

SEXO, NAMORO, E MIGRAÇÃO: MUDAR DE VIDA OU COMO REPENSAR O TURISMO SEXUAL NO NORDESTE BRASILEIRO?¹

Marie-Eve Carrier-Moisan

University of British Columbia

Resumo: Este texto baseia-se num trabalho de campo realizado desde julho 2007 na praia de Ponta Negra em Natal, no Nordeste do Brasil, considerado como um dos maiores destinos de turismo sexual na região. No Brasil, a exemplo de outros lugares, o chamado turismo sexual tornou-se o sujeito de intensas discussões promovidas por diversos atores incluídos o governo municipal, regional e nacional, organizações não-governamentais, pesquisadores e populações locais. Este trabalho se coloca na linha do recente pensamento crítico que interroga os limites da noção de "turismo sexual" e a sua capacidade de capturar a diversidade de relacionamentos sexuais, amorosos e econômicos entre nativos e turistas em lugares marcados por desigualdades globais e fluxos transnacionais. Neste trabalho, proponho refletir sobre estes relacionamentos ambíguos, assim como se manifestam em Ponta Negra entre mulheres nativas e homens estrangeiros. Se o sexo pago ocupa um lugar central nesse espaço transnacional, também é o caso do namoro, do casamento e da migração –dimensões aqui examinadas para refletir sobre as implicações dessas novas formas de conjugalidades transnacionais que, muitas vezes, são vistas como estratégias de mobilidade social para as mulheres nativas. Em outras palavras, como ampliar a discussão sobre o tema para considerar o namoro transnacional como estratégia culturalmente elaborada para “mudar de vida”?

Palavras-chaves: Turismo sexual, estratégia de mobilidade, namoros transnacionais.

Abstract: This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the tourist area of Ponta Negra, Natal, in the Brazilian Northeast, now considered a major destination for sex tourism in the region. In Brazil and elsewhere sex tourism has gained currency as the subject of intense discussions for governments, policy-makers, non-governmental organizations, scholars and the local populations. My paper engages with the recent scholarship that questions the limits of the concept of “sex tourism” and its ability to capture the diversity of sexual-economic arrangements between locals and tourists in settings marked by global inequalities and transnational flows. In this paper, I propose to reflect on these ambiguous relationships, as they manifest themselves in Ponta Negra between Brazilian women and foreign men. If paid sex significantly defines this place, it is also the case of love, marriage and migration –dimensions explored here to reflect on the implications of these transnational conjugal arrangements, seen as strategy of social mobility for local women. In other words, how can we expand the discussion on sex tourism to consider transnational love as a strategy culturally elaborated by these women to transform their lives?

Key words: Sex tourism, strategy of mobility, transnational love.

¹ Trabalho apresentado na 26ª *Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia*, realizada entre os dias 01 e 04 de junho, Porto Seguro, Bahia, Brasil.

SEX, LOVE AND MIGRATION: *MUDAR DE VIDA*, OR FIRST REFLECTIONS ON ‘SEX TOURISM’ IN THE BRAZILIAN NORTHEAST²

INTRODUCTION: THINKING SEX TOURISM

‘Sex tourism’ is today considered a problematic term since it is recognized that it has not the clear boundaries attributed to it a couple of decades ago. Studies have shown that although it might intersect with prostitution it cannot be reduced to it.

Adriana Piscitelli 2006: 1

This paper is based on ethnographic research that is still underway at the time of writing these lines. Still immersed in the field, and still trying to make sense of the complex relationships established in the tourist area of Ponta Negra, in Natal, I offer the following as *preliminary* reflections, with the aim of engaging with the recent scholarship that questions the limits of the concept of ‘sex tourism’ and its ability to capture the diversity of relationships between tourists and locals (Piscitelli 2007; 2006, 2004a; 2004b; Oppermann 1999). In its commonsense meaning, sex tourism usually refers to prostitution (Silva and Blanchette 2005; Piscitelli 2006), and Natal, in the Brazilian Northeast, is no exception to this trend. In the state capital of Rio Grande do Norte, as elsewhere, discussions about sex tourism are fraught with tensions, because different visions of agency, choice, and commodified sex are articulated and opposed. If “the term has acquired an emic status” (Piscitelli 2006:1) it nonetheless takes on different flavors according to the contexts. It is, depending on who is making the claims, interchangeably conflated with pedophilia, traffic in women, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, or sex work, to the point that the topic constitutes a tense field and has led to heated debates³. But

² *Acknowledgements.* I am grateful to all the people and organizations in Natal who agreed to participate in this research project and to share with me on a topic fraught with tensions and stigma. I would like to thank the *Coletivo Leila Diniz –Ações de Cidadania e Estudos Feministas*, as well as Elisete Schwade, from UFRN, who provided helpful feedbacks on a preliminary version of this paper, presented during an internal seminar organized by the *Coletivo Leila Diniz* on April 25th 2008. I extend my thanks to Alexia Bloch from UBC who offered insightful comments on a preliminary version of this paper with short notice. I would also like to thank Lita, who, for 6 weeks, became *minha companheira* in the field, and whose gaze on Ponta Negra definitely enriched this paper, and William Flynn for the many inspiring reflections, on-going conversations, and editorial contributions he brought to this paper, as well as for being an amazing companion in the field, and a talented co-ethnographer. Finally, this research would not have been possible without the generous support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, through a PhD’s Canada Graduate Scholarship of 3 years (2006-2009).

³ For instance, in 2005, anthropologists Fernando Bessa Ribeiro and Octavio Sacramento were declared “persona non grata” by the municipality after presenting the early result of their research on sex tourism in Ponta Negra, mainly because they proposed the regulation of prostitution in Natal (Azevedo 2005). Then, in 2006, Ponta Negra was at the center of a special media coverage on sex tourism by the national news network Globo in which the municipality of Natal was targeted for allowing sex tourism to happen on its territory, and some establishments were identified as participants in the sexual exploitation of minors (Jornal da Globo 2006). The following year, activists from different NGOs were involved in a campaign to eradicate sex tourism in Natal, marching the streets of Ponta Negra with a notable symbol of sex tourism, a 2-meter sculpture of a white penis called “Grande Penis Branco” (Diário de Natal 2006a) and some bar owners have now posed signs prohibiting sex tourism from their establishments. And yet, not

more than the confusion over its meanings, the main problem in these discussions lies in irreconcilable visions of commodified sex, seen either as oppression, or as work⁴. It is beyond the scope of this paper to find a resolution to these old tensions, which express themselves in Natal in many ways (see footnote 1). Yet, in spite of their opposition, both frameworks treated sex tourism as a form of prostitution and consequently most of the discussion on sex tourism in Natal has centered on the question of whether the women involved are essentially victims, or workers. I maintain that we need to move away from seeing sex tourism exclusively as part of prostitution in order to grasp the complex universe it constitutes, at times intersecting with prostitution, but at other times, departing drastically from it (Oppermann 1999; Piscitelli 2006). By shifting the discussion away from the debates over ‘victims’ versus ‘sex workers’, it becomes possible to emphasize that sex tourism encompasses much more than an exchange of sex for money, as recognized in the scholarships on sex tourism (Oppermann 1999; Cabezas 2004; Piscitelli 2007; 2006; 2004a; 2004b). Yet, in spite of this recognition, the point of departure in most studies of sex tourism is still “the prostitute”⁵ (Brennan 2004; Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006; Oppermann 1999; Cohen 1986).

In this paper, I propose to explore the spaces where sex tourism and prostitution do not coincide, or, perhaps more accurately, the spaces where the line between love and money get confused, and where a ‘prostitute-sex tourist’ framework is insufficient to comprehend the diversity of transnational ties forged between foreigners and locals. I also suggest that we need to move away from the opposition between “coerced” or “willing” (Agustin: 2006:32), as suggested in studies of migrants selling sex (see also Bloch 2003; Piscitelli 2004a) because it tends to obfuscate the complexity and range of experiences women (and men) encounter in this universe, while it “force[s] them to *identify* as ‘sex workers’ or victims” (Agustin: 2006:34). In these studies, the emphasis is on migration, to recognize women “as people looking for economic and

long ago, a university professor at UFRN declared that “o turismo sexual é uma invenção do poder publico” (sex tourism is an invention of the public authorities) insisting that the selling of sex between tourists and locals is nothing but prostitution –an affirmation that would certainly have shocked the local associations of residents, who have seen their locality transformed in recent years by what they refer to as sex tourism.

⁴ In the first framework, sex tourists are seen as sexual predators, and women, as victims (even when they affirm the contrary) because prostitution necessarily harms them due to its sexual nature; in addition, women are seen as forced into prostitution due to lack of economic opportunities or following personal histories of sexual abuses. In the second framework, sex tourism is understood as a form of labour, women are seen as global sex workers, and the point is to improve the working conditions of those located in global sex work rather than condemning its sexual nature.

⁵ If they consider a continuum of practices related to commercial and non-commercial sex, it is in a linear, evolutive fashion, from prostitution to affective relations. For instance, Ribeiro and Sacramento propose that “what *started* as a relation exclusively based in prostitution –sexual services in exchange for money– *evolved* into a relation with a certain degree of affectivity, in such a way that the commodified aspect associated with sexuality *gradually* turned less explicit” (2006:13, my translation, my emphasis).

social opportunities” (Piscitelli 2004a: 284; my translation). In sex tourism, too, people are driven by projects of economic and social mobility, and although a migration framework cannot encompass the experiences of all in sex tourism, I propose to consider the women as strategically making choices for access to better economic and social opportunities.

Since July 2007 I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork⁶ in the tourist area of Ponta Negra, in Natal. I have been particularly struck by the complex, and often times ambiguous, transnational relationships Brazilian women forge with male foreigners in their attempts to *mudar de vida* (transform their lives). If paid sex significantly defines this place, it is also a place of love, marriage and migration. Indeed, in Ponta Negra, economic interests often merge with other projects, including romantic love –an aspect already recognized in studies of sex tourism (Cabezas 2003; Piscitelli 2006; 2007; Brennan 2004). But more than simply reiterating the blur of love and money at play in this universe, I take as a starting point that relationships between foreigners and natives are ambiguous in a sex tourist context and I ask: what is at stake in this conflation between love and material benefits in a transnational space like Ponta Negra, marked by global inequalities?

I argue that overall, this ambiguity comes from attempts to erase the signs of a monetary transaction and to ‘normalize’ the relationships with foreigners, in order to set legitimate grounds for a project of social mobility. In other words, I suggest that these ambiguous relationships (of love and money) constitute culturally embedded strategies to, as the women say, *mudar de vida* (transform their lives) or *sair dessa vida* (get away from this life) allowing them to become part of hetero-normative conjugal arrangements, and thus, to insert themselves into ‘legitimate’ relationships that are considered morally good, and that fit the dominant normative prescriptions of sex in heterosexual marriage⁷. To further reflect on this, I first consider Ponta Negra as a transnational space making possible the imagining and in some cases, the materialization of new social and economic opportunities in spite of the inequalities embedded in it (Brennan 2004). I then turn to a discussion of the ambiguities in sex tourism and the ways in which they manifest

⁶ So far, fieldwork has included participant-observation in the bars, clubs, restaurants, and beaches of Ponta Negra; tape-recorded interviews with Brazilian women, foreigners, workers in tourism, state agents, and NGOs; and follow-up in everyday lives of some key informants. Fieldwork was still underway at the moment of writing this paper.

⁷ In *Thinking Sex*, Gayle Rubin (1982) proposes that “sex is a vector of oppression”(293), not in the sense implied by anti-pornography feminists, but because of “erotic speciation”(285)—a stratified sexual system. In this hierarchy of sexual practices, heterosexuality within marriage occupies the top, fetishists, sadomasochists and prostitutes the very bottom end, and long-term homosexuality, the middle. Her model, although for the U.S., seems to apply in the context of my research, as most women seek, ultimately, marriage to foreigners, often talking in negative terms of their sexual practices (paid sex or sex with many men). It is worth noting that not all women seek hetero-normative conjugal arrangements as the presence of some lesbian women doing *programa* indicates.

themselves in Ponta Negra between male foreigners and Brazilian women and finally I reflect on the potential broader implications of the strategies elaborated by women to *mudar de vida*, especially given that these strategies are grounded in inequalities of gender, race, class, age, and nationality. I propose the following as ‘first thoughts’ to provoke further reflections on sex tourism, in Natal and in other contexts, in the hope that the discussion will move away from an essentialization of women’s identities and experiences in sex tourism.

PONTA NEGRA: A TRANSNATIONAL, CONTESTED, AND AMBIGUOUS SPACE

Ponta Negra is, indeed, a very small place. It occupies the southern part of the city of Natal, the state capital of Rio Grande do Norte, and constitutes, in the city landscape, a place of its own⁸. It has become a transnational space where a concentrated presence of foreigners is highly visible, especially when compared to other areas of Natal. As one walks along the two kilometers of beach from the famous *Morro do Careca* to the more quiet resort hotels along the *Via costeira*⁹, one notices the many restaurants, bars, hotels, travel agencies, shops and real-estates agencies, which are predominantly owned by foreigners, many of which have foreign names in Italian, Spanish, English, and French. Among the many spots on the beach to enjoy the sun and the sea, one is particularly well known for being Norwegian-friendly, and it is even possible for Norwegian tourists to listen to music in their own language, from the handmade sound system the ambulant CDs sellers carry along the beach. Other spots are recognized for being the meeting points of Italians or Spanish. During the day, most tourists¹⁰ in Ponta Negra spend their time at the beach, take a surf lesson, walk along the path, or enjoy a buggy tour in one of the nearest beaches such as Genipabu or Pipa in Rio Grande do Norte. But very few explore Natal beyond Ponta Negra. At night, the tourists eat in the restaurants along the beach, have a drink in some of the bars, frequent the mall, or buy souvenirs from ambulant sellers or inside the many shops forming part of the unique, one-sided street along the beach. Ponta Negra is also

⁸ Natal has a population of 774 230 habitants (IBGE 2007); it is relatively small compared to other state capitals in the region (such as Recife, Salvador, Fortaleza). Natal has experienced a rapid increase in tourism in the last years. In 2007, Natal ranked as the third city most visited by international tourists in the Northeast of Brazil and as the sixth for the whole country (after Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Porto Alegre and Fortaleza), receiving as much as 218 825 international visitors in 2007 –an impressive number giving the size of the city (Infraero 2007).

⁹ The *Morro do Careca* constitutes a giant sand dune with some vegetation –it is a protected area, and it sets the limits on the southern part of the beach of Ponta Negra. The *Via Costeira* designated the road along the beach leading up to the *Praia de Areia Preta* (Beach of Black Sand). The highest concentration of tourists in Ponta Negra is situated between the beginning of the *Via Costeira* and the *Morro do Careca*.

¹⁰ According to my observations, the tourists come from other parts of Brazil, from Argentina and Europe (including Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, Sweden, Norway, France and Switzerland). I’ve met only one Canadian and one American. A study conducted by Sebrae on the profile of international tourists reveals that Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch constitute the majority of those visiting Natal (Diario de Natal 2006b).

marked by the presence of many domestic migrants, from interior towns in Rio Grande do Norte, but also from other states, who have opted to migrate to Natal attracted by the opportunities of tourism, considered better than those in their own locales. Many of them emphasize the peacefulness, including the relatively low crime rate of Natal compared to other state capital cities in the Brazilian Northeast, such as Recife, Salvador and Fortaleza, and point to its potential to provide economic opportunities, due to international tourism. In this space, the locals also find their place, using the beach to fish, play ball, surf, enjoy the sun, work in the hotels, bars, restaurants, and sell an impressive variety of items and food to the tourists relaxing on the beach, including shrimps, fruits, empanadas, crepes, ice cream, beers, drinks of all sort, hammocks, sunglasses, sun cream, souvenirs and so on.

Yet many local residents lament the changes brought by tourism, which, although translated into new economic opportunities for many, has also transformed the social relations and the landscape. These residents, along with business owners, have formed local associations such as *Movimento SOS Ponta Negra*, or *Ame Ponta Negra*¹¹ to promote sustainable, balanced and responsible development in Ponta Negra (Trigueiro 2005; Diarrio de Natal 2006a). These associations point to the difficulty in buying properties, to the gentrification of their neighborhood, and to the problem of sex tourism, claiming their locale is now ‘owned’ by foreigners, seeing these changes as recent, and linking them to the first international flights connecting Natal to Europe, since the late 1990s, early 2000s. For these associations of residents and business owners, sex tourism (commonly understood as prostitution between white male foreigners and Brazilian women) has brought with it an increase in violence and criminality, including money laundering, organized crime, drug dealing, street kids and pedophilia. The presence of *garota de programa*¹² at the beach (usually young, dark-skinned, lower-class women) disturbs these local residents and business owners who feel their locality has been transformed into a giant brothel for male foreigners. Some tourists too lament the commodification of sex in Ponta Negra, and many male tourists have expressed to me their desire to meet “normal” women, complaining that *all* women in Ponta Negra are prostitutes.

¹¹ Literally, “Love Ponta Negra”. It is the association of the residents, businessman and friends of Ponta Negra –in Portuguese, *Associação dos moradores, empresarios e amigos de Ponta Negra*.

¹² The term *garota de programa* refers to women going on *programa*, which Piscitelli refers to as “explicit agreements to exchange sexual services for money, including prices, practices, and lengths of encounters” and thus, “the word *prostituição* (prostitution) refers to *programas*”. (2007: 491) In Ponta Negra, women rarely use the word *prostituição* but rather talk about doing *programas*. When asked how they self-identified, women would usually say as *garotas de programa*. For a discussion of *garotas de programa*, see Gaspar (1985).

Recently, the closure of bars at the beach has further altered the locality, and created new tensions. The nightlife has moved up the hills, in the *Alto de Ponta Negra*, in what is locally referred to as the *rua do Salsa*, (Salsa street) and its adjacent streets¹³ –a space that until recently was almost exclusively frequented by university students and by Natal’s middle-class. For these groups, the presence of *gringos*¹⁴ disturbs what they see as their space, transforming it into a morally corrupted area due to the conflation between *gringos* and sex tourism, and to the significant number of young, lower class, and predominantly dark-skinned women (many of whom are *garotas de programa*) who also find themselves in this space. As a result, there have been some attempts by the middle-class at preserving their space ‘intact’: some of the bars in this area have adopted a dress code to target a more “respectable” clientele, and some women self-identified as *garotas* were prohibited from entering, as one of them told me, not because of her clothing, but because of her ‘transgressive’ sexuality¹⁵. There is also one bar with the sign “no sex tourism here” in its entrance door and with a high entrance fee for women, clearly targeting a middle-class feminine clientele. In spite of these attempts, the *rua do Salsa* has become the main point of encounter (at night) between *gringos* and Brazilian women, many of whom are *garotas*.

Ponta Negra is thus a contested space, where different tensions are articulated along 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 love, marriage and migration. In the many bars, restaurants, clubs, and at the beach of Ponta Negra, women do not only sell sex to foreigners, and not all of them are *garotas*. Many of them come to this place with the goal of finding a potential husband to *mudar de vida* already in mind, either to live abroad or to realize their projects in Natal or elsewhere in

¹³ The Salsa street and its adjacent streets comprise about two blocks, with about 15 establishments (bars, restaurants, clubs).

¹⁴ In this paper, I used the term *gringo*, as it is the way local people refer to foreigners (usually white, Europeans or North Americans, but can also refer to Latin American foreigners, especially from Argentina, and especially if white). Silva and Blanchette (2005:254) propose that the term *gringo* in Rio de Janeiro usually refers to any foreigner, and does not have a pejorative connotation. In Ponta Negra, it depends on the context of its use but it can imply negative connotation for some locals –especially given that Ponta Negra has rapidly changed recently due to mass tourism, and that some people resent the foreigner’s presence and privileges.

¹⁵ Prostitution is not considered a criminal act in Brazil –but inducement to prostitution, including establishments favouring it, is criminalized.

Brazil. Both contested and transnational, Ponta Negra is also an ambiguous space, where it is not always clear what is commodified, and who is involved in this process. These questions are further elaborated in the following sections of this paper.

THE AMBIGUITY IN SEX TOURISM

The transactions that take place [in sex tourism] are difficult to recognize and categorize as a form of labour; instead, the landscape of tourism lends itself more to interpretations of adventure and romance.

Amelia Cabezas 2004: 997

The ambiguity characterizing sex tourism is an old observation in anthropological and sociological studies of sex tourism, with some early studies referring to “open-ended prostitution” (Cohen 1986) to describe the conflation of love with money embedded in the relationships forged between foreigners and natives. Many have proposed that the sexual exchanges that take place in the context of sex tourism are fluid because of the spatial configuration in which they are set: in settings that are not strictly dedicated to commodified sex (such as strip clubs, red light districts, brothels) and considered to have an “atmosphere of ‘normality’” (Piscitelli 2007: 492).

Others argue that this appearance of normality is also staged, or performed by women, as they attempt to transform their clients into boyfriends (Cohen 1986; Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006; Silva and Blanchette 2005; Brennan 2004). Cohen 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 costumers 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. Ribeiro and Sacramento go even further than Cohen’s stage theory, and argue that Brazilian prostitutes in Ponta Negra “construct a simulacra” (2006:12; my translation) that is, they pretend to be completely subject to man’s seductive power and enact behaviors associated with non-commercial sex, such as giving kisses on the mouth. They are operating a “manipulative seduction” (2006:12; my translation) that the tourist perceives as genuine, which means that “not only he buys sexual services, but also (and more than anything) he buys the illusion of a conquest, or better, a simulacra in which he feels infused with power, virile competence, believing himself to be an authentic *Don Juan*” (2006:13; my translation). In this

interpretation, “the illusion of a conquest” is produced through an appearance of normalcy that women are particularly adept at creating, yet this reading implies the relationships with men are necessarily inauthentic, essentially deceptive and exclusively driven by self-interest.

Some authors have suggested that it is not possible to read women’s strategic use of love as merely driven by economic interests and have proposed more complex understandings of their “performance of love,” insisting on the impossibility of assessing whether love is real or feigned partly because it is experienced between two people (Silva and Blanchette 2005; Brennan 2004). Thus, that women work hard to hide the commodified aspect of the relationships does not prevent the presence of other interests, such as love. Women are not, these authors argue, located outside culture: women use “the discourse and practices of romantic love to secure marriage proposals for a visa”(Brennan 2004: 97), but, and this is a key distinction, they also *embrace* the discourse on romantic love and its practices.

I adopt a similar view, and I suggest that in Ponta Negra, the appearance of normalcy is more than merely ‘staged’ for economic interests, and constitutes more than a simulacra. Women in Ponta Negra seek it, because it offers them the possibility to have the kinds of relationships that are considered ‘legitimate’. What drives these women, then, is more than access to material wealth: they also seek to insert themselves into hetero-normative conjugal arrangements, with foreigners. Indeed, in this transnational space, lower-class women tend to value foreignness (for its association with wealth, whiteness, and europeanness) and to see in foreigners ‘ideal’ men with whom many hope to realize their dream of romantic love. Thus, drawing upon the many ambiguous terrains that are intrinsic to the universe of sex tourism, they actively seek to ‘normalize’ their relationships with foreigners.

Foreigners also seek to normalize the relationships with women, as they, too, are subjected to the stigma associated with prostitution (including the male pride of not to have to, at least explicitly, pay for sex) and to the imperative of inserting themselves into hetero-normative conjugal arrangements. There is therefore a mutual impulse at work in Ponta Negra to normalize the relationships, which makes possible, for women, the imaginings (and at times the materialization) of a project of social mobility with foreigners. But how do these ambiguities manifest themselves? In Ponta Negra, as will become clear, these ambiguities are deeply spatialized, and relational.

GRINGOS AND BRASILEIRAS ENCOUNTER ONE ANOTHER IN PONTA NEGRA

Foreigners and *brasileiras* (Brazilian women) form an important part of Ponta Negra's landscape, and their presence is notable in the hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs and at the beach where both groups seek to encounter one another¹⁶. Far from being homogenous, *gringos* constitute a diversified group of foreigners and I find the label "sex tourist" limiting to grasp their complexity and diversity. There are, indeed, many axes of differences, including their social class, age, nationality, length of time in Brazil and Natal, first timers versus old timers, traveling with friends or alone and so on (see also Oppermann 1999). It is difficult to provide an accurate profile of *gringos*, but according to my observations over the last nine months, their age ranges from 20 to 60, with a majority of them in their mid-thirties or early forties. They come from many different countries but are predominantly Europeans¹⁷. These men are either traveling alone or in groups of two-three, and more rarely, in bigger groups of four-seven, and come to Natal with diverse motivations –for business, to have fun with their friends, to surf, or to meet Brazilian women. They have different levels of wealth –some foreigners own properties around Natal or in Ponta Negra, other come from working-class background and have saved for months for their trip. Some are regular tourists and expatriates, and thus have more experiences than the newcomers (they regularly emphasize they know better the place and the women). Some men spend their holiday with a different girl every night, and make their 'conquest' visible to other foreigners. Others seek to encounter 'normal' women, as they say, meaning women who do not engage in paid sex –whether for a night out or for more. Some *gringos* also hope to find a girlfriend, or to engage in relationships that approximate a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. There is, indeed, more to say about *gringos* –the point for now is that they are not exclusively driven by paid sex when they come to Ponta Negra, and that they themselves often blur the lines between love and money¹⁸ –a point I will return to later.

¹⁶ There are some transvestites and gay men who also seek to encounter foreigners or who go on *programa* in Ponta Negra, but they are rather marginal in these spaces, and many transvestites tend to frequent more isolated area of the city where street prostitution with local men predominates. In addition, there are some *gringas* looking for *brasileiros* (and vice versa), but they are much more discrete, and marginal. As argued by Gregory in the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic "the privileging of heteronormative masculinity, locally and within the international tourist industry, constructs sex work as female and heterosexual" (2003:333) and a similar dominant construction is at work in Ponta Negra.

¹⁷ In the last 9 months of research, I've meet only one Canadian, one American, and a few Argentineans, all other male foreigners being Europeans, including Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, French, British.

¹⁸ Silva and Blanchette (2005) too identify diversity in the nightclub "Help" in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, and present a typology of sex tourists that includes the accidental sex tourist, the monger and the love-tourist. This last

Brazilian women who seek to meet foreigners also constitute a complex, and diversified group¹⁹, and again it is difficult to translate here their differences and many motivations, life histories, and backgrounds. Thus I offer the following as a preliminary sketch of the group they constitute. For the purpose of this paper I focus exclusively on lower-class women as they dominate the spaces where *gringos* and *brasileiras* meet, and I wish to address *their* projects of social mobility. They are predominantly dark-skinned (*morena*)²⁰, with a minority being ‘white’, and another, ‘black’. They are, for the most part, from lower to lower-middle class backgrounds, having had little access to education (some of them have not completed their primary school; all of them went to public schools, which in Brazil restricts their access to a university degree). Many are single mothers, or have dependents at their charge. Some have grown up in Recife’s shantytowns, others in the peripheral neighborhoods of Natal, Maceio, João Pessoa, and many come from interior towns of the state, or from the Vila –the oldest, and poorest part of Ponta Negra. The majority of them are in their early twenties, with the oldest women I have spoken to being 42, the youngest, 18. It is difficult to assert whether many minors insert themselves into the spaces where *gringos* and *brasileiras* meet one another; if they do, they use false identity cards in the bars and nightclubs, as most of the establishments apply the Brazilian law given the public concern with the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in tourism²¹. For sure, no children are found in these spaces.

Many women come to Ponta Negra with previous experiences of transnational migration, usually in Europe²², for periods as short as 5 days to as long as 15 years. Whether they have lived in Europe or not, most women have learned a second language (oftentimes in Ponta Negra, in their encounters with foreigners) –Italian, Spanish and increasingly, English. Previously these women worked as domestic workers, or in other low-paid jobs in the service sector. Their search for social and economic opportunities bring them to Ponta Negra, where they seek to meet

type challenges common assumption that men only look for sex in the nightclub “Help”: as their ethnographic research reveals, love-tourist are surprisingly numerous in the nightclub, seeking a girlfriend, even a wife.

¹⁹ I am aware of the complexity of typology of women in sex tourist settings (see Piscitelli 2007). Indeed, in Ponta Negra, middle class and upper class women, too seek to meet foreigners. Yet I seek to address the specific practice of transnational love as a strategy to *mudar de vida for lower-class women* (both self-identified as *garotas* or not).

²⁰ I use the term dark-skin women and not black women because both *gringos* and Brazilian women in my research use the term *morena*, not *preta* or *negra* to describe their skin colour.

²¹ Natal was the first city to adopt a code of conduct against the sexual exploration of children and adolescents in tourism, which has been endorsed by travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, shops, associations and so on. See <http://www.resposta.org.br/resposta.php> In relations to the presence of minors, many men seek to avoid it and warn one another about women looking too young. One young-looking woman (but older than 18) told me on a night out, “I’m not lucky with foreigners, they don’t want to go out with me, they all think I am a minor”.

²² So far, I have meet only one woman who spent some time in Miami, in the United States.

foreigners, usually with the project of migrating abroad, marrying or making fast money. In Ponta Negra, some of these women work in the tourist sector where they can easily meet foreigners in a 'normal' context (working as a waitress, dancer, fruit seller at the beach, cashier in shops, receptionist, and so on) while others choose the sex trade with foreigners. These women are differently located on what Piscitelli refers to as a "continuum of commodified sex" (2007: 498), from explicit agreement (to exchange sex for money) to more fluid arrangements, and many of them engage in ambiguous relationships with foreigners.

These ambiguities begin in the many spaces where foreigners and *brasileiras* seek to meet one another –namely the beach, bars, restaurants, and clubs that form part of a tourist area and not of a red-light district, and thus, that take the appearance of normalcy. Since my first day of arrival, the *rua do Salsa* and its adjacent streets have changed, and what used to be an important point of gathering for the middle-class youth (an open space, on the side of a bar catering to university students) is now turning into a point of encounters between *gringos* and *garotas* –but it looks like an ordinary open-air bar. In addition to this space, in the early hours of the night, both *gringos* and *brasileiras* frequent open-air bars (mostly two) with tropical themes and views on the street, to later move to the few *discoteca* (nightclubs)²³ of the area, where, in one of them (the most frequented) the *gringos* can watch young, predominantly dark-skinned Brazilian women dancing erotically on the counter of the bar. With the exception of this last bar, for the passerby with no knowledge of the sex tourist scene, the *Alto de Ponta Negra* does not appear as a space of commodified sex. The interactions between Brazilian women and foreigners take there an appearance of normalcy: they flirt, drink, engage in conversation, dance, kiss, and sometimes, leave together for the man's hotel room. A *gringo* might buy a rose from the flower merchant who circulate in the bars, and offer it to his partner.

This blur is also at play at the beach, and in the restaurants by the beach, where *gringos* and Brazilian women (whether *garotas* or not) walked hand by hand, kiss each other, lie down together at the beach, go shopping in the nearby mall, eat in the restaurant, spend a couple of days together in the neighborhood beaches, or go on a buggy tour for the day. In this tourist landscape that invites romance, many *gringos* hire a woman for the week, and in the prices, includes everything: kisses, romantic dinner, a day with them at the beach, spending a night out with them, and of course, sex. These relationships confuse what commodified sex includes. Usually, women

²³ There were three *discotecas*, two operating on alternative days, one of them being a bit away from the Salsa street, but still in the *Alto de Ponta Negra*.

prefer these arrangements, as they might open the way for long-term relationships, and provide them with some financial security for a couple of days. Thus women even accept to accompany a man without making any explicit arrangement beforehand, given he could potentially become a boyfriend.

Things get also blurred given that many women who are not *garotas* insert themselves in the spaces recognized as point of encounters between *garotas* and *gringos*, and seek romance (and sex) with foreigners –a romance that also includes material benefits²⁴. Claudia, a white, 37-year-old woman, self-identified as *garota*, explained to me she had just recently begun to go on *programa*: “before, I did not charge” and would only *namorar*, which means she would engage in romantic love with foreign men. She would go out with foreigners, get invited to have dinner in a nice restaurant, and act as their girlfriend during their stay. Yet, she insisted, for her to accept to *namorar*, a gringo would have to treat her well, which means, “he has to *spend*, he has to please a woman, to treat her well”. Whereas Claudia draws a time-line between *namorar* and *programa*, many women are not as consistent: if they meet a man they like on a night out working, they might decide to simply flirt, rather than work. But even this line is sometimes difficult to mark: whether *garotas* or not, on a night out women say they are going to *paquerar* (flirt) with foreigners; and often times refer to foreigners as their *namorados* (boyfriends) even if only spending one night with them while being paid for it. Many women insist in saying that they choose the man with whom they go on a *programa*, “I have to feel something for him” or “I choose, I don’t go with any men”. In practice, however, women are not always able to choose (due to financial need, or during the low-season) –yet what is significant is that they seek to give an appearance of a normalcy to relationships that are commodified²⁵. By saying that they choose

²⁴ Usually, middle-class and upper-class women who seek to encounter foreigners would frequent other bars, clubs and more quiet parts of the beach. Aware of the blur between love and money, they are particularly concerned that people would see them as driven by economic interests. The daughter of a university teacher was invited to Spain by her Spanish boyfriend, but she refused. When I asked her why, she replied: “can you imagine, a woman like me, accepting to depend on him?”. A university student explains to me how difficult it was, in the first months of her relationships with her German boyfriend, to accept gifts from him given the conflation between love and material benefits in Ponta Negra. She insisted to point to the ‘naturalness’ of their encounter, as introduced by a common friend, to show that she was not actively looking to meet *gringo*, unlike so many women in Ponta Negra. These practices of distinction reveals that the ambiguous relationships lower-class women develop in Ponta Negra are not exempt from the stigma associated with immoral sexuality and with commodified sex. If gifts, restaurants, flight tickets or any other material benefits are involved, then the relationships is seen as false, self-driven, immoral by middle-class, upper class women (see also Piscitelli 2007 for a discussion of the process of distinction among Brazilian women who date foreigners in Fortaleza).

²⁵ It is important to note that among the women self-identified as *garotas*, some say they would only go on explicit *programa* with men. These women emphasize they are working, not looking for a man, thus adopt more a professional identity. They do not choose with whom they go, and do not go on a *programa* without making explicit

men, by flirting with them, and by referring to them as their *namorados*, these women seek to ‘normalize’ their relationships with foreigners

In these ambiguous spaces, *gringos* are often outnumbered by *brasileiras*, and receive a lot of attention –they are smiled at, gazed at, and cheered up by young, good-looking women. Some women 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 clubs. Many women initiate the flirt through a gaze or find a pretext to approach a man, while other women prefer to wait but when a man approaches them, they would encourage him with their gaze and smiles, and rapidly engage the conversation. Some women are more direct in their seductive approach, and touch or kiss the men or invite them to dance. Most foreigners experience this attention positively, and often comment that at home, they never experience something like that –they are usually the one who have to initiate a flirt, and are often turned down by women. What is particularly significant is that they see, for the most part, the interactions they have with these women as part of their experience of Brazil (and not as part of commodified sex or tourism). Thus, in these spaces where women flirt with them, deploy their eroticized bodies, and show friendliness, foreigners consider these interactions as ‘normal’ for Brazil, and they turn these attributes into national or racial qualities. They contrast Brazilian women with European women, and usually see in them ideal version of femininity, or what I refer to as ‘tropical femininity’. This tropical femininity translates into 1) a tropical sexuality²⁶ (as dark-skinned women, these women are seen as more sensual than their European counterparts); 2) a friendliness and openness not found elsewhere (most foreigners do not experience, in their home countries, spaces where so many women engage in friendly conversations and interactions with them); and 3) a way of being that make them “real women” (*brasileiras* know their ‘place’, they do not pretend, as one foreigner once told me “to be men” like European women do, which means basically they dress sexy, take care of their body, and would be fulfilled in the role of a housewife).

In her research on sex tourism in Fortaleza, Adriana Piscitelli discusses at length these imaginings (2007; 2006; 2004a). She proposes that “foreign tourists are usually attracted by the idea of sexual encounters with women perceived to possess an intense, racialized ‘tropical

arrangements. Yet, I have met very few women who made these claims, and even less who, in their practices, do not blur the lines.

²⁶ See Piscitelli on tropical sexuality (2007; 2006; 2004b). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the genealogy of these imaginings, on the part of both foreign men and Brazilian women. For more on the links between race and sexuality in Brazil, especially on “the production of the idea of a ‘Brazilian sexual culture’” (2006: 3) and the process through which it gets read and rewritten in the context of sex tourism, see Piscitelli (2006).

sexuality' and who embody traits of 'traditional' femininity" (2007: 493-494). In turn, women also embrace this tropical sexuality (2006; 2004b). In Ponta Negra, *brasileiras* know their tropical femininity makes them ideal girlfriend for foreigners and thus, they embody this distinctive way of being women, performing their sensuality, friendliness, and femininity in the many bars, clubs, restaurants, and at the beach of Ponta Negra where men gather. This tropical femininity is not 'staged' but enabled by, and constitutive of this transnational space. In other words, it is made possible only in the interactions with foreign men, who deploy, in their encounter with these women, what I refer to as a "gringo masculinity".

Similarly to the tropical femininity, this gringo masculinity is produced through the encounters between *gringos* and *brasileiras* and is made possible in a transnational space where what is foreign acquires a special value –especially given that *brasileiras* tend to devalue local men and to consider *gringos* as ideal version of masculinity. This *gringo* masculinity is grounded in imperial visions which constructs the North as a place of work, efficiency, modernity and culture, and the South –including Brazil and perhaps more so the Northeast– as a place of leisure, laziness, tradition and nature. In the bars, restaurants, clubs and at the beach, foreigners share together about their experiences in Ponta Negra. In these spaces of male sociality, they enact a *gringo* masculinity in which their whiteness, their europeanness, their maleness, their mobility, their wealth, and their power to buy sex marked them as distinct (see also Gregory 2003). In their talks, foreigners point to their superiority, as men, in contrast to Brazilian men, whom, they say, do not treat women well, are predominantly violent, and do not assume the children they father. In contrast, they see themselves as good providers, and rationalize that if Brazilian women try so hard to seduce them, it must be because they embody a better form of masculinity. In the context of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, Steven Gregory points to these 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" (350). As one German man in his late 50s said to me, puzzled: "I don't know why younger girl fall in love with me" –implying it is not his wealth, whiteness, mobility but him, as a man, these women fall in love with.

In addition, this man explains *brasileiras* predilection for *gringos* in term of the difference between Brazilian and European men. According to him, "women have had bad experience with Brazilian men" such as getting pregnant at an early age without support from the father. Many foreigners in Ponta Negra see themselves as good providers compared to Brazilian men. And,

quite significantly, many insist in saying that the money they give to women, “*é só uma ajuda*” (it’s just a help) as two Portuguese men once told me –meaning by that they are not paying for sex but rather helping a poor woman. These Portuguese and other *gringos* explain they prefer to invite a woman to eat with them, to give her gifts, to have her as company over their stay, or to spend the entire night with her, rather than engaging in any explicit exchange of money for each sex acts. One Norwegian in his early thirties told me he and his friends came to Ponta Negra with the intention of having fun and sex, but not *pay* for sex. Yet, this man was giving 200 *reais* a day as ‘a help’ to the woman who accompanied him –a dark-skinned, 20 year-old woman from Recife. He explains he gave her ‘a help’ due to her economic situation, saying “Have you seen the house she wants to buy? I went on Google Earth to see where it is, it’s in the middle of a *favela!*” To *pay* for men is often seen as admitting their failure to get a woman.

Thus these foreigners too, attach stigma to commodified sex, and seek to insert themselves into relationships that approximate dominant model of conjugality. In Ponta Negra, many men seek to ‘normalize’ their relationships with Brazilian women, and thus avoid explicit discussion over money. Considering women as embodying a tropical femininity, and themselves as better men than Brazilians, they tend to downplay, or recode, the monetary aspects involved in the transaction and thus the inequalities that structure the relationships: women have sex with them not for money, but because they like sex, and because they like them.

Brazilian women also construct foreigners as ideal men and see in them a different version of manliness in comparison to Brazilian men. They too attribute to them a *gringo* masculinity in which wealth, whiteness, and europeanness mark foreigners as better. In Ponta Negra, foreign men on their holidays treat them like “princesses” as they would say, bringing them to nice restaurants, buying them fancy drinks, inviting them to their hotel rooms, giving them an impressive amount of things including flowers, mini-Dvds, English lessons, clothes, jewelleryes, dictionaries, sunglasses, shoes, bikinis, and so on, and at times, offering even a flight ticket to Europe. Countless times, women have told me “*desisti do brasileiro*” (meaning they have abandoned the idea of having relationships with a Brazilian man) –seen as worthless, unfaithful, and not taking care of his responsibilities including the children he fathers. Some also said “*gringo para casar, brasileiro para transar*” (gringo to marry, *brasileiro* to have sex) and would then explain that *gringos* are nicer with women, treat them well, and make better providers than Brazilian men, who are worthwhile only in bed. Some foreigners do not fit with the ideal of the good provider, and women made an important distinction to ‘sort’ these men. In the many

bars, restaurants, and clubs, the *cafuzó*²⁷, is the topic of many discussions among women, and commonly refer to a man who does not want to pay to have sex, whom they consider cheap, or who would offer very little money. The *cafuzó* is thus avoided by women, and is the topic of many jokes, as it counters the dominant idea of foreign men as good provider.

In short, the appeal of foreigners comes from the idea that they are imagined as good provider, responsible fathers, respectful men and romantic lovers, in contrast to their local fellow whom women see as “not worthwhile”. The ambiguous conjugal arrangements between foreigners and Brazilian women are thus contingent upon mutual imaginings of one another in which foreigners are seen as better version of masculinity, and *brasileiras*, considered ideal women in comparison to Europeans. This co-construction of idealized otherness facilitates the normalization of relationships, because women see in these men ideals of wealth, mobility, manliness –in other word, the perfect boyfriend for them to realise their projects of social mobility and normativity. The women in turn, embody a tropical femininity that foreign men idealize. In other words, they represent the perfect (holiday) girlfriend.

MUDAR DE VIDA THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL LOVE

Transnational romantic ties act as surrogate family migration networks to access a middleclasslifestyle and its accompanying security.

Denise Brennan 2004: 103

For lower-class women, ambiguous relationships with sex tourists open the ways to real social mobility.

Adriana Piscitelli 2007: 498

In the summer of 2007, I met a 20-year-old woman on her way to *mudar de vida*. Originally from the Vila of Ponta Negra, Ana was on her way to marry her Norwegian boyfriend and to move to Norway. He was her first foreigner boyfriend, and Ana felt the stigma associated with paid sex as people around her assumed she was on *programa* with him –especially given her skin colour (*morena*) and socio-economic background. Ana was leaving with her mother, brother

²⁷ *Cafuzó* has a strong social class connotation. In Rio Grande do Norte it locally refers to a man from the lower-classes who displays rude body language, has bad manners, dresses inappropriately, and expresses himself simply. In the context of my research, however, the term seems to apply differently to foreigners, as local women use *cafuzó* to refer to *gringos* they consider “cheap” (see also Ribeiro and Sacramento 2006).

and stepfather and contributed to the household expenses working in a shop in the main mall of Ponta Negra. After he left for Norway, her Norwegian boyfriend asked her to stop working there, jealous of the potential foreigners men she could meet while working; in exchange, he would pay for her monthly expenses. Ana agreed, and her mother was delighted, too, as he gave more money to the household than what Ana earned working in the shop. When he left, he had promised he would bring her to Norway, and he eventually arranged a three-month trip that would serve as a test to see if Ana could enjoy life in Norway with him. After this period, the plan was to get married. Before leaving, Ana was unsure about her feelings for him, or about going to live abroad, but thought this was an opportunity she should not refuse. When I asked her why not stay in Brazil, she replied: “*para fazer o quê?*” (for what?). After all, her mother had sacrificed a lot for her, and was living with a man she did not love, but whom she considered a good man, for helping her financially. In the words of her mother “*não gosto dele*” (I don’t like him) but “*nunca faltei de nada por causa dele*” (I never lacked of anything because of him), in addition to insisting he always treated Ana well, for a stepfather. Ana thought that it was now “her turn” to contribute: “my mother did everything for me, *agora e minha vez* (now it’s my turn)”. Moreover, accepting his invitation to Norway would put an end to the local gossip on her doing a *programa*, as this would mean inserting herself into a hetero-normative conjugal arrangement and providing a stigma-free income to the household.

In the dominant discussions on sex tourism in Natal, women like Ana are usually absent, given their lack of engagement in explicit commodified sex. Yet, her situation is similar to many of the *garotas*: she, too, blurs the line between love and economic interests in her attempts to transform her life, and seeks in the discourse and practices of romantic love, to *mudar de vida*. She agreed to quit her job in a shopping mall of Ponta Negra at the request of her Norwegian boyfriend, as being provided for was seen positively, both by her and by her relatives (including her mother, who also encouraged her to marry him). Ana was not sure about her love for him, but still tried to insert herself in a relationship locally recognized as ‘legitimate’ and exempt from the stigma attached to prostitution. She thought once married to him, and with his financial help, she could get a university degree in medicine –a dream difficult to attain by herself. Once in Norway, things did not work out as she planned, as Ana felt captive in his home and decided to leave him after only a week in Norway. She stayed in Norway with a Brazilian friend for the remaining three months, and there, met another man, this time “falling in love” with him –but only after her friend had sought to arrange a marriage for her, which Ana refused, seeking ‘real’ love. She came back with only one idea in mind: to return to Norway to marry him. In the meantime, however,

Ana continues to frequent the main points of encounters between *gringos* and *garotas*, where she flirts with foreigners. Thus, Ana makes use of the ambiguities at play in sex tourism, and both uses love strategically and embraces its discourse and practices.

In contrast, Bebel, a 26 year-old dark-skinned woman, self-identified as *garota de programa*, came to Ponta Negra with the intention of finding a potential husband. Initially she sought to marry a foreigner willing to live in Brazil, afraid of what could happen to her in Europe, having heard stories of women forced into prostitution on television. Bebel had a predilection for Italians, because in her view, “they are romantic, yes, yes romantic [smiling a lot, nodding her head] caring, they know how to give pleasure to a woman, they treat a woman really well”. At some point, she maintained contact by phone with three different Italian men –her “Italian collection”, as she would say jokingly, 3 chances of going to Europe. Bebel met them one after another, when they were on holiday (staying here between 1 and 3 weeks), and did everything possible to transform these men into *namorados*, even pretending to be pregnant by one of them, in the hope that he would either come back to Ponta Negra, or provide her with a ticket. Bebel felt love for all three of them, and found it difficult to say which one of them she preferred, but her choice would usually be Lucas, because he was the most likely to give her a ticket to Italy.

With the goal of finding a foreigner to marry, Bebel would often go out with *gringos* without making any explicit agreement over money. She once spent a week with an Italian without receiving any money, nor asking “*porque gostava dele*” (because I liked him). She also paid for her lunch to convince a Spanish man she was not a *garota*, in the hope that he would fall in love with her, but was later puzzled as to why a man would not invite her, as in her view, a good man in a ‘normal’ relationship should pay. With no ties attaching her to Brazil, and with no primary school completed, Bebel thought that her way out (*sair dessa vida*) was only possible through marriage. She rejected Brazilian men (for being uncaring, not worthwhile, not good provider, not romantic) and when Lucas made a proposition to her (of marriage), she resolved going to Italy in spite of her fears (of the place and of him), excited about the idea of meeting again with her lover. She left mid-April without any return ticket, with no clear project in mind other than marrying Lucas but aware that things might not turn out as imagined. Bebel, similarly to Ana, made use of the ambiguities embedded in sex tourism to transform her life by inserting herself into a ‘legitimate’ project of social mobility –in her case, normalizing a relationship that had begun as one of commodified sex. She came to Ponta Negra imagining that she –a poor *morena* with no education– could transform her life through love and marriage. If Bebel saw in

foreigners a potential way out of poverty, she also imagined them as ideal man to live out her dream of romantic love. She, too, makes use of the discourse and practices of love in her project of social mobility, inserting herself into ambiguous relationships of love and money.

The project of transforming their lives is what drives many lower-class, dark-skinned women in Ponta Negra and many indeed, make their way to Europe, or are able to achieve other projects in their own localities with the financial help of their transnational boyfriends. Thus, as Silva and Blanchette (2005:279, my translation) suggest about women who insert themselves in the universe of sex tourism in Copacabana, and who also seek to transform tourists into boyfriends:

Their activities cannot be simply understood as the result of a ‘colonial brainwash’ or as the product of a ‘low self-esteem’ –indeed, they often lead to socio-economic changes in their lives they see as improvements. Therefore, they are better understood as rational strategies than as ideological manifestations of a false consciousness²⁸.

For these women, the imagined possibility of *mudar de vida* is more powerful than the stories of failures they come to hear or experience, and many women come to this space with a previous experience of transnational migration that makes their strategies even more rational, as they know what it is like to live abroad.

As lower-class, dark-skinned women, and usually without a university degree, they are fuelled by the idea that no matter what, their chances to experience upward mobility by themselves in Brazil are almost none, that Europe, is where opportunities lie, and that marriage to a foreigner would allow them to realize their dream of social mobility in a respectable fashion. 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 class background (and if they are *garotas* see them only as *puta*), which explain why so many women consider marriage with a *gringo* as the only path toward social mobility.

In their attempts to ‘normalize’ relationships with foreigners, these women are, ultimately, driven by projects of social mobility that imply traditional gender roles: men as provider, women as housewife. For these lower-class women, it might be difficult to conceive of projects of social mobility that include ‘financial independence’ as they have limited economic opportunities, but they also draw on local understandings of gender roles. Indeed, there is a history of a blur between sex and money in the region, as lower-class women have made use of

²⁸ In original: “Suas actividades não podem ser entendidas simplesmente como os resultados de uma ‘lavagem cerebral colonialista’ ou os frutos de uma ‘baixa auto-estima’, pois freqüentemente providenciam mudança socioeconômicas em suas vidas que são entendidas por elas como melhorias. Portanto, são melhor entendidas como estratégias racionais do que como manifestações ideológicas de uma falsa consciência”.

their sexuality strategically (Gregg 2003). In the Brazilian Northeast, love is often conflated with material benefits (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Carrier-Moisan 2005), and women often assess men in terms of their ability to provide for them. A good man is one who can help them financially, and, ‘marriage as transaction’ is an old phenomenon in the region, as revealed by Ana’s story. Thus, their strategies are embedded in local, historical, and cultural understandings of marriage, gender, love, and sexuality, but these find new resonance in the encounters with foreigners.

In effect, the gringo masculinity and tropical femininity at play in Ponta Negra articulate ways of being a man and a woman that tend to reify hetero-normative sexuality, to naturalize and racialize gender identities, to promote traditional gender roles and to (re)produce inequalities of race, class, and gender. As women seek in foreigners the good provider, they embrace the idea of depending on men as a way out poverty. In the blur of love and money, and in the many ambiguities, there are some erasures: these relationships are inscribed in inequalities of race, class, gender and nationality, and form part of a global political economy producing sites of exclusion and privilege.

How are we to make sense of, on the one hand, the resourcefulness and strategic use of love deployed by women in their projects of *mudar de vida*, and on the other hand, the structural inequalities of this sex tourist economy in which these ambiguous relationships of sex, love and money develop?

FINAL REFLECTIONS: WHAT IS AT STAKE, BETWEEN LOVE AND MONEY?

In this paper, I have discussed transnational love, marriage and migration as strategies of mobility for lower-class women in Ponta Negra, in the hope of moving the discussion on sex tourism away from the debates over whether these women are ‘victims’ or ‘workers’. This dominant reading of sex tourism as prostitution restricts the possibility to recognize the universe of practices in which economic interests, sex, and love converge. In this paper, I have offered preliminary reflections on these ambiguous relationships, which develop in the mutual imaginings of *gringos* and *brasileiras*. I have suggested that the blur of love and economic interests erase the monetary aspect of the relationship and makes possible projects of social mobility as women inserted themselves into hetero-normative conjugal arrangements. Moreover, I have proposed that in these ambiguous terrains, gender identities are racialized and naturalized, and are grounded in structural inequalities that overall, make the materialization of women’s project difficult to attain. If these women imagine new possibilities, as in Appadurai (1990) “the

attainability of these fantasy lives depends on who is doing the imagining and where”(Brennan 2004: 45).

In the following, I reflect on the implications these strategies to *mudar de vida* have when thinking about broader issues, such as the politics of citizenships, migration and marriage. In light of the previous discussion, it becomes crucial to recognize that “citizenships, not only capital, empowers many in the global economy” (Brennan 2004: 20), and that transnational love and marriage offer one of the few legitimate viable ways to move across borders for a majority of lower-class Brazilian women. Marriage provides, as pointed out by Silva and Blanchette (2005), a legal means to migrate without *cafetão* (intermediaries; pimps), and, importantly:

the predilection of the girls for foreigners are not coincidental, much less an option chosen due to lack of information or for ‘low-esteem’. In a world in which access to the outside is ever more restricted, especially for poor Brazilian women, these men appear as means to open the road for Europe and the United States, where, –in their imaginary, but also in the experience of many of them– opportunities lie (2005:272; my translation)²⁹.

The women who come to Ponta Negra are well aware of the privileges of citizenships, and of the differentiated mobility those with the “right” passport, and themselves, experience. They know that mobility is mediated by citizenship and that, as geographer Massey suggests, “some people are more in charge than others; some initiate flows and movements, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it” (1994:149). In Ponta Negra, women are seeking to meet foreigners –and not Brazilian men– precisely because they recognize in their foreignness, the privilege of citizenships.

In this context, marriage takes the form of a transnational transaction to cross-border legally. 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 assumption 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

²⁹ In original version: “A predileção das meninas por gringos não é um mero acaso, muito menos uma opção feita por falta de informações ou por ‘baixa estima’. Num mundo onde o acesso ao exterior é cada vez mais restrito, especialmente para brasileiras pobres, estes homens aparecem como meio de abrirem as rotas para a Europa e os Estados Unidos, onde –no imaginário, mas também na experiência de muitas das meninas– as oportunidades existem”.

can nonetheless decide whether or not to be mobile or to return to China” (174). In Ponta Negra, too, women make strategic decisions about love, marriage and migration.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that these strategies of social mobility are inscribed in structural inequalities. So far, the attention on sex tourism as prostitution as posited women as either ‘victims’ or ‘workers’ –identities that do not fit with the many women who actively deploy transnational love in their attempts to *mudar de vida*. Marriage to a foreigner might provide them with better lives, but this should not prevent us from seeing that in their attempts, women might reinforce a gender system that tends to (re)produce traditional scripts of gender roles, in which women are highly dependent on men for their project of social mobility.

REFERENCES

- AGUSTIN, Laura. 2006. "The Disappearing of a Migration Category: Migrants Who Sell Sex" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 32(1): 29-47.
- APPADURAI, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy". *Public Culture*. 2(2): 1-24.
- AZEVEDO, Sheylla. 2005. "Entrevista: Fernando Bessa" *Diário de Natal*. Natal-RN, September 20: 6.
- BLOCH, Alexia. 2003. "Victims of Trafficking or Entrepreneurial Women? Narratives of Post-Soviet Entertainers in Turkey". *Canadian Women Studies* 22 (3-4): 152-158.
- BRENNAN, Denise. 2004. *What's love got to do with it: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- CABEZAS, Amalia L. 2004. "Between Love and Money: Sex Tourism and Citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic" *Sign: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29(4): 987-1015.
- CARRIER-MOISAN, Marie-Eve. 2005. *Narratives of 'luta': The Manoeuvres of Migrant Women Workers in the Brazilian Northeast*. Non-published M.A. thesis. Montreal, Canada: Concordia University.
- COHEN, Erik. 1986. "Lovelorn Farangs: The Correspondence between Foreign Men and Thai Girls" *Anthropology Quarterly*. 59:3: 115-127.
- CONSTABLE, Nicole. 2003. *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and 'Mail-Order' Marriages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DIARIO DE NATAL. 2006a "Em Ponta Negra: Ato Contra Sexo Turismo". *Diario de Natal*, Natal-RN, November 10: 8.
- DIARIO DE NATAL. 2006b "'Cartão Postal' de Natal é o natalense". *Diario de Natal*, Natal RN, June 4.
- GASPAR, Maria Dulce 1985 *Garotas de Programa: Prostituição em Copacabana e Identidade Social*, Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.
- GREGG, Jessica L. 2003. *Virtually Virgins: Sexual Strategies and Cervical Cancer in Recife, Brazil*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- GREGORY, Steven. 2003. "Men in Paradise: Sex Tourism and the Political Economy of Masculinity" in *Race, nature and the Politics of Difference*. D. Moore, J. Kosek and A. Pandian eds. Duke University Press. Pp 323-353.
- IBGE 2007 "Cidades: Rio Grande do Norte: Natal" Access on-line April 2008 through: <http://www.infraero.gov.br/movi.php?gi=movi>

INFRAERO 2007 “Movimento Operacional Acumulado da REDE INFRAERO –Janeiro até Dezembro 2007” Brazil. Retrieved on the Internet April 2007 at <http://www.infraero.gov.br/movi.php?gi=movi>

JORNAL DA GLOBO. 2006. “Reportagens Especiais: Aqui se vende sexo; Troca-se Sexo por Esperança; Estructura para o turismo sexual; O triste destino das menores prostitutas no Nordeste; Para acabar com o turismo sexual no Nordeste” *Jornal da Globo* March 6 –10 retrieved on the Internet April 2008 <http://jg.globo.com/JGlobo/0,19125,VVJ0-2756-154130,00.html>

MASSEY, Doreen. 1994. “A Global Sense of Place” in *Space, Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Pp 146-156.

OPPERMANN, Martin. 1999. “Sex tourism”. *Annals of Tourism Research* 26:251-66.

PISCITELLI, Adriana. 2007. “Shifting Boundaries: Sex and Money in the North-East of Brazil”. *Sexualities* 10: 489-500.

PISCITELLI, Adriana. 2006. “Transnational sex travels: negotiating identities in a tropical paradise” In *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in Latin America*, Un Massachussets, Amherst : Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies

PISCITELLI, Adriana. 2004a. “Entre a Praia de Iracema e a União Européia: turismo sexual internacional e migração feminina” in *Sexualidade e Saberes: Convenções e Fronteiras*, ed. A. Piscitelli, M.F. Gregori and S. Carrara, Rio de Janeiro: Garamond: 283-318.

PISCITELLI, Adriana. 2004b. On “Gringos” and “Natives”: Gender and Sexuality in the context of international sex tourism. *Vibrant -Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 1:87-114.

RIBEIRO, Fernando Bessa, and Octávio Sacramento. 2006. “A ilusão da conquista: sexo, amor e interesse entre *gringos* e *garotas* em Natal” unpublished paper presented at the 3º Congresso da Associação Portuguesa de Antropologia, Lisboa: 1-19. Retrieved on the Internet April 2008 <http://www.apantropologia.net/publicacoes/actascongresso2006/cap7/RibeiroFernandoBessa.pdf>

RUBIN, Gayle. 1982. “Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality” In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance. Routledge and Kegan Paul. Pp. 267-319.

SCHEPER-HUGHES Nancy. 1992. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

SILVA, Ana Paula and Thaddeus Blanchette. 2005. “Nossa Senhora da Help: sexo, turismo e deslocamento transnacional em Copacabana” *Cadernos Pagu* 25 (july-dec): 249-280.

TRIGUERO, Gabriel. 2005. “Ame Ponta Negra vai lutar por um novo bairro” *Diario de Natal*. November 18: 2.