each other on weekends. In this way, Ana was making sure she would counter the potential sadness of being away for the first time and avoid being too lonely in a place where she did not speak the language. She was also making her stay with her boyfriend safer, by having him introduced to her friend and by knowing a place where she could go to in case of trouble. As she said: "I'm just a bit afraid, right? I think it's normal. As I don't know the language, it will be a little tricky". Mostly, Ana was afraid of feeling lonely, of "getting into depression" because it was her first time being away for such a long time, in a foreign place. When asked about how she imagined Norway, she answered she knew little about it, but had heard from her friend already living there that it was not always easy: "she says that in the beginning, you always get into depression. [She also says] that she missed it here, that the climate is different. Things like that. But she says she does not regret being there and that she likes Brazil a lot, but just for

Holidays.” Thus, while she thought of Norway as where opportunities lie, she also did not thought of her experience there naively.

Her careful planning proved to be quite useful, as after only ten days in Norway, Ana took off, feeling like a prisoner in Michael’s home mostly because he did not allow her to go out and threatened to restrict her use of the Internet to communicate with her family if she were to complain to her mother. Ana was afraid this would only escalate further and decided to head for her friend’s house in Oslo. She spent the rest of the three months prior to her return flight at her friend’s house and eventually secured work, cleaning rooms in a hotel-restaurant. A couple of weeks prior to her return to Brazil, Ana became involved with another Norwegian man, this time, feeling in love with him (*apaixonada*).

Back in Brazil, Ana made plans to go back again to Norway to reunite with her new Norwegian boyfriend, and in spite of her initial disappointment, was more than ever convinced she wanted a life away from Ponta Negra. Her desire was highly motivated by her new love, but also, by the conviction that there were more possibilities to have a good quality of life *lá* (there). This included: access to a decent wage, a life without fear of violence, where “ the police does not beat us,” where the government was providing loans to study and a university education was a possibility, and where her skin colour and Brazilianness – though perceived negatively by Norwegian women – was seen as exotic among men.

Ana’s story illustrates the intricacies of women’s intimacies, which rely on the use of love to establish mutual ties of obligation and the ideal of man as the provider. In

this sense, it fits with local cultural scripts;<sup>119</sup> yet in other ways we can also read Ana as challenging or even appropriating the ideal of man as the provider to suit her own goals. Ana thus challenges common assumptions about women's emancipation: with her financial reliance on Michael to get by while in Ponta Negra and her willingness to stop working at his request, she suggests compliance with the patriarchal bargain. Yet, Ana was not naively "in love" with Michael or willing to relinquish total control of her body, or sacrifice everything for money or a visa either. Eventually, she refused the terms of the bargain, and decided to leave, in pursuit of other goals.

Perhaps more crudely, however, Ana's story reveals the significance of marriage to a foreigner as an escape,<sup>120</sup> a way out of a life that is deemed too difficult to sustain – and in her case, not because of her engagements as a *garota de programa* but because of the constraints she experienced in Natal, as a low-income *morena*. Like Larissa, whose story I recount in Chapter 5, Ana saw few possibilities and no future for herself in Brazil. Her feeling of estrangement in Natal was thus similar to women involved in the sex trade and her desire for mobility motivated by the same ideals of a better life abroad. Ana also framed her decision in a discourse reminiscent of the women who were engaged in the sex trade. For one thing, she too was hoping to *sair dessa vida*. While what she referred to as "this life" was not paid sex with foreigners, this idea similarly expressed a feeling of estrangement: for Ana, it meant a lack of economic opportunities, limited possibilities to

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<sup>119</sup> This cultural logic, however, does not operate evenly across race and class. Indeed, it was quite distinct for middle class women: for instance, the daughter of a university professor narrated how she would have never accepted a flight ticket from her Spanish boyfriend because it would have indicated that she was "interested". While Ana was considered 'respectable' as long as she could establish her boyfriend was truly inviting her to Norway; for the daughter of a university professor, however, economic dependence on a gringo would be seen as disreputable.

<sup>120</sup> Transnational love and marriage as a mean to remake oneself and achieve upward mobility is not unique to the context of Brazil (see for instance Constable 2005; 2003), and has a long history. For instance, in early twentieth century Canada, Japanese 'pictures brides' (i.e. women who married men transnationally following an exchange of photos) sought to achieve upward mobility through marriage (Makabe 1995).



study, as well as daily experiences of violence. In the street where she lived, shootings related to the drug traffic were frequent, she told me, and a woman was recently shot just in front of her house where her mother operated the small convenience store. For Ana, marital migration seems to be the way to *sair dessa vida*, as well as to improve both her and her mother's life.

Thus, *sair dessa vida* constitutes a deeply spatialized phrase that is particularly significant in grasping the experience of women who engage with foreigners and who seek to migrate and marry. Ana, too, saw life in Europe, *lá*, as better than in Brazil – for both love and money. Ana's engagement with Michael, while certainly inscribed within the local political economy of love, was also partly motivated by the cartography of desire that places European men at the top of hierarchy of ideal men, and Europe, as the place where opportunities lie. Depicted in the media as naïve women duped by the dreams of encountering their prince charming, women in Ponta Negra were certainly “on the move for love” (Cheng 2010), but, as the story of Ana reveals, they were far from naïve. Yet, they were neither simply manipulative nor instrumental in their projects of mobility. Love deeply mediated their transnational circuits, in a myriad of ways. In what follows, I turn to a woman whose story – albeit unique in many ways – was echoed by many other women who made the choice of moving abroad “in the name of love.”

### **Júlia's Strategic Intimacies: Gringo Love as Salvation**

Júlia captures both this sense of escape from *essa vida* and this attraction for foreigners and Europe, processes that were deeply intertwined in women's narratives. Júlia was not typical yet her life experience illustrates the wide range of possibilities and

the intricacies of women's engagements with foreigners. At 38 years old, she was the oldest among my interviewees and had spent the longest time in Europe, specifically 15 years in Switzerland. A native of Natal, her late teens were marked by a tragic event that led her to leave her hometown; she was gang raped and beaten in retaliation for a shooting in which her boyfriend, a police officer, was involved. Partly because of that bad experience, but also partly attracted to Rio de Janeiro and the promises of a better life she imagined she would encounter there, Júlia decided to leave Natal for Rio: "It was almost 15 years ago. There were no gringos in Natal. And I wanted to date foreigners. So I knew that in Rio de Janeiro it was full [of foreigners], no? Because it passed on the TV. I don't know how many tourists arrived in Rio de Janeiro for the New Year. So we went really close to the New Year."

In the early 1990s, Natal had no international flights and almost no developed infrastructure for tourism, and North-easterners commonly dreamed of prosperity in the South and Southeast of Brazil, popularly imagined as more developed and modernized than the Northeast. Júlia was able to secure a free flight on a military plane due to medical reasons (which she falsified with the help of a doctor) and headed for Rio de Janeiro with a friend (who was supposed to assist her in the hospital) and with only 50 reais in hand. While she could have stayed with relatives there and secured work as a nurse, Júlia eventually became involved in prostitution in the tourist district of Copacabana. She explained she was seduced by what she saw there: "the girl, there, were all beautiful [with] their hair done, their perfumes, full of gifts. So I was seeing a lot of people, gringos, no, who came from Europe, who came from all parts of the world." In Rio, she made a Brazilian female friend who had already lived in Europe and who

suggested to Júlia the possibility of marrying a foreigner: “she kept saying: ‘marry with a foreigner, marry with a foreigner, *muda de vida* (change your life), go away to Europe, you have to discover Europe.’”

At the time, Rio de Janeiro was “the bridge to Europe” according to Júlia, who was impressed by her friend’s fashionable look and money. She decided to follow her friend’s advice and began doing *programa* in Copacabana including in the famous discoteca *A Help*<sup>121</sup> in order to meet foreigners. For her then, the appeal for foreigners was thus partly mediated by her desire for a modern lifestyle and identity, but it was contingent upon her previous experiences with Brazilian men too. As she explained, when I asked her why she preferred foreign men:

I think because I’ve seen so much what daddy did with mummy. Other experiences from my friends [who were] pregnant, and a brasileiro would leave her, or beat his wife, or kill his wife. There is so much violence against women in Brazil! I’ve endured abuses from brasileiro. I didn’t succeed in marrying a brasileiro, I could not see myself marrying a Brazilian man. I dated one for four years. When I wanted to get marry, when I began talking about it, talking about having children (...) he didn’t want to, his mother did not want to. She wanted him to marry someone with money. Brazilians are very prejudiced. They have more prejudices than Europeans.

Her Brazilian in-laws disapproved of her union with her boyfriend because she was not university educated and had done ‘only’ a technical degree in nursing: “I didn’t have a training that gave me money. I studied for auxiliary nurse only. He wanted a university-educated woman (*uma mulher formada*). And his mother wanted *uma mulher formada*, because he was a captain in the Navy, he was a military [marine]”.

For Júlia, part of the incentive to date foreigners was the idea that they were not as prejudiced as Brazilians, which she tried to explain to her boyfriend at the time:

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<sup>121</sup> The discoteca *A Help* opened in 1984 and became internationally famous in the 90s for attracting foreign male tourists looking to meet Brazilian *garotas de programa*. It eventually closed in 2009 (Folha Online 2009).

I said ‘no, at least the foreign men doesn’t ask me a diploma to marry him. (...) My friends who married with Europeans, who are in Europe, they [their husbands] did not ask for a university diploma. They don’t marry with a diploma, they marry with a woman. You want to marry a diploma, or you want to marry a woman?’ I said: “I did not have the [financial] conditions to go to university, it’s not now that I’ll go. I don’t go because I don’t have the [financial] conditions.”

Initially, Júlia was doing programa with both brasileiros and gringos but eventually she began frequenting nightclubs catering mostly to gringos:

Because when I saw *os estrangeiros* (the foreign men), I didn’t want to simply do programa in Rio de Janeiro, I wanted to namorar. Because I thought the foreign men were so handsome, no? For me, it was something from another world. It was men for real (*era homens de vez*). Because with me, they were sweet, romantic, they gave me gifts, they brought us to the shopping malls (...). Everything that a Brazilian man was not doing for me, I found it in the foreign man. So I mean this type of men has conquered me, conquered me in such a way that I said “I don’t want to marry with a Brazilian man anymore.” Because I’ve discovered that in the world, there are people who are more affectionate, more humans. I’ve met many good people, many bad people too but the majority of *europesos* (European men) in comparison to brasileiros, they’re better!

In Copacabana, Júlia met her future husband, Jacques, while at the beach. He was a medical doctor from Switzerland, in his mid-forties, recently separated from his wife. According to Júlia, both were lonely and looking for companionship when they met. For her, it was important to meet someone for love; she had previously received a flight ticket to Germany as a gift from a German tourist but refused to go because she did not love him. She thought: “I’ll go when I’ll meet the person that I love,” and she made a promise to herself that she would only leave Brazil when meeting a foreigner with whom she would fall in love: “I’ll do everything, everything to never leave this man, because he’ll save me, he’ll save my life.” And indeed, Jacques was, in the words of Júlia, her salvation, partly because he helped her combat tuberculosis but also because he brought her to Europe and provided her with a better life, the one she had always dreamed of (albeit fraught with many difficulties and only temporarily as I describe below).

Shortly after meeting Jacques, Júlia went to Switzerland where she lived for 15 years, from 1992 to 2007. When I met her, she had been back in Natal for a couple of months, after being deported from Switzerland, following her divorce from Jacques. Her stay in Switzerland was difficult, as she endured what she described as years of ostracism and racism from his family and friends, who were convinced that Júlia was ‘self-interested’ rather than ‘truly in love’. It took four years until Júlia and Jacques eventually married, four years during which she was deported three times for overstaying her tourist visa. When she was found ill and treated for tuberculosis, she was allowed to stay in Switzerland on humanitarian grounds for about a year. After her recovery, Jacques agreed to marry her, and they remained together for an additional 10 years. Yet Júlia was still missing a year to get full citizenship when Jacques requested a divorce. She said she eventually agreed to sign the divorce paperwork, not because she wanted to divorce him, but in order to prove once and for all that she was truly loving him and not primarily interested in getting citizenship. “I said no, I’ll sign [the paperwork] ‘cause everybody said I wanted the passport from Switzerland. So I’ll sign, for him to get a big proof, I’ll sign to show him how much good I want for him. My passport would have come the next year. I would have had two passports.” Júlia decided to let go of her citizenship rights, as an ultimate proof of love, in spite of the important implications this would have for her future. After 15 years in Switzerland, she had no right to stay in the country, and eventually had to leave.

Júlia remembers her time in Switzerland as a tumultuous one. During the interview, she narrated her life story in fragments, jumping back and forth in time, and thus, complicating a chronological understanding of her life. To be sure, her 15 years in

Switzerland included serious hardships, among others: serial deportation, severe depression, drug abuse, racism, ostracism, and a suicide attempt resulting in her forced hospitalization in a psychiatric institution. In Switzerland, Júlia had to face constant suspicions about her relationship with Jacques, and this generated anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation during her whole time there. Her father-in-law was both verbally and physically violent toward her never accepting that his son had re-married a Brazilian woman. He would utter insults, telling her, for instance “go away from my country, you won’t stay here, *voce é uma brasileira de merda* (you’re a shitty Brazilian woman), I don’t want my son to marry a brasileira.” He would evoke her nationality when insulting her, something Júlia encountered with other people and which she attributed to the belief, in Switzerland, that all Brazilian women are prostitutes, and by association, bad women. As she explains: “As people badmouth about Brazil, Cuba, and other countries where there are so many girls doing prostitution, you are judged and condemned as if all the same. Because when a country has so much prostitutas, you are judged the same way, many people think like that.” She succeeded in challenging the expectations people had of her, because many thought that after a few years, she would leave Jacques. Yet, as she says, “instead of spending five years, I spent 15 years, and until today I still like him!” In addition to Jacques’ father, his friends, mostly other doctors, remained suspicious of her ‘true’ motivations. They suspected, according to Júlia, that she was only interested in his money and obtaining a “red passport”. The problem, according to her, was that, “because he was a doctor, both his family and his doctor friends did not want him to marry a brasileira, a woman who did not have the same level of education as he had.”

The irony, in Júlia's story, is that she decided to marry a European man because she felt reduced to a diploma (or lack thereof) with Brazilian men. Her narrative also hints at prejudices, discrimination and racism she faced for being a Brazilian woman. In spite of her bad experience in Switzerland, Júlia was still hoping for a life abroad, seen as better than anything she could potentially get in Brazil: "I've found in Switzerland a country that has everything, everything that I don't have here (...). *Là*, there was everything that I need. So I mean, I felt in love, (...) a country so right, I wanted my country to be the same." At 38 years old, after a long stay in Switzerland, Júlia was back in her hometown, and when I met her, she had recently begun frequenting the nightclubs and bars of Ponta Negra and working as a *garota de programa*. She said she was still hoping for love, including with her ex-husband. While she boldly identified as a *garota de programa*, she also frequently went *de graça* with foreign men when feeling attraction and/or affection for them. After being economically and romantically successful for many years, and following an extensive stay in Switzerland, Júlia was back in her hometown, doing *programa*, with the same goal in mind as 15 years earlier, when she had left Natal for Rio: *sair dessa vida*.

While Júlia's story is mediated by her personal turmoil, it is also part of the "cartographies of desire" (Pflugfelder 1999 cited in Constable 2005: 7) emerging in projects of social mobility for other Brazilian women. Her reification of foreigners, as well as of Europe – despite her difficult experience there – does not signal her inability to see clearly, but rather, a deep sense of alienation in her hometown and a refusal to accept the limited possibilities she sees in a life with a Brazilian man and in Brazil. Although not all women had such a harsh story, it was common for many of the women returnees I

interviewed to narrate stories of hardship in Europe and to still dream of a life abroad.

While some commentators see women as blindly reifying foreigners (and essentializing all Brazilian men as machos), I think of their collective imaginings as a critique of patriarchy and unequal gender relations in Brazil in a similar way to Schaeffer-Grabel (2004: 34-5) in her analysis of Mexican women seeking cybermarriages with U.S. men.

As she proposes:

Mexican women turn to foreign men and lifestyles as a way to escape traditional value systems in the family, a corrupt and unstable government, and confining definitions of gender and womanhood. As women articulate their hopes to leave what is oppressive about Mexican men (and Mexico) for a seemingly more open and liberating journey with foreign men (and the United States), they demonstrate how powerful such a shift is in their imaginary – from national to transnational citizenship – can be. The space of the foreign offers greater prospects for self-improvement and growth through a more intimate and equitable marriage partner, opportunities to travel, better education, and sometimes careers.

Thus these Mexican women reject local gender arrangements and seek ways to make up for the failures of the state and market outside of their nation. While the women in Schaeffer-Grabel's study are middle class women and perhaps in a better position to achieve success, they share with the Brazilian women I interviewed a critique of local gender relations and fascination for the foreign – seen as where opportunities lie.

Constable (2005) argues that the impetus for women's transnational marriages commonly goes beyond material motivations. According to her, women are also motivated by a desire for lifestyles they perceive as modern and for husbands also imagined as modern. This appeal for modernity and modern men is shared by women in a wide range of locations including Turkey, Japan, and Mexico (e.g. Bloch 2003; Kelsky 2001; Schaeffer-Grabel 2004). These women seem to associate modernity with self-fulfillment, individualism, and equality. In the words of Padilla et al.: "love – and the



practice of affective consumption that surrounds it – has become a strategy for affective mobility, and a very individually oriented technique for framing oneself as a modern subject” (2007: xviii). Through the transnational circuits forged between Natal and various locations in Europe, love provides a template to live modernity and to engage in the practices of consumption that are so closely entangled with it.

As their narratives reveal and as discussed in Chapter 4, women such as Júlia express the possibility to consume goods and experiences as one of the main advantages of engaging in economic/sexual/amorous relationships with foreigners: they differentiate themselves from other Brazilian women by pointing to their knowledge of fine dining, their trips to nearby beaches, their experiences living abroad, the brand clothing, shoes, handbags, or perfumes they wear, the display of the latest in technological devices including iPhones, cell phones, mini-DVDs, iPods, laptops, and so on. Love is as Faier, contends “a term of global self-making: at once a language and a set of conditions through which these women articulated globally recognizable forms of agency and subjectivity within transnational relations of power” (2007: 149). Drawing on Foucault, she considers love as a “a self-making term, part of those ‘techniques of the self’ (...) through which women not only established and conformed to rules of conduct but also sought to transform themselves and their lives through their global encounters” (2007: 150). Through the practices of transnational love, then, women are able to engage in practices that would not be accessible to them otherwise, at least, not via legal means. Love is thus their passport to lifestyles, commodities, and identities that allow them to transform themselves and to access what they imagine and understand as a better place. Yet this desire is also part of what they frame as an escape from their estranged life in

Ponta Negra (and the rest of Brazil). Indeed, their desire for modernity and their search for an escape away from the alienation of Ponta Negra are contingent upon each other and mutually constitutive, as we have glimpsed with Ana's and Júlia's stories. I now turn to Leila, Ana's friend, a woman whose narrative and life story complicates my discussion of love as a mobilizing force in projects of social, economic, and spatial mobility.

### **Leila: Love Hurts**

Leila, with whom I opened this chapter, reveals the complex, at times contradictory ways love is interwoven in projects of social mobility and mediates power relations with foreign men. A 27-year-old mother of two children, she had been *nessa vida*, or in this life, since 2000 – that is for eight years when I interviewed her. During this period, she had lived in Italy for three years, married to an Italian man she had met in the context of sex tourism and from whom she eventually got legally separated. Unlike many other women in Ponta Negra, Leila did not hope for love with a gringo, but rather thought of love as a painful experience she preferred to avoid in the future. For her, *not* loving was a “necessary distance” to realize her own mobile aspirations independently. She was hoping to migrate to Europe, which she saw in ideal terms and as the way to *sair dessa vida* in a similar fashion to other women in Ponta Negra, but without the help of anyone, including foreign men. Yet love had been an important mobilizing force for Leila; it was, after all, in its name that she had initially moved to Italy, as we shall see.

Leila was born in Recife, the third of seven siblings, and after her father abandoned the whole family, they all came to live in the countryside, in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. When she was seven years old, her mother gave her to a wealthy family

in Natal in exchange for monthly payments. Leila stayed with this family until she was 15, and developed an ambiguous relationship with her “second mother,” as she referred to the woman who took care of her: while she felt treated “*como uma filha*” (as a daughter) she also thought that her second mother considered her “*como se fosse uma empregada*” (as if I were a maid). The arrangement indeed resembled more child labour than adoption, as Leila had to work in the house and was differentiated from the biological daughter of the woman who took care of her. As Leila explains: “her daughter had private school, of course, it’s her daughter! Her daughter was going to the pool, her daughter was doing a lot of nice things that I also wanted to do, but I couldn’t.” Among other things, Leila really wanted to frequent school, and went only for a brief period when she was 13 years old. At 15, she fled the house and never came back because her second mother wanted to force her into marriage. Leila then began working as a domestic worker, which she described as particularly exploitative: “People treated me badly, maybe because I was black, maybe because I was poor, I don’t know. I would work but people would not pay me.” Shortly after leaving the house of her second mother, she met the father of her two children, who initially hid from her that he was already married. He agreed to provide for her after learning she was pregnant, convincing Leila to keep the child : “he told me ‘no, you won’t get an abortion, I’ll put you in a house and you will live with me but I can’t always be with you’. Because he was married, so he had to share [between his wife and me].” She had her first child, a son, and shortly after, her daughter, but then her boyfriend left her for another woman (one of her friends). Leila was left alone to take care of her children and remained bitter about Brazilian men after that experience: “the majority of Brazilian men want to take advantage of women,

because [here, in Brazil] there are many women and few men. So they chose which girls they want, you know. It's difficult for us, they use women a lot. And now, not a single Brazilian man uses me anymore because I don't want, I don't like Brazilian men."

Leila thus continued working as a domestic worker until one of her *patroa* (boss, patron) introduced her to Ponta Negra: "she saw my situation, she helped me a lot." Among other things, "she studied Spanish, she started to teach me a little of Spanish. From time to time, when it was my day off, at weekends (...) she would go in the car with me, and we would go to this restaurant, *Frutos do Mar* (Seafood) that's located right here, because she would say 'there are many interesting men who respect women, who like morenas'." During one such evening, Leila met a man from Sweden: "the first gringo I went out with was Swedish, he spoke English. I didn't understand anything but I realized he wanted to go out with me, no? So I was still scared but I went out with him and my patroa went home. I came back the next day in the morning. Then he paid me so I thought: wow, why is he giving me all this money?" Leila learned from her patroa she could find men like him at Ponta Negra's beach. By then, international tourism in Natal was not as omnipresent as in the mid-2000s and Ponta Negra was not yet infamous for sex tourism. Leila thus went to Ponta Negra's beach and met again the same Swedish man, staying with him for an additional two months:

I stayed two months [with him] but then later he preferred another woman. Because I had my children, he had to help me. He preferred another woman. Also then as I had already started, I liked it. Well, I didn't like to do what I'm doing but, well... I liked it because I was getting money [that was] more ... more ... easy. Because when I worked [as a domestic worker] I earned very little money.

Encouraged by her patroa, Leila decided to stop working in her house as a domestic worker and began doing programa regularly in Ponta Negra. By then, she was

20 years old. The monetary advantage, for her, was significant: “as a domestic worker, it’s very little money. So what I received in a month working [as a domestic worker] I get it here [in Ponta Negra] in an hour.” While doing programa, she met Federico, an Italian man who would become her future husband. Keeping in touch after he left, he eventually asked her over the phone whether she would marry him, about six months after they had initially met:

So I said yes, because he knew my history, my life. So then I told him: “me, of course all I want is to get married and sair dessa vida but I don’t want to get married just to get married. I want to have someone, *eu quero ter amor* (I want to have love)”. I liked him, but I wanted him to like me as much as I liked him. Then he [said]: “but I love you” and so on. Fine, we got married but before I told him “I want to have a normal life, as husband and wife, but I also want to have a little freedom, like, (...) if I make friendship in Italy, I want to go out with my friends some day. And then I also want to have your child because I didn’t have time to spend with my children, they’ve always stayed with my mother when they were young. So I want to have a baby again. He said: “all I want is to have a child too.” I got married, I went to Italy, then when I got there after a year... he always said he was poor but after a year I discovered he wasn’t poor, he was rich and his family didn’t want me to have his son.

While sair dessa vida through marriage was important for Leila, she was also after romantic love, but in a more egalitarian relationship or modern arrangement where she could have “a little freedom.”<sup>122</sup> She thus agreed to marry Federico but then felt betrayed, as things did not work out the way she had planned with him. In Italy, Leila realized that her in-laws did not want her to have a child with her husband because they thought that she would “take their things” that is, that she was self-interested. Thus, they did not have any child together. Similarly to Júlia, she had to face suspicions about her “real” intentions. As a result, she went into depression and her in-laws began “to despise me, to

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<sup>122</sup> Hirsh and Wardlow (2006) show how the ideology of companionate marriage, which is based on intimacy and mutual affection, has become globalized. They argue that while modern love is not always practically achievable and mediated by local contexts, it still operates as an ideal in various cross-cultural contexts. This ideal operates in Ponta Negra, as Leila’s narrative suggests.

despise me, to despise me to the point of beating me.” Both her father-in-law and brother-in-law were physically violent towards her, while her husband “did nothing” to defend her. “He said: ‘I can’t be against my family. Because here people can’t have depression. People here live a good life. And we have to present a good image for people.’” In their logic, Leila could not be depressed because she was supposedly having a good life in Italy, and was thus resented by her in-laws for being depressed.

Moreover, she should have happily relinquished control of her body and movement in exchange for being provided for. Leila was not allowed to visit friends or go shopping on her own and felt “like a prisoner.” Federico was expecting a woman that would clean and cook for him: “I think he wanted a slave woman, to do the things he wanted. Like a maid, no? Because before, he lived alone, he had to do the things so he married me to be his maid.” He was, in her words “from this old time,” expecting a traditional woman. He was also demanding sexual access to her body whenever he wanted and Leila recounted an incident when Federico forced her to have sexual intercourse, close to the time she eventually left him. After a year in Italy, Leila was allowed to work outside the home upon the recommendation of a doctor to cure a depression; otherwise her husband would not have agreed to let her work outside the home. However she was never far from his control: she worked in the same factory as him.<sup>123</sup> After three years in Italy, Leila decided to come back to Natal and legally separated from Federico. When I interviewed her in January 2008, she had been legally separated for a year and a half and was waiting the divorce paperwork to be sorted.

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<sup>123</sup> She was able to buy her first house with the money earned, which she gave to her biological mother who still lived in the countryside of Rio Grande do Norte.

This experience had left Leila particularly reluctant to rely on men to achieve economic and social mobility, unlike the majority of women in Ponta Negra. When I interviewed her, she was pursuing the possibility of moving permanently to Venice in Italy with her two children and younger brother who was university-educated and could secure work more easily than her other siblings. Speaking Italian, Spanish, and English, Leila thought that she could work as a waitress or in the tourism industry and earn good money there independently of anyone. She owned several houses in Brazil (in Natal and in the country side near Natal) bought with the money she received from her legal separation, and was planning on selling two of them (which were adjacent) in order to pay for the initial cost of moving back to Italy. Like Ana and Júlia, she was hoping to *sair dessa vida* and could not imagine herself living in Brazil: “I can’t, I can’t *sair dessa vida* here and work here! To get 300 reais? It’s not [enough].” She estimated her monthly expenses at about 1000 reais and she could not see herself able to make a living properly earning the minimum wage (which at the time was almost 300 reais). Furthermore, she was worried about the future of her children and thought that she could provide them with a better life in Europe. Leila lived on the same street as Ana, and like her, she saw Europe in stark contrast to Brazil, especially in terms of educational and employment opportunities, as well as in terms of violence and safety:

I prefer [going to Europe] because it’s not enough, it’s not enough for me to work for 300 reais. So I prefer to go away, because there, outside... sure it’s a hard life, there. There, you go only from home to work, from work to home but it’s about time that I take serious responsibilities. I already have great responsibilities but I have to... I think that... it’s like... I have to work, people! I have to teach the right thing to my children, you know? And I want to take them out of here, because in the street where I live, you saw, there are many drug traffickers.”

The difference between Italy and Brazil, for her, had also to do with the possibility to access a lifestyle associated with modernity and consumption. When I asked her what she thought were the main differences between both countries, she proposed:

Work. Work, school for my children, the way of living. There, I can have a car, I can buy a car, I can have one as I already have my license. I can have my own car. For sure, I'll pay rent, it's expensive. I'll have to work a lot, but I prefer this people because I'm thinking this is a good thing for my kids. The difference between there and here is that here, people are very lazy. And here [when] we work hard, we receive nothing and we're still humiliated. No, there, everybody respects everybody. And you can get your little car. You can have a good life. You can offer your children a better life.

Leila constructed her experience in Brazil in spatialized terms: in Natal, she saw few possibilities for herself, given her lack of formal education (she attended school briefly when she was 13 years old) and given the racial, class-based, and gender scripts constraining her possibilities even more. She thus imagined in "the foreign" her path toward social and economic mobility, and the way to give a better life to her children. Initially, she thought that marriage to a foreigner would bring her out of this life, but then her bad experience with Federico left her with a bitter taste for foreigners even if she still preferred them to Brazilian men. Thus, she sought to remain at a distance from foreign men as well.

Indeed, a couple of days prior to the interview, Leila had met an Italian man who treated her "so well, you know the type of person who is affectionate, loving, with whom you feel so good with?" She did not want to be with him because "I don't want to make him suffer and I don't want to suffer." She treated him badly after he declared his love for her and told him: "I want to be with a man today, tomorrow with another, then with another. I don't want to know of anyone who falls in love with me, please don't like me!



I don't want anybody else to like me." She also said to him: "how can you fall in love for a woman full of problems? I don't want you to solve my problems. I don't want you to help me. Because my ex-husband helped me and then what? And he's talking about everything he did for me. I only want to do my things alone. Honestly, I don't want any man helping me." Leila was indeed highly critical of women such as her friend Ana, as she explained, "My ex-friend is one of these women who dream [of marrying a foreigner]. This is why she's with one, and then another saying she is not a puta while she is, in order to see whether she arranges one to go away. She is deluded, she's deluded." Both friends fought over the ways in which they identified with foreign men, Leila always telling foreign men she was a garota de programa, while Ana had more ambiguous relationships with foreigners, especially upon her return from Norway.

She told men she is not a prostituta, she's with them for free. At the start, they [some women] make them [the foreign men] stay with them until the end of their holiday but when they're almost at the last day of their holiday, they oblige them to give them this much money. So [the men] are deceived. But it was precisely because of this that my colleague and I fought. Because my colleague does the same thing as [these women] with some Italian men here.

For five years, Leila owned a house on the same street as Ana and developed a strong friendship with both mother and daughter, considering them almost like family. The end of her friendship with Ana thus precipitated her departure to Italy and Leila described herself as alone, without ties. While initially, romantic love significantly shaped her mobility, Leila was seeking to migrate independently of anyone including foreign men. This was possible because of her different economic means compared to other women, which allowed her to make the journey from Brazil to Italy with her brother and children. Furthermore, because she had already lived for an extended period of time in Italy and spoke Italian, she could build upon this knowledge and previous

experience. For her, avoiding romantic love appears as necessary to prevent suffering more and to succeed in her project of mobility. Indeed, she thought of women like Ana as naïve and avoided romantic love as a way to maintain control over her future decision, positioning herself as more experienced, and thus wiser:

I've gone very often [for free], but not anymore. When I was younger, when I didn't understand. That's it, when I was like this colleague of mine<sup>124</sup> [Ana], when I was crazy (iludida, enlodida) to go away, you know, to get married with one of them. So I was foolish (iludida, enlodida) and sometimes I would go [for free]. But now, what I've suffered serves as an experience. Because now I never go [for free]. He can be the cutest guy in the world. There was a cutie, the most handsome, gorgeous man, Leonardo DiCaprio would have lost next to him, really. But I didn't go [with him] only because he wanted to go for free. If it were her [Ana], because she's stupid, she would have gone. But me? Where's your love? Keep your beauty to yourself, I don't want to know anything. I prefer to get a short, fat, ugly, man. You're cute, you're handsome, but I don't want your beauty. You know why? They come here, they stay with us, and then they leave. It's like that. If I go for free today, he's not going to stay with me forever. Tomorrow he's with another woman, you understand? I'm 27 years old, but I have so much experience.

Leila thus complicates further my discussion of love as a mobilizing force in projects of transnational mobility, as she sought to avoid love following her previous experience with Federico in Italy. Her narrative suggests that while transnational love is as one of the few available means of social and economic mobility to many low-income, racialized Brazilian women, a few women may also envision *sair dessa vida* on their own, independently of any foreign man. Leila's narrative also hints at the tensions arising from the different expectations shaping the relationships between foreign men and Brazilian women: while foreign men usually express a desire for a traditional wife, Brazilian women commonly aspire to a modern lifestyle premised upon egalitarian relationships with their foreign husbands. In Europe these mutual imaginings may clash and thus

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<sup>124</sup> Possibly, Leila refers to Ana as a "colleague" (*colega*) as a way to signal a more distant relationship than "friend" (*amiga*).

explain the significant number of women returnees to Ponta Negra such as Ana, Júlia and Leila.

### **Sair dessa Vida**

“I wanted to arrange a marriage to sair dessa vida. To get out quickly.”

Bebel, 26 years old, November 24, 2007

“I think my dream was to meet someone, to meet someone who would take me away from this.”

Bethânia, 27 years old, February 27, 2008

“To live this shitty life or to marry someone and have stability.”

Isabella, 22 years old, March 11, 2008

Love and marriage appear as a way to sair dessa vida, or to escape essa vida, this life. Larissa, whose experience of ostracism I recount in the previous chapter, thought that only a marriage to a foreigner could save her from her disreputability and allow her to escape from class and racial oppression. She was not alone, as the above quotes by Bebel, Bethânia, and Isabella suggest; indeed, sair dessa vida was the goal of most, if not all women I encountered and who worked as garotas. Yet sair dessa vida was also used by women such as Ana in reference to their harsh lives and lack of possibility for social and economic mobility (and not in reference to selling sex).

*Sair dessa vida* is thus an expression of a desire for mobility, whether social (as in status), spatial (as in migration), or economic (as in escaping poverty). To get out of one's life, to escape one's biography is thus what many women – whether garotas or not – are ultimately seeking. I propose that gringo love is, for many of them, what provides the legitimate grounds to move across borders and to access the lifestyle they hope for.

They are, in many ways, finding their own responses to the exclusionary practices of the state and the failed promises of the market. They turn to the foreign, and opposed *essa vida* to an imagined brighter future or a remembered past experience in Europe. This process is reminiscent of what Gordillo (2002) describes as a negative dialectic, where places are imagined in opposition to what one is not in contrast to the other. *Sair dessa vida* operates as an important narrative that bespeaks how Brazilian women imagine Ponta Negra in opposition to Europe. Thus, women's reification of the foreign/foreigners and their search for an escape are part of the same historical practice; their practices suggest a deep sense of alienation with their social locations.

Love thus mediates power differentials in Ponta Negra. As Cheng (2010: 142), drawing on Scott (1985) proposes in the case of Filipina entertainers in U.S. military camps in South Korea:

Love serves as a 'weapon of the weak' for these Filipinas, who draw on the symbols and rhetoric of love as a moral framework to negotiate their subordination and pursue their inspirational projects. As migrant women who have no official channels of redress for the human rights violations taking place daily in the clubs, they focus their energies on turning love into a source of power. In other words, where the state and the market fail them, love gives them hope.

Cheng provides a compelling analysis of the ways in which love becomes a dilemma for Filipina entertainers in U.S. military camps, as they face tensions between, on the one hand, their financial and familial obligations, and on the other hand, their desire for their own individual aspiration and fulfillment (whether it is access to a modern lifestyle or romantic love). Love, in her words, mediates "familial responsibilities and personal freedom" (159). Furthermore, Cheng points to the ways in which the performativity of love does not necessarily preclude its subjectivity – or its "realness" (2010: 136). Recent scholarship on 'mail-order brides' and cross-border marriages

provides similar insights into the ways in which love can be both felt and performed or real and instrumental (e.g. Constable 2003; 2005; Faier 2007; Patino 2009). Inspired by these works, I hope to have shown here the complexity of women's intimate strategies, and the complex ways in which love acts as a mobilizing force in women's transnational mobility. Gringo love, in many ways, provides a cultural script for Brazilian women to engage in practices of mobility; while it may be alienating, empowering, messy, or used strategically, gringo love remains constitutive of women's experiences in sex tourism and beyond.

## Conclusion

The ethnographic challenge is how to take account of structural inequalities and sociocultural factors that circumscribe women's and men's options and inspire new opportunities and imaginings, while simultaneously conveying the richness and dignity of their choices without reducing them to calculating instrumentalists or naïve romantics.

Nicole Constable 2003: 225

What is clear (...) is that their experiences were created not out of many possible discourses but out of a limited range of discourses expressive of structures of power and of individual and collective resistance to those structures. My challenge became one of refusing to depict retired dancers and their promoters as either victims or romantic figures; such a polarization would have scuttled sensitivity to the messy, sometimes contradictory, deeply textured stuff of lives lived and recounted.

Becki Ross 2009: 26-7

In this dissertation, I have tried to provide texture to the lives of those taking part in heterosexual sex tourism in Ponta Negra. Like Constable writing about cross-border marriages between Chinese and Filipino women and American men, or like Ross tracing the history of the erotic entertainment industry in postwar Vancouver, my challenge became one of trying to write an account that would reflect the complex, at times even contradictory, lives of the Brazilian women and foreign men I discuss in this dissertation. Inspired by Cheng (2010), my focus on gringo love has not been motivated by the notion that love erases power differentials. Forms of affect, including women's ambiguous intimacies with foreigners, operate within structures of power, as I discussed in the last chapter, and as I hopefully convey in this dissertation.

Theoretically, my dissertation contributes to recent innovative work by feminist anthropologists engaging with the intersections of gender, mobility, and affect, in a world characterized by intensifying processes of global capitalism (Bloch 2011; Cheng 2010; Constable 2003; 2005; Faier 2007; Frohlick 2009; Padilla et al 2007; Patico 2009). My

work invites novel ways to think about global sex tourism. Indeed, the women in my study are invested in complex forms of affect and projects of social mobility that cannot be grasped by the two, most common frameworks used in the literature that interpret them as either victims or workers. In the dominant scholarly discussions on sex tourism, women like Ana (Leila's friend, who went to Norway as discussed in Chapter 6) are usually absent, given their lack of engagement in explicit or implicit forms of commercial sex. By bringing her ambiguous intimate practices closer to Leila and other garotas de programa in Ponta Negra, I have sought to shift the discussion away from interpretations of sex tourism as exclusively synonymous with prostitution, in order to capture its imbrications in the daily, intimate practices of low-income, racialized Brazilian women in Ponta Negra. My dissertation thus challenges common assumptions about sex tourism, and as such, participates in critical feminist debates and contributes to innovative feminist scholarship in anthropology and beyond.

Methodologically, my work draws inspiration from pioneering feminist anthropologists critical of the process of knowledge production and determined to decolonize academic research (e.g. Behar and Gordon 1995). I thus follow a rich feminist tradition of ethnographically grounded anthropological research probing the working of power in the design, fieldwork, analysis, and writing process. Inspired by the legacy of work such as *Women Writing Culture*, I find myself writing against the grain, as the women in my study challenge us to think beyond current models positing them as either victims or workers and to critically consider campaigns against sex tourism and taken-for-granted assumptions about sex tourism. In this sense, my work is part of the long history in feminist scholarship of critical engagement with issues of social justice.

## **Sex Tourism as Material and Discursive Practice**

It is one of my contentions that sex tourism functions both as a discourse and as a material reality and I have attempted to render parts of both dimensions here. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to challenge the ways in which sex tourism is discussed both in the scholarship and activism surrounding the issue. I have taken a critical stance on the conflation of sex tourism and prostitution in tourism, as well as on the misguided conception of sex tourism as equivalent to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents or to traffic in women. My goal has been to expose what I see as deeply problematic representations and interventions that negate important aspects of women's experiences with foreign men. I have thus traced the genealogy of sex tourism as a public discourse in Brazil and the city of Natal and analyzed more closely the spatiality of the campaigns against sex tourism in Ponta Negra. As discussed in Chapter 3, the state policing of this place, the quasi criminalization of prostitution, the discriminatory practices of bar, hotel, restaurant owners, the fear surrounding the spatial and social mobility of impoverished, mixed-race or black Brazilian women, as well as the sense of foreign invasion – all speak to spatial tensions over who belongs in Ponta Negra. These practices, I have suggested, have had the effect of further entrenching the marginalization of the women they were meant to rescue: the predominantly impoverished, black or mixed-race women, who engage in commercial sex with foreigners. Furthermore, I have shown that many inhabitants of Natal resent the presence of foreign tourists as well as the environmental, social, and economic consequences of mass tourism. The opposition to sex tourism is thus the channel through which anxieties over the threat of mass tourism, globalization, neo-colonialism, and national sovereignty become articulated. Yet their



focus on sex tourism prevents a critique of the model of economic development favoured by the state and results in targeting of individuals (i.e. pervert sex tourists or naïve *garotas de programa*) rather than addressing the deeply entrenched inequalities and structural problems that characterize the region.

Spatial exclusionary practices along lines of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality thus define the political field of power in which the Brazilian women I wrote about in this dissertation act. By describing the complex political interests that collude in the fight against sex tourism in Natal, I hope to have begun disrupting narratives that leave unquestioned the “good” involved in these campaigns against sex tourism. While the idea of fighting women’s exploitation is a powerful trope in discourses on sex tourism in Natal, its alarmist tone does little to tackle the complex subject position of the women involved in sex tourism or to engage with the plurality and potential ambiguity of their positions, interests, and experiences.

Foreigners, too, are engaged in practices that disrupt common depictions of “pervert sex tourists” invoked by the campaigns against sex tourism in Natal. Drawing on Gregory’s notion of imperial masculinity – a form of hetero-normative masculinity he observed in the Dominican Republic among tourists from North America and Europe – I have explored what I call ‘gringo masculinity’. I have argued that in addition to the exoticization/eroticization of Brazilian women, foreign men also seek intimate relationships that affirm their desirability as men and that transcend the commercial nature of sex. I have thus also examined a tension foreign men experience between othering (an erotic/exotic other) and intimacy (with a woman). In Natal, there is a co-construction of idealized otherness between European men and Brazilian women, a

process of mutual fetishization that is crucial to understand the interactions that occur between them. Through what I have described as the ‘fetish of the gringo’, we have seen that local Brazilian women imagine foreigners as better men than Brazilian men and participate in the reification of their masculinity by imagining them as gringo, not macho. In turn, foreign men involved in sex tourism experience being desired in ambiguous ways, and they come to think of themselves as good, desirable men ‘helping’ these women.

In this dissertation, I have challenged the common interpretations in sex tourism studies that sex tourism occupies a liminal space, in which tourists lose their inhibitions, experiment with their identities, and transgress momentarily sexual norms that regulate their society (Bauer and McKercher 2003; Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006; Ryan and Hall 2001; Williams 2010). For instance, Bauer and McKercher (2003) propose that “the most important role that tourism, as a phenomenon, plays in sexual relationships is that it offers a liminal environment away from the constraints of home, which reduces inhibitions and provides increased opportunities for sex” (10). Sex tourism, in this view, momentarily frees its subject from the ethics and morality of his or her society and allows for playful sexual transgressions.

While tourism provides new sexual possibilities I have not characterized the practices of male tourists in Ponta Negra as “liminal,” even if this may be the way they see their experiences. I rejected the duality work/leisure because these seemingly separated spheres are indeed mutually constituted and part of the same historical practice. While I see sex tourism as deeply ambiguous, I still think that tourist practices participate in the production and reproduction of social norms. In Ponta Negra, at least, male tourists

do not engage playfully with any type of sexual practices but rather take part in heterosexual practices that sustain, rather than depart from, the norms of the home. Expanding on Gregory (2007), I have argued that sex tourism allows for the reproduction of heteronormativity and facilitates the exercise of masculine power and western privileges.<sup>125</sup> While notions of exotic differences inform the practices of these male tourists, these differences become inequalities, and are put in the service of the exercise of heteronormative masculinity rather than existing outside of societal norms and structures of power as a liminal approach to tourism would contend. In this dissertation, I have thus interrogated sex tourism as a practice that sustains heteronormativity and contributes to the reproduction of normative gender identities and sexualities (see also Babb 2006).

### **Sex Tourism as Sair dessa Vida**

One of the main arguments I made in this dissertation is that Brazilian women in Natal strategically utilize their relationships with foreign tourists as sources of social mobility and capital (both economic and cultural) while also aspiring to form romantic relationships with men they commonly imagine as more ‘civilized’ than local Brazilian men. I thus read their aspirations to form relationships with foreigners as an expression of their recognition of the status and capital foreigners represent. In the public discourse on sex tourism in Natal, sex tourism as mobility is too often reduced to warnings of danger, in which enchanting princes are transformed into lascivious wolves. If their dreams often

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<sup>125</sup> My point, here, is to emphasize the ways in which sex tourism does not operate outside of normative prescriptions. However, it is important to remind the reader that this heteronormative masculine power and these western privileges do not remain unchallenged by Brazilian women. Rather, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, Brazilian women make use of their femininity and assert their autonomy against patriarchy and heteronormativity in complex and creative ways.

echo the fairytale of Cinderella, the women I write about here are also complex social actors who grasp the structural inequalities they face and strategize to *sair dessa vida*. By securing long-term ties with foreign men, women in Ponta Negra enhance their chances of migrating to Europe and marrying up, something they find hard to imagine, even less experience, in Brazil. In other words, women capitalize on the ambiguities of sex tourism in order to achieve social, economic, and spatial mobility.

In the bars, nightclubs, and at the beach of Ponta Negra, these women “put their femininity to work” in attempts to achieve their goals of mobility. Drawing on Skeggs (1997), I have argued that femininity is a form of embodied capital, one of the few cultural resources women have at their disposal. These women are thus invested in the practices of both looking and acting feminine, through various processes meant to signal to foreign men their value as women. I have shown that women in Ponta Negra strategically utilize *both* their hypersexuality and respectability, capitalizing on foreign men’s search for hot, but traditional women. These women thus seek to establish themselves as respectable, valuable, and marriageable women through discursive strategies and processes of identification/disidentification meant to disrupt ascriptions of stigma and disreputability. Women distinguish between necessity and luxury, money and help, or *garotas de programa* and sex worker, among others, in attempts to repudiate ascriptions of vulgarity to their practices. These processes of distinction do not occur without paradoxes and tensions, as women negotiate ways to signal both their sexual availability and their respectability. Their engagements with foreign men are thus far more complex and creative than the victimizing accounts and rescue discourse of the campaigns against sex tourism would lead us to think.

My analysis of femininity as a form of embodied cultural capital would have been incomplete without a consideration of the role of affect in mediating women's engagements with foreign men. While rational considerations definitely shaped women's transnational mobility, the decision to marry and migrate was rarely the result of a simple straightforward calculation. It was often times in the name of love that women made the decision to move across transnational borders; I have thus discussed the role of romantic love as a significant mobilizing force shaping the circuits of women's mobility. In order to grasp women's intimate engagements with foreign men, I have suggested that it is important to locate their practices within the political economy of love (Padilla et al 2007: xii; Rebhun 1999). In the Northeast of Brazil, 'love' cohabits with interest beyond the narrow realm of sex tourism, and women's intimate practices with foreign men take their root in local gendered history. Yet there is more to gringo love than a straightforward reproduction of local gender arrangements. Transnational love with foreign men, as we saw, also acts as a productive force for women to remake themselves as modern subjects in Europe and to achieve social and economic mobility. Furthermore, the appeal for foreigners may also reveal a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the organization of gender, race, and class relations in Brazil. Intimacies with foreign men are also, at times, the catalyst to express discontent with their social locations. *Sair dessa* hints at this sense of estrangement and alienation that young, low-income, racialized women in Natal experience. Love with foreigners is thus an escape away from what is often conceived as a place "*sem futuro*" or with no good prospect for the future.

*Sair dessa vida* thus express a desire for mobility, whether social, spatial, or economic. To get out of one's life, to escape one's biography is thus what many women –

whether garotas de programa or not – are ultimately seeking. I have suggested that gringo love is, for many of them, what provides them with the legitimate grounds to move across borders and to access the life they hope for. They are, in many ways, finding their own responses to the exclusionary practices of the state and the failed promises of the market. Whether they are successful or not is another story – and the presence of many returnees in Ponta Negra points to the challenges these women face as they journey across borders.

### **Brazilian Women on the Move for Love<sup>126</sup>**

What does the future hold, then, for these women? This is a difficult question to answer, especially since their future is predicated, to a large extent, upon their ability to secure long-term, transnational relationships with foreign men. My dissertation has focussed exclusively on sex tourism *in* the city of Natal, and does not examine the Brazilian women who live in Europe after marrying foreign tourists met in the context of sex tourism or to work in the sex industry. We thus know little of the women who stay in Europe as I only interviewed women returnees, whose stories point to the unpredictability of their mobile strategies, and to the back and forth movement between various destinations.

Indeed, in spite of severe challenges to mobility<sup>127</sup>, a surprisingly high number of women I met in Ponta Negra had been to Europe (and less frequently, North America),

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<sup>126</sup> I borrow this expression from Sealing Cheng's ethnography *On the Move for Love: Migrant Entertainers and the U.S. Military in South Korea* (2010).

<sup>127</sup> The women I spoke to had various experiences crossing borders, but it was common for them to express their fear or anxieties of border crossings, and to discuss their dependency on men to buy their flight ticket, as well as to provide for them once in Europe. Crossing the border was also a source of stress for these women who often times were deemed suspicious by virtue of their racialized bodies, gender, and nationality. The conflation between Brazilian women and prostitution – especially in Italy and Spain – was

most of them, to visit their boyfriends or to live there with their husbands. As I mentioned in the introduction, of the 27 women I formally interviewed almost two-thirds had experienced travelling abroad (17 out of 27), and all but one of these women went abroad at the invitation of a boyfriend – an important finding given the emphasis in the media and popular discourse on traffic in women and the scholarly attention to migrant *sex workers*. Of the 16 women who travelled at the invitation of their boyfriend, eight had married or been in a companionate union they refer to as marriage (even if not legally married) and were back in Brazil after either a separation or a divorce, and two women eventually married after I left Brazil (and, as far as I know, are still married).

Given Natal's proximity to Europe, most women had travelled to what they refer to as the 'Old World' with Italy as the country most visited (8) followed by Norway (3), Germany (3), the United States (2) and then by Holland (1), France (1), Switzerland (1), Portugal (1), Spain (1), Sweden (1) Chile (1), and the Bahamas (1)<sup>128</sup>. The majority of women stayed with their boyfriends or husbands and eventually returned to Brazil after a separation or divorce. The length of their stay during these various trips varied between one week and 15 years, with many women who had gone for either a period of three months on a tourist visa or a more extensive length when marrying, commonly between one to three years. Seven women even had children from their unions with foreign men. Thus, a majority of women had already gone to Europe via legal means, in spite of severe limits to their mobility. Brazilian women are thus on the move for love, yet the

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such that women took great pains to make sure they would appear as respectable girlfriends or wives when crossing borders.

<sup>128</sup> The majority of women had visited one country only, but a few visited two and a woman did a tour of Europe, visiting several countries at once (tricking an ex-boyfriend as revenge and twice using the ticket he bought her to travel around Europe, staying with men she had previously met in Ponta Negra). Another woman visited several countries with her American boyfriend on his boat, including the Bahamas, Chile, and the United States.

significance of marital migration remains by and large ignored by the media, NGOs, and various political actors, and has not captured the attention of scholars (save the work of Piscitelli 2009; 2008).

While my data are necessarily partial, as I did not conduct research among Brazilian women living *in* Europe or North America, my long-term ethnographic research in Ponta Negra provides an entry point to interrogate the mitigated successes of women's marital migration. Women's successes seem short-lived and highly dependent on their ability to maintain their relationships with their foreign partners. As Patino (2009) says "the fact that people experience their choices as liberating does not preclude the possibility that they are also entering new arrangements of power whose ramifications are not fully yet perceived" (324). After all, these marriages are based on a paradox; while women imagine foreign men as more modern and egalitarian than Brazilian men, foreign men expect Brazilian women to be more traditional and submissive. Thus, when migrating in this context, women are likely to encounter new forms of oppression and alienation, including racism and sexism.

As discussed in Chapter 6, women returnees in Ponta Negra report that in Europe, they faced gender expectations that clashed with what they had in mind when moving abroad; they felt restricted in their mobility and they did not want to be confined to the domestic space of the home. Several women were verbally and physically abused by their partners or in-laws following marital migration. Their narratives suggest that they encountered serious threats to their well-being – including depression, sexual violence, or forced home confinement – and that they engaged in relationships premised upon men's search for women over whom they could exert their control. Furthermore, as *Brazilian*



*women*, they were seen with suspicion due to the close association of Brazilian female bodies with the sex trade in several European countries. Thus, their ‘true’ motivations were questioned, and they faced discrimination, racism, even ostracism. In short, while they seek to *sair dessa vida* through marital migration, Brazilian women may indeed encounter new forms of oppression following migration to Europe.

Yet it would be also misleading to conclude that women are necessarily oppressed through these transnational marriages. Similarly to what Constable (2003) argues about correspondence marriage between U.S. men and Chinese and Filipino women, marriage might represent, for women with few economic opportunities, a relatively good option given the structural inequalities in which they find themselves embedded. Constable invites feminists to reconsider their western and middle-class assumptions about a ‘good’ marriage, as they might not appreciate the benefits of traditional marriage for women who have “worked in fields or a factory for subsistence since childhood” (2003:65). In her view, women “may, in a sense be ‘on the receiving end’ of mobility, but they can nonetheless decide whether or not to be mobile or to return to China” (174). Several questions thus remain open in terms of the marital migration of Brazilian women: what are the new forms of power they enter when migrating? Can marriage provide them with an escape, a way out, as they are hoping? And what happens to the women who do not succeed, in the long run? When I left Natal, Júlia, whose story I narrated in Chapter 6, was admitted to a psychiatric institution, after attempting suicide. She was 38 years old, divorced, had spent 15 years living in Switzerland, and felt there were very few possibilities for her in Natal. It was extremely difficult for her to begin anew in Ponta Negra, with no guarantee of success at finding a new, potential husband. Thus, while the

women I interviewed seek to achieve social mobility (rather than survival) their ability to succeed is severely limited by their social locations, by the unpredictability of their intimate strategies, and by the uncertainties of tourism.

### **Sex Tourism in Natal: Old Patterns Anew and Uncertain Futures**

Since I left Natal in June 2008, international tourism has dropped drastically (Ministério do Turismo 2011; 2010b; 2009; 2008) while the neighbourhood of Ponta Negra has lost its market value (Alves 2009) due to various reasons, including its desertion from the inhabitants of Natal, and its close association with sex tourism. While in 2007 there were more than 100 000 international tourists arriving at the international airport of Natal, by 2010 there were fewer than 50 000 per year. International tourism has thus drastically decreased beginning in 2008 with a drop of 30 000 tourists from the previous year, potentially due in part to the global economic crisis, but also to the international reputation of Natal as a site of sex tourism. While I was in Ponta Negra during the first half of 2008, several business owners commented on what they had perceived as a decline in tourism, pointing to the infamous image of Natal as a site of sex tourism as the cause for this massive, sudden drop. In the last few months of my fieldwork, Brazilian women too often times commented on how “*fraca*” it was in the bars, meaning that there were very few tourists in town. I felt it was emptied in contrast to earlier months, but I thought it was cyclical and I had not anticipated that Natal would experience such a rapid, drastic decline in tourism. I imagine that several women have moved to other locations nearby – including Fortaleza, Recife, or Salvador. This may only be temporary, however.

Indeed, tourism remains an important economic activity for the state and with the advent of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil, international tourism could increase anew. In the summer of 2014, the city of Natal (along with eleven other Brazilian cities) will be host to the World Cup. Natal is currently preparing to welcome this major sporting event through various investments including new tourist infrastructures and a state-of-the-art stadium. Unsurprisingly, the upcoming World Cup in Natal has generated new fears of traffic in women and child sex tourism (Pyl 2010), and resulted in new undercover media coverage denouncing child sex tourism (Globo 2011). The media coverage has included images of young girls (between four and seven) dancing with their mothers in an open-air bar during carnival time in what looked like a point of encounter between foreign men and *garotas de programa*. In the days following the media coverage, several state interventions were conducted; the Federal Police along with the Childhood and Youth Court of Natal rapidly investigated the establishment in question, and accused the two mothers of negligence with their respective daughters (Xavier 2011). The two women worked as professional dancers in the bars and claimed their daughters accompanied them late at night solely because it was a festive period – not because they were part of a scheme of sexual exploitation (Felipe 2011). There was nothing to suggest that these children were sexually exploited but since they were in a space deemed inappropriate for their age, accusations of negligence were made against the mothers who claimed the footage was misleading and falsely represented them as *garotas de programa*. The Coletivo Leila Diniz issued a public statement expressing its concern with the criminalization of *garotas de programa*. In its statement, the collective further critically reflects on the state's development policies in light of the upcoming

World Cup event, proposing that: “saying no to the criminalization of prostitution is demanding that policies meant to confront gender inequality are implemented with integrity and the commitment that the problems specific to women are recognized by society” (Coletivo Leila Diniz 2011). Sex tourism, then, continues to be publicly debated and remains an important sphere of intervention from various state and non-state actors.

The policing of black, mixed-race, female, and poor bodies thus continues unabated in Ponta Negra, and will likely persist in the months leading up to the World Cup. Will the recognition of prostitution as a professional occupation by the Brazilian government eventually prevent the quasi criminalization of prostitution and spatial exclusions? Or will projects of gentrification impact women’s practices and have them retreat into areas of the city that are less safe, diverse, or ambiguous, and where they exert less control? Will state and non-state actors keep focussing on targeting individuals (i.e. pervert sex tourists or naïve Brazilian women), or will they address the deeply entrenched inequalities that characterize Brazilian society? Long-term, further ethnographic research examining sex tourism in Natal appears indeed critical to elucidate the unfolding of these different articulations.

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## Appendix A: Interviews Data

### Brazilian women

Name	Age	Edu. level	Children /with gringo	Married to gringo?	Has traveled or lived abroad?	If yes, where	If yes, how long?	If yes, bf?
1) Ana*	20	HSD	0/0	no	yes	Norway	3 months	yes
2) Felicidade	36	-----	1/1	yes(d)	yes	Italy U.S.	2-3 years	yes
3) Daniela	20	HSD	0/0	no	yes	Italy	2 months	no
4) Bebel	26	-----	0/0	yes	yes	Italy	3 months	yes
5) Larissa	28	HSD	2/1 pregn	no	no	-----	-----	----- --
6) Júlia	38	P	0/0	yes(d)	yes	Switzerland	15 years	yes
7) Perla	28	HSD	4/1	no	yes	Germany	2 years	yes
8) Lucia	27	HSD	1/0	no	no	-----	-----	-----
9) Leila	27	-----	2/0	yes(d)	yes	Italy	2 years	yes
10) Bethânia	27	HSD	2/0	no	yes	Spain; Chile...	Few weeks	yes
11) Flávia	24	psd	2/2	yes(d)	yes	Italy	7 years	yes
12) Bruna	22	-----	3/0	no	no	-----	-----	----- --
13) Leandra	24	psd	2/2	yes (d)	yes	Norway	1 year	yes
14) Eliane	19	-----	1/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
15) Carla	18	HSD	0/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
16) Teresa	25	P	2/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
17) Raquel	26	-----	3/0	no	yes	Germany	1 week	yes
18) Gabriela	24	HSD	2/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
19) Liduina	25	psd	2/1	yes (d)	yes	Italy	7 years	yes
20) Isabella	22	psd	0/0	yes	yes	Germany Italy	3 months live there	yes
21) Janaina	22	HSD	1/1	yes(d)	yes	Holland	6 months	yes
22) Sônia	25	HSD	0/0	no	yes	France, Italy, ...	9 months	yes
23) Valentina	25	HSD	2/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
24) Thais	38	psd	1/0	yes(d)	yes	Italy	3 months	yes
25) Lisa	35	P	0/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
26) Mácia	32	HSD	1/0	no	yes	Norway	9 months	yes
27) Alícia	19	psd	1/0	no	no	-----	-----	----
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>19/27 7/27</b>	<b>10/27</b>	<b>17/27</b>	<b>Italy (8)</b>	<b>1 week - 16 years</b>	<b>16/27</b>

#### Legend:

\* = Interview conducted with Lita, the Spanish sociologist with whom I work collaboratively.

P = Professional degree (nursing, manicure, hairdressing) completed

HSD= High school degree completed

psd= Primary school degree completed

bf = at the invitation of boyfriend

(d) = divorced

## Foreign men

Name	Age	Nationality	1 <sup>st</sup> time in Natal?	1 <sup>st</sup> time in Brazil?	Occupation in Natal
1) Liudgi	39	Italian	yes	no	tourist
2) Cesar	44	Italian	no	no	tourist
3) João*	34	Portuguese	no	no	tourist
4) Pedro*	29	Portuguese	no	no	tourist
5) Silvio	41	Italian			tourist
6) Antonio	62	Italian			tourist
7) Boris	41	Belgium			travel agent
8) Oliver	60	German			tourist
9) Francisco	34	Italian			tourist
10) Mark	35	Norwegian	no	no	tourist
11) Frederico	34	Italian	yes	no	tourist
12) Stephan	39	Dutch	no	no	bar owner
13) Matthieu	43	French	no	no	real estate agent
14) Luciano	mid thirties	Italian	no	no	guesthouse owner
15) Frank	Early 60s	German	no	no	hotel owner
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>Italian (7)</b>	<b>2/15</b>	<b>0/15</b>	

## Informants

### 1) State and non state actors campaigning against sex tourism

#### Non-governmental organizations

Ana Paula Felizardo, *Resposta*, February 14 2008

Sayonara Dias, *Casa Renascer*, April 15 2008

Danúbio, *Pau e Lata*, May 8 2008

#### Associations of residents and business owners

Neson Mello, *AR de Ponta Negra*, May 23, 2008

Edourado Bagnolli, *AME Ponta Negra* , May 21 2008

#### State actors

*Delegacia do Turismo* (Tourism Police) March 3, 2008

SECTUR (*Secretaria Municipal do Turismo*, or municipality's secretary of tourism) May 21, 2008

SETUR (*Secretario do Estado do Turismo*, or the state tourism secretary) May 21, 2008

### 2) Workers in the Tourism Industry

Maximilio, restaurant owner, May 26, 2008

Livío\*, surf teacher, September 7, 2007

Manolo, bar owner in Ponta Negra, May 5, 2008

Rogério, kiosk operator , March 13 2008

### 3) Others

Maria, Ana's mother, May 8, 2008

Maria de Andrade\*, head of ASPRO-RN, the association of sex workers in Natal. September 9, 2007