

“They are mar-vel-ous, and they all want me!”: Gay Brazilian tourists and global geographies of desire

Sexualities

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Abstract

This article explores the geographies of desire that inform contact between gay Brazilian tourists and the men they encounter abroad. It argues that Brazilian men largely embrace the sexualized image of themselves that circulates globally and value foreign men according to their proximity to whiteness. By studying tourists who hail from the Global South, their imaginings of the Global North, and the ways they exoticize themselves, the article brings a new perspective to the scholarship on tourism, which usually focuses on North-to-South travel.

Keywords

Brazil, desire, LGBT tourism, race

Meet Filipe. A 26-year old Brazilian gay man from the city of Recife, Filipe had visited more than 10 European countries before settling in Germany, and he would eventually visit every country on the continent. In an interview conducted via WhatsApp, he told us that the best thing about Europe is that he likes the men and they like him back: “They are mar-vel-ous, and they all want me!” Filipe identifies as *pardo* (brown) but prefers Europeans with “Scandinavian features,”

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that is, blondes with light-colored eyes. In Recife he did not feel particularly desirable, but in Europe he found that these men showered him with attention:

The main reason [for traveling abroad] for me is that [...] the physical characteristics of Brazilian men where I lived didn't attract me much. If I went to southern Brazil [...] I would find more people who are blond, white, with light eyes, which is the type I find attractive. Yet they would be snobbish about it. [...] Here in Europe it is totally different. Being blond is something normal; [...] actually, they think I'm all that because I'm Latino, I'm brown, I have brown eyes and hair that is different from theirs. So here I get much more attention, I have much more to choose from, and I am much, much happier.

Not only did Filipe feel more valued in Europe, but sleeping with foreigners also increased his social capital among his Brazilian gay friends. He loved taking pictures of the men he slept with and sending them to his friends, especially if they were "beautiful blondes." Sexuality, race, and tourism were inextricably linked for Filipe and his friends, and they represent a form of self-making that complicates our understanding of tourism. Moreover, they were the result of a type of tourism that scholars have seldom explored, in which the travelers hail from the Global South.

This article explores how transnational connections between gay Brazilian men and foreigners shape the imaginary of desirable bodies, desirable locales, and fantasies of Othering produced by tourism. This "geography of desire," we argue, has been co-produced by historically constructed, shared imaginaries of Brazil as a tropical, sexualized nation and of other countries—particularly North American and European countries—as more cosmopolitan, developed, and tolerant. Our most important insight is that when Brazilians travel abroad, they "Other" not only the men they meet but also themselves, informed by foreign perceptions of their nationality. That is, while Brazilian racial hierarchies lead them to value foreignness according to its proximity to whiteness, they also construct their own identity in relation to how people globally imagine Brazilian sexuality. Contact with foreigners also allows them to re-evaluate their own sexual worth, particularly for dark-skinned Brazilians who are not considered "beautiful" in Brazil but are valued abroad. In the end, however, tourism does not undo global structural inequalities that stereotype Brazilians as hypersexual but also as untrustworthy or intellectually inferior.

Scholars of tourism have nearly always imagined the Global South as a destination for tourists, not a point of origin. Yet in countries like Brazil tourism is an important symbolic practice, as a sign of conspicuous consumption. For instance, in the 1990s, shopping trips to the United States or vacations to Disneyworld became important class markers for middle-class Brazilians—these trips represented a global connection to modernity and a luxury few could afford (O'Dougherty, 2002). With the increase in purchasing power experienced by working-class Brazilians during the first decade and a half of the 21st century, tourism

became accessible more widely. For residents of favelas, air travel in particular became a symbol of having overcome poverty (Freire-Medeiros and Name, 2013). Europe and the US are associated with cosmopolitanism, consumption, and cultural capital in Brazil. James N Green (2001) describes how Brazilian men who engaged in same-sex practices wrote about their travels to the US as early as the late 1940s, and Richard Parker (1998) describes how gay Brazilians traveled to Europe and the United States in search of love, work, and HIV medication during the 1990s. Problematically, Parker theorizes shared sexual orientation as a path to offsetting the economic and cultural subordination that structures Brazilians' relationships with foreigners, and neither Green nor Parker mention how race and ethnicity shaped the experiences of these travelers. More recently, Isadora Lins França has analyzed how Brazilians who visit Barcelona for circuit parties see themselves as cosmopolitan (França, 2015a) and gain social capital from their nationality (França, 2015b), but she also does not theorize how race shapes their experience.

International mobility for LGBT tourists cannot be delinked from the racialized experiences that emerge from global sexual encounters. While domestic gay and lesbian tourism to San Francisco is frequently framed as a pilgrimage to an imagined (white) "queer homeland" (Howe, 2001), international travel to non-white nations is frequently portrayed as more fraught with danger, and tends to assume that compared to the Global South the US is exceptionally progressive in terms of LGBT rights (Puar, 2007). Locations like Brazil, however, occupy an interstitial space, represented as a "sexual playground" where sexual norms do not apply and bodies are available for consumption (Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento, 2010), and the country has been framed by the Brazilian government and transnational tourism companies as an erotic paradise in order to attract tourists (Mitchell, 2015; Williams, 2013). In the context of sex work, clients commonly sexualize Brazilian bodies for either their nationality (Maia, 2012) or race (Williams, 2013). This sexualization travels with these bodies when they go abroad. For example, *travestis* (gender nonconforming sex workers) have been traveling to Europe since at least the 1960s to improve their economic standing (Kulick, 1998), and studies of travesti migrations to Spain and France remark on the ways they emphasize their nationality and racial difference to attract clients (Silva and Ornat, 2015; Vartabedian, 2014). Adriana Piscitelli similarly argues that female sex workers in Italy and Spain emphasize their Brazilianness and its association with affection to gain an advantage in a competitive market (Piscitelli, 2007) and that these women value white men for their perceived attractiveness (Piscitelli, 2004). And Gregory Mitchell makes the case that male sex workers have internalized exotic representations of Brazilian bodies, describing themselves as "sex machines" whose voracious appetites please both male and female clients (Mitchell, 2015: 209).

Our article expands the purview beyond sex work because the exchange of money implies that auto-exoticism is simply a selling point within a sexual market. Our research, however, demonstrates that global geographies of desire structure other forms of travel and mobility, and that they are always bi-directional.

Our interviewees valued sexual encounters with white European and American men because those encounters provided them with cultural capital among fellow Brazilians, and they quickly learned and even embraced the image of Brazilians as exotic and hypersexual in those encounters. Despite the inherent inequality in the global structures that produce these stereotypes, there are strategic advantages to this auto-exoticism, which provided these men access to pleasure and forms of self-making. Thus, we argue that “eating the Other” is a more complex operation than portrayed by bell hooks (2012), insofar as non-white subjects from the Global South can also “eat” whiteness as they transform their own identities. As Sharon Patricia Holland argues, we need “to take seriously how the transatlantic slave trade altered the very shape of sexuality in the Americas for *everyone*” (Holland, 2012: 56; emphasis in original) and analyze the link between erotic desire and racialization. If mobility and tourism are central to the construction of the “gay male cosmopolitan,” as Hiram Pérez (2015: 105) argues, we need to push beyond the idea that queer men of color are simply objects of those exoticizing fantasies and engage with their active participation in sexual cultures that racialize themselves and others. These conclusions are in line with other ethnographies about queer mobility, such as Martin Malanansan’s (2003) insight that dating white men is a valuable form of social capital among Filipino immigrants in New York City, even if it means negotiating with these white men’s Orientalist stereotypes. Similarly, Dredge Kang (2017) analyzes the growing preference for “white Asians” —such as Japanese and Koreans—among Thai gay men, and the ways it can provide these men more status than dating a white European or American.

This article employs historical and ethnographic methods to complicate narratives about tourism that posit a one-directional form of Othering. Our documentary sources allow us to understand that this auto-exoticism, in which Brazilians sexualize themselves, has been going on at least since the 1970s and is tied to a longer history of neocolonial relations in which Brazil is imagined as a source of sexual adventure, while North America and Europe are cast as the sources of cultural, political, and sexual models. Our ethnographic sources allow us to understand the interpersonal processes by which gay Brazilians become sexualized subjects, as well as the ways they desire foreign men. We initially recruited interviewees among friends we had met while doing other research in Brazil and then asked them to refer us to other men who had traveled abroad, recruiting interviewees of varying regions and social classes through snowball sampling. Later, we created a profile on the gay dating app Grindr, using a virtual private network to alter our GPS location and make us appear in the profile grid of cities like Cuiabá, Mato Grosso and Santarém, Pará, enabling us to recruit additional interviewees. In all cases, we were open about our identities as researchers and our goals, and we provided opportunities for interviewees to stop at any time. All told, of our 20 interviewees, we were already friends or acquaintances with 12 of them, four were reached through snowball sampling, and four were contacted through Grindr. We carried out interviews over Skype, WhatsApp, or email,¹ for a total of 20 between 2013 and 2019. Fifteen interviewees had only traveled abroad as tourists or to

study, and five had initially gone as tourists but had also lived abroad for longer periods, with three settling in Germany or Ireland after marrying Europeans.

The relatively small sample size and the fact that over half the interviewees were drawn from our own social networks both merit additional discussion. Certainly, our positionalities as a gay Ecuadorian anthropologist and a gay, white North American historian asking Brazilians about their attraction to foreign men (like ourselves) influenced how they responded to our questions. We found it particularly telling that while the gay Ecuadorian was never sexually propositioned while carrying out the interviews, the gay, white American often kept receiving sexualized messages in the days and weeks after an interview, whether from friends or from interviewees he had never previously met. Still, it is significant that there were no major variations between the responses from our friends, their friends, and the men recruited on Grindr. This held true despite their coming from six different states in four of Brazil's five main regions (North, Northeast, Center-West, Southeast). As a result, we are optimistic that our responses are representative and generalizable, or at the very least highly suggestive of broader patterns.

Travel, sex, and LGBT rights in Brazilian gay media

We begin our analysis by examining how tourism abroad is portrayed by Brazilian gay media. In contrast to the image gay foreigners have of Brazil, as a sexually liberated space where “sin does not exist” (Parker, 1998: 1), gay Brazilian men imagine foreign Others and themselves in markedly different ways. These are not only a product of Brazil's subordinate position in global hierarchies, but also a reaction against and appropriation of it. To be sure, the specifics of these imaginings have varied since the emergence of a visible gay subculture in the late 1970s, undergoing significant changes in the wake of Brazil's transformation from a right-wing military dictatorship in the 1980s to the social democracy that lasted until the congressional coup of 2016. Yet all this time, Brazilian gay men have represented foreign Others in ways that are less sexualized, while remaining acutely aware of their own power as sexually potent Brazilians. This thread can be followed in the early gay press, through recent tourism promotion targeting gay travelers, to gay men who hook up with, date, and marry foreign men today.

These discourses appeared as early as the 1970s, amidst the effervescence of civil society that helped precipitate the demise of the military dictatorship (Ferreira, 2010). For example, self-exoticizing imaginings of Brazil appear occasionally in *Lampião da Esquina*, a magazine founded in 1978 that combined book and theatre reviews, interviews with figures from Brazilian popular and intellectual culture, and activism. *Lampião* was characterized by its leftist agenda oriented toward identity politics, in the context of the political struggle against authoritarianism. Amidst economic crisis in the late 1970s and the 1980s, international travel was an unimaginable luxury for most Brazilians, and one searches the pages of *Lampião* in vain for discussion of travel abroad. Nonetheless, through its focus on foreign gay movements and cultural production and descriptions of gay foreigners visiting

Brazil, *Lampião* reaffirmed Brazil's subordinate position internationally and repeated foreign depictions of Brazilian men as hot and sensual.

Throughout its 41 issues, *Lampião* exhibited a preoccupation with foreign gay culture and activism, from Pride parades to activist organizations and magazines. These were designed to make readers feel like they were part of a global community with a common culture and interests. The United States and Europe were represented as the places where cultural and political trends originated, and *Lampião* dutifully exposed readers to the latest international research on sexuality, like Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Indeed, even when a trend was of dubious value, *Lampião* presented Brazilians as helplessly on the receiving end, like an article on gay music in the United Kingdom that critiqued the commercialization of gay culture abroad, while regretfully predicting that gay culture in Brazil would soon face the same fate (*Lampião da Esquina*, 1978a).

Strikingly, the only time sex came up in relation to foreigners was in *Lampião's* comments on their perception of Latin Americans as sexual objects. For example, upon discovering that an American gay tour would be visiting Rio de Janeiro, *Lampião* helped organize a party at a local gay club, one influenced by Carmen Miranda's projection of Brazilianness. "It's going to be called 'Tropical Night': Lots of fruit, lots of turbans, lots of pineapple cocktails, lots of suntanned people on the dance floor, and lots of olé-olé, ok-olá" (*Lampião da Esquina*, 1978b).

In the 1990s, as Brazil achieved control over hyperinflation, and accelerating in the 2000s, as a wave of prosperity and redistributive policies created what some (controversially) described as a "new middle class," more Brazilians found that they could travel abroad. Among this class, young men who live with their parents and have no children likely have the most opportunities. As a result, at least until the recession that began in 2015, even working-class men could dream of a getaway to Buenos Aires or Santiago. For example, Ricardo, a 24-year old from a lower-middle class family on the periphery of Brasília, was able to travel to Argentina by working at a hostel in exchange for food and lodging. The more enterprising might even spend a few months in Europe, like Marco, a friend of one of the authors who found a cheap flight to Berlin and supported himself making and selling refrigerator magnets. Probably due to the difficulty of obtaining a visa, the US was a less common destination for working-class men. To plan their trips, they utilized their Brazilian friends, foreign men they met in Brazil, and a variety of websites and travel agencies targeting an imagined affluent gay consumer.

The earliest of these was the now-defunct site MixBrasil, one of the first LGBT-oriented sites in Latin America, whose creation in 1995 accompanied the rise of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on LGBT people as consumers. A second wave of LGBT magazines and sites appeared in the late 2000s and early 2010s, as rapid economic growth transformed Brazil into a major actor on the global stage. These included the travel magazine *Revista ViaG*, a glossy magazine that seeks to "transcend the issue of sexuality and offer distinctive information about tourism" (*Revista ViaG*, 2017). With the shift in the 2010s from text-based media to video, YouTube channels became an important LGBT media outlet, and channels

like Põe na Roda, with over 400 videos and 1 million subscribers, have created videos on LGBT travel destinations around the world.

In contrast with publications targeting American and European gay travelers, Brazilian LGBT media emphasize not the sexual allures of foreign Others, but rather shopping, cultural opportunities, and sightseeing. For example, a 2010 article from MixBrasil highlights Slovenia's ability to provoke feelings of "love, tranquility, and safety," as well as its supposed "lack of prejudice against gays" (*MixBrasil*, 2010). New Orleans' allure is to be found in its "unique architecture, authentic cuisine, [and] jazz on every corner," and its annual gay festival, Southern Decadence, is notable for its "colorful costumed multitude[s] parading through the streets" (Garrido, 2014), a characterization sure to appear understated to anyone who has been to Decadence. An article on Peru explains, "To walk the streets of Cuzco is to be transported directly into a history book," and draws attention to Machu Picchu's capacity to "make you feel like you're touching heaven" (*MixBrasil*, 2011).

The characteristic most consistently associated with foreign destinations, however, is their more tolerant attitudes toward LGBT people and their supposedly more progressive legislation protecting LGBT rights. One of the most popular features of the YouTube channel *Põe na Roda* follows a group of correspondents who travel Brazil and the globe to visit the hottest gay destinations (often for Pride), including Curaçao, San Francisco, London, Barcelona, and Tel Aviv. Practically every video follows the same script—interviews with locals (or, more often, English-speaking tourists from the US), visits to LGBT cultural attractions, nights spent drooling over men at circuit parties, conspicuous consumption, and, without fail, comments about how the locale is more advanced than Brazil in terms of LGBT rights. San Francisco is described as the "capital of freedom" (*Põe na Roda*, 2016), in Tel Aviv the narrator comments that "people like us are integrated into the city and, more importantly, respected" (*Põe a Roda*, 2015), and Puerto Vallarta is characterized as "ahead of us in gay rights" (*Põe na Roda*, 2017). These impressions that other countries offer more political rights for LGBT people persist even in the face of evidence to the contrary. While same-sex marriage was only legalized across the US in 2015, is only recognized in Israel when performed in another country, and only became legal in Jalisco (the state where Puerto Vallarta is located) in 2016, it has been legal in Brazil since 2013. More importantly, none of these videos imagine Brazil as a tolerant space, and always imagine foreign destinations as a respite from homophobia, representing the opposite image of the homonationalism that Jasbir Puar (2007) argues is tied to American, European, and Israeli LGBT tourism.

While foreign destinations are imagined in terms associated with cosmopolitanism, when the destination is in Brazil itself these Brazilian travel publications shift their focus to sex. Certainly, channels like *Põe na Roda* draw attention to the beautiful men available in foreign locales; indeed, the reason their travel videos each have in excess of 250,000 views is likely related to the chiseled, shirtless men on display. Yet for Brazilian destinations, sex more often takes center stage. One of

the most prominent attractions in Vitória is a bathhouse that “attracts the most beautiful boys” (*MixBrasil*, 2012b) A beach in Fortaleza is notable for the “shirtless boys skateboarding [...] A concentration of beauty and flirting” (*MixBrasil*, 2012a) The isolated rocks above Gaibu beach near Recife are a great place to “admire the view, and, who knows, maybe have a little bit of shameless fun” (*MixBrasil*, 2012c).

Some things have changed from *Lampião* three decades earlier; the target audience of *MixBrasil*, *Revista ViaG*, and *Põe na Roda* is not a leftist gay activist, but rather a gay consumer in search of culture, shopping, and parties. Yet other things remain similar. Contemporary gay travel publications still see the world beyond Brazil as a source of progressive politics. And while no one denies that gay Brazilian travelers have sex abroad, just like in *Lampião*, these travel publications sexualize Brazilians themselves far more explicitly than they do foreign men. In so doing, these publications show just how deeply transnational discourses about Brazilian sensuality and sexual prowess have been internalized by Brazilians themselves. And as it turns out, Brazilian gay men who travel abroad reproduce these same patterns.

On desiring and being desired abroad

Gay Brazilians have complex motivations for travel abroad, including experiencing other cultures, gaining cultural and social capital, exploring possibilities for study or work abroad, and meeting people with whom they could have friendships, sex, and romantic relationships. The US and Europe held a special place in the imagination of all our interviewees, even those who were unable to afford to travel there or secure the necessary tourist visa to visit the US. Just like in the gay travel publications, one of the main reasons our interviewees preferred the US and Europe was because they saw them as more LGBT-friendly than Brazil. For example, Tiago, a 29-year old from Recife who had taken extended trips to Portugal and Germany before moving to Berlin in 2017, described his hometown as “extremely heteronormative,” “repressive,” and with few gay clubs that interested him, which meant he “deprived himself of certain things I wanted to do.” In Berlin he could “put on a dress, put on makeup and go to a club” without repercussions, something that contributed to his having a “higher quality of life as a gay man” than in Brazil.

Yet there is more to international travel for gay Brazilian men than just the opportunity to experience cultures perceived as more LGBT-friendly. Gay Brazilians increasingly choose international destinations because they provide enhanced opportunities to have sexual experiences with foreigners. A common thread throughout many of our interviews was that travel within Brazil was less interesting and enriching than traveling abroad, and the perceived sexual ordinarieness of Brazilians played an important factor in that. Traveling abroad thus serves an important symbolic marker of both becoming a cosmopolitan subject and “consuming” those sexual Others who usually get to “consume” Brazil at will.² Even

though gay Brazilians have less economic power than their European and American counterparts that visit Brazil (Mitchell, 2015; Williams, 2013), they still construct their sexual identity through touristic experiences that include sexual experiences abroad. This means that the experience of Brazilians while traveling abroad is structured by how they are received and sexually desired by others, something largely dependent on the sexual and social capital that comes with being Brazilian.

When our Brazilian interviewees traveled, they perceived that an image of Brazil and Brazilians preceded them and shaped how they were received. Whether or not they “looked the part,” expressing they were Brazilian immediately valorized them in the eyes of others. João, a 27-year old who describes himself as “*mulato*,” explained that it was “even kind of funny” how Chileans would react when they found out he was Brazilian: “They became much more open and much friendlier. After I noticed this, the first thing I would do was tell them that I was Brazilian.” Claiton, 31, who identifies as white, stated:

Yes, they desired me more [because I was Brazilian]. [...] [Brazil] has that reputation for Carnaval, for the Amazon, people still think everyone walks around naked [...] Others say that Brazilians take better care of our bodies, and that’s why they get more attention.

Edilson, a 32-year old who also refers to himself as *latino* or mixed, and who had traveled extensively in Europe and North America, explained that despite being not identifiably Brazilian (i.e. being light-skinned), his nationality still helped him connect:

It’s a luxury item being a Brazilian abroad, it’s highly valued. Guys would express a certain surprise because I don’t “look” typically Brazilian. [...] But when they realized I was telling the truth, it had its value. It’s interesting, like something we export, based on a certain exoticness, I don’t know. I think there is a recent tendency to value Brazil and Brazilian culture in places like France, or England, and when they hear you are Brazilian they always think you are charming and say “how cool!”

This hyper-valuation of Brazil seems to emphasize a certain “charming” character, an anticipated approachability. For other interviewees, this image was specifically sexualized. João credited his Brazilianness for a three-way with a male-female couple in Belgium: “In their mind, Brazilians were good in bed, were hotter, stuff like that, and they wanted to know what it was like.” Sleeping with a Brazilian is seen as an accomplishment—the fulfillment of a sexual fantasy, as 27-year old Leandro (who said he did not know how to identify himself racially) put it:

Brazilians have such a strong sexual image abroad [...] that when I have sex with someone there, I feel that I am fulfilling that fantasy for them. I think they see it as an opportunity, “Wow, I am having sex with a Brazilian” [...] Once when I was in a bar

going to a bathroom, a guy stopped me in the corridor, and when I told him I was Brazilian he immediately grabbed me by the waist.

Brazilians are seen not only as personally approachable, but also sexually available, whatever their skin color. Realizing that someone is Brazilian gives someone unstated permission to be much more sexually forward than usual, because they imagine Brazilians to be hypersexual.

Edilson, João, and Leandro seemed to be aware that this image of Brazilians was simply a stereotype, an image based on “exoticness” or “fantasy,” but other interviewees internalized this image of themselves with a certain amount of pride. Pedro, a 33-year old who identifies as *moreno* (brown) and had studied in Spain, expressed how his approachability, his predisposition to be more comfortable with physical contact, made him more attractive there:

When I was in Spain, being Brazilian was a central factor. I never felt so highly regarded as when I was in Spain. It was so much easier for me to have sex than it is here in Brazil [...] When I said I was from Rio de Janeiro they became very interested... and when I am abroad I am a different person, I am looser. And I think it's also a matter of Latin behavior, of how we touch; they don't have the culture of hugging and kissing a person when they meet them, so you become a curiosity, a more interesting person for them. I think it's that. It's a matter of the *calor* [warmth] the Latin has.

Pedro considers this seemingly innate “warmth” to be a generalizably Latin, not only Brazilian characteristic, and one that renders him attractive in a European or North American context that many interviewees characterized as “colder.” Nonetheless, he also admits that he becomes someone different when he is abroad – he fulfills the expectations people have of Brazilians as looser and sexually adventurous. Similarly, Anderson, a white 32-year old who has traveled to seven countries in Europe and three in Latin America, reveled in the attention he got and was convinced that it was due to Brazilians indeed being sexually hotter:

Saying one is Brazilian and *carioca* [from Rio de Janeiro] opens a thousand doors for you abroad; they showered me with so much attention that the only thing that was missing was their carrying me in their lap like a baby. Once when I was in a bathhouse [in Italy] a guy from Cambodia said to me, in English, “You are Brazilian!” That was before I had said a single word to him. I asked him how he knew, and he said I was “*caliente* [hot], *fogo* [fire], etc.” and that I was clearly so adept at sex... Brazilians are MUCH hotter [*quentes*] in every way, despite foreigners being more libertine.

Anderson embraced the stereotype of Brazilians as sexually potent because it made him more desirable and facilitated sex abroad. Similarly, Iago, a 27-year old black Brazilian from São Paulo who had visited Chile, the US, and Spain, stated without

hesitation “We Brazilians are very good in bed,” and credited that fact for why Brazilians were so popular abroad.

Still, several interviewees pointed out that these positive impressions were often counterbalanced by negative stereotypes. Vitor, when asked how he had been treated as a Brazilian exchange student in Detroit, said that Brazilians are seen “as slackers, who don’t like to work, and who are generally a little sly [*malandro*].” Filipe described in detail some of the negative aspects to the ways Europeans view Brazilians:

We are seen here as prostitutes, as sex workers, as dancers, as people who are here to be entertaining, as someone who will make everyone laugh, and lift people’s spirits. At the same time, being carnivalesque, being *caricato* [campy/theatrical], being funny definitely helps them see us as more beautiful and sexier. [...] Skin color also helps, everything helps. [...] They think we have a bigger dick, that everything about us is bigger and better, sexually speaking. Intellectually, they don’t think that; we are well below them in that sense. We are here to play the role of trophy, of housewife, of companion. They are the ones who are meant to make all the money and we are the ones who should do all the housework. That is how Brazilians are seen here, especially women, but men as well.

For Filipe, the cost of being sexually desirable was not being taken seriously by some Europeans, who sexualized him for being Brazilian but devalued his intellect and expected him to remain subordinate to their wants and desires, especially economically. The transnational imaginary of desirability that gives Brazilians sexual value abroad, in other words, can simultaneously devalue them in other ways, similar to the stereotypes of hypersexuality that black and brown men and women experience within Brazil (Hordge-Freeman, 2015; Williams, 2013).

This dichotomy between being desired sexually and discounted intellectually came into relief in our interview with Tiago. As an MA student in architecture back in Brazil, a highlight of his two previous visits to Germany had been the country’s architecture, and he had settled on writing his thesis on the topic. It was easy for him to sleep with men he met during those initial trips, due in large measure to the positive expectations they had about Brazilian sexuality.

However, Tiago remembered that after one hook-up with a German, they began chatting about why Tiago had come to Germany. The German’s attitude changed as soon as he learned that Tiago was not in Germany simply for tourism and fun. He refused to believe that Tiago was in Germany to do research for his MA thesis and told him it would be very hard for him to study architecture in the country. This turned out not to be true, and Tiago was able to return to Germany to study via an exchange program. Tiago interpreted this as evidence that Germans have negative stereotypes of Brazilian immigrants, compared to tourists, and think that immigrants are lazy and up to no good. Like Filipe, he saw such interactions as evidence that some Germans were unwilling to respect him intellectually. These stereotypes of hypersexuality contribute to the structural inequalities they

experience abroad, especially if they decide to live in Europe like Filipe and Tiago, and not simply experience these locations as tourists.³

Racial geographies of desire

Nationality is not the only fault line that gay Brazilian tourists use to evaluate their relationships with foreign men. Race is another factor in the exoticism that occurs between Brazilians and foreigners. Thor, a 25-year old who calls himself *pardo* (brown), says that he finds foreign men more attractive because they are “hot, white, with beards—not all of them, of course—and they have a body with that spectacular aesthetic—some even have blue eyes!” This racialized exoticization works both ways, a dynamic particularly noticeable for darker-skinned Brazilian men, who find that foreign men sexually desire them in a way uncommon in Brazil. Fábio, a 35-year old from São Paulo who now lives in Ireland and identifies as *negro* (black), has had relationships with an American and a Pole. He clearly believes that his desire to be with a light-skinned blonde would be almost impossible in Brazil but is realizable abroad:

I find light skin very attractive [...] The more different a guy is from me, the more I like him [...] I also think a blonde foreigner is more likely to find me attractive than a blonde Brazilian is. [...] I like being with foreigners because they are beautiful and attractive and I know they also find me interesting and *gostoso* [hot], and it's good to know that you are also being desired.

While Brazil's aesthetic hierarchy⁴ positions light skin and blonde hair as much more desirable than the physical characteristics associated with blackness, making darker-skinned men feel that blonde men look down upon them, the situation is different abroad. Suddenly, these men find they are desirable after all, and they strategically embrace the exoticism that revalues their bodies while abroad. In their minds, sex with white men is experienced as a respite from the racial and class hierarchies that are not so easily escaped in Brazil. The question of how much of a respite this racialized exoticization of black and brown bodies actually offers from racism, although an important one, is one that our *negro* and *pardo* interviewees did not raise.

The possibility of becoming sexually desirable is clearly a factor for dark-skinned Brazilian gay men's travel abroad. Luiz, a 31-year old who identifies as *negro*, expressed the same contrast between how Brazilians and foreigners perceive him and how this structures his own desire:

The model of manhood of that [...] was taught to me since my childhood, is Caucasian, even Germanic [...] It's sad to admit [...] but if I'm honest with myself it's like that. And personally, it is not enough to desire, I need to be desired as well [...] The Brazilian man who fits the model of what I desire will very rarely desire me back with the same intensity and quality of my desire, because it's a type of desire that puts

me in a subaltern place in relation to him. I feel foreigners have a more egalitarian form of desire. [...] They don't see me with Brazilian prejudices, and I feel freer [...]

Nearly all of the short-term and long-term relationships Luiz has had have been with Americans or Europeans, and he stated that he enjoyed his travels in the US because it made him feel desired in a way he does not feel desired in Brazil. The same did not apply to his trip to Colombia. Luiz's sexual desire for whiteness becomes possible in the US, where he sees his relationships as being more egalitarian than the ones he has in Brazil, even though they depend on transnational geographies of desire that are highly hierarchical and exoticizing. The remark that Luiz makes on the intensity of desire points toward the nuanced forms of affect that structure sexuality, and the role that race and tourism have in producing that intensity—we all want to be desired, and travel can render us exotic and desirable to others.

Luiz also provides a sense of how the geography of desire for Brazilians is marked by specific valuations of the US and Europe in contrast to everywhere else. Meeting men is a clear motivation for the trips he has taken to the US and wants to take to Europe, but the same is not the case for Asia or Africa—he says he would love to travel there, but for their culture:

I want to go to Europe, to Asia, specially Scandinavia, England, Egypt, Korea, Japan, Patagonia, Iceland—those are a few that come to mind. The ones outside of Europe because of their culture: Egypt because of their culture. [...] Korea, China and Japan are [the future]. I want to go Europe because of the culture, the language a little, and due to the men, that counts too. I would never go to Europe just for the men, just like I didn't go to the US just because of the men, but I have to be honest and say that one of the central reasons why I wanted to migrate to the US was because I wanted to have a relationship with someone. [...] In Asia, or Africa, that factor is zero. [...] I would never consider hooking up with a Japanese man, not because of appearance, because I do not find them ugly, but because their culture is too different from mine; it wouldn't work.

It is interesting that even though Brazil has plenty of descendants of Japanese immigrants, Luiz still considers Japanese culture to be too dissimilar for him to relate to Japanese men. Tiago similarly mentioned that if he went to Japan he would just visit the cities and learn about the culture, but if he went to Sweden or Norway he would also visit gay clubs and saunas. And Fernando, a 28-year old who had traveled to Germany and India for work, said that since he did not find Indian men attractive, he had not slept with anyone there. He considered his trip to Germany a success because he had slept with many German men, who he found “to be attractive, because they are tall, and because they have physical characteristics that are so different from Brazilians.” His emphasis on the difference that Germans have from Brazilians belies the large Germanic population in Brazil, particularly in comparison to the small South Asian population.

No one we interviewed listed sex as a factor for their actual or desired trips to Peru, India, or Japan, but many of them did when mentioning Europe or the US. That is, they saw foreigners as desirable according to their proximity to whiteness. This is subtly different from the way gay Asian men, for example, are often imagined in the United States and Europe as submissive bottoms. Our Brazilian interviewees did not stereotype Asianness; they erased it.⁵ Whereas in the Global North, people from a variety of countries are imagined as consumable and desirable in specific ways, in Brazil, and likely the Global South more broadly, it is whiteness that is imagined as desirable. This same valuation of perceived whiteness also occurs for men who travel within Latin America. The most common Latin American destinations for our interviewees were Argentina and Chile, countries both imagined as whiter than Brazil, and as possessing attractive men. They never mentioned countries imagined as indigenous, like Bolivia, Paraguay, or Peru, as sexual destinations in any sense.

Within Europe, there may also exist a hierarchy of whiteness. A few of our interviewees identified Spanish or Middle Eastern men as their preferred physical type, but people from the Middle East are usually considered white in Brazil and do not suffer the negative racialization they do in the US. More commonly, interviewees mentioned Germany, Eastern Europe, or Scandinavia as having the kind of men they desired. In the words of one interviewee, Pedro:

I think foreigners are more beautiful than Brazilian men. [...] Brazilian men come in all types, from black men to blondes, so you can find a man for your taste. But foreigners have something different about them, and that difference attracts me. Here in Rio there are many *morenos* who work out their bodies, and I like smaller men, for example Eastern European men, like the models from Bel Ami, they are smooth and petite [...] Before meeting my boyfriend I had a plan of going to Eastern Europe for sex, I wanted to visit the headquarters of Bel Ami and take photographs with some of my favorite models.

Pedro would have measured the success of his trip in two ways: by having sexual experiences with Eastern European men, as well as capturing the porn models he desires through photographs, probably to show off to his friends in Brazil. Similarly, Filipe, who had visited nearly every European country, highlighted Eastern European men as his favorites:

If you took a bunch of guys from these countries and put them in front of me, or told me that there were a bunch of them somewhere, you can be sure that the next day I'd buy a plane ticket to go there.

He specifically structured his touristic travel to consume Eastern European men, in a similar way to how American and European men travel to Brazil for sex tourism (Mitchell, 2015).

Whiteness can clearly represent a form of currency among Brazilian gay men. In response to being asked whether he tells his friends when he hooks up with

foreigners, João responded, “I’ll admit that I told them, and I was excited when I did it. [...] I have several gay friends who have done exchange programs outside the country [...], and they always tell me, with the same enthusiasm.” This is the same thing Filipe did when he not only told his friends about the “beautiful blondes” he slept with, but also sent pictures. Indeed, photography has long been theorized as a way to capture and sexually consume the exotic Other (Alloula, 1986; Stepan, 2001; Thompson, 2007). However, what is interesting in these photographs taken by Brazilian gay tourists and their sharing tales of their conquests with their friends is that they reverse the exoticizing gaze that white foreign tourists usually exert on non-white Others in Brazil. Fernando related this pride in sexually possessing a white foreigner to the desire for “First-World” status.

Brazilians are proud when they date a foreigner, a European, an American; it’s also a point of pride for me, but more due to my boyfriend being a cool person, than the fact that he is German. [...] Brazilians think everything foreign is better, due to that relationship between the First World and the Second World. There is also a concern with getting a [foreign] passport, because a relationship can make viable possibilities for Brazilians that they would not have otherwise.

The Brazilian desire to consume whiteness, then, cannot be disentangled from Brazil’s position within global hierarchies and the structural pressures that impel Brazilian gay men to desire the “First World.” While some Brazilian gay men simply engage in tourism as a form of leisure, for many others tourism seems to be almost always tied to fantasies or concrete plans for migrating to Europe and the US. Romantic relationships factor in these men’s minds as a way to gain legal status in the US or Europe, and they are not necessarily seen as less valid relationships due to the practical benefits they convey. Of the 15 men we interviewed, five ended up living abroad for longer periods, and three married Europeans. These three were the envy of many of their friends, who perceived them as having “made it” for crafting a life abroad for themselves, despite difficulties like racism or lack of professional opportunities.

Conclusion: Reversing the touristic ga(y)ze

Gay tourism from the Global South remains relatively unexplored, and we hope this article opens new avenues of research into mobility, desire, and racial exoticism. Examining gay Brazilian men’s relationship with transnational discourses of desire reveals that the links between racialization, travel, and sexual minority cultures are more complex than portrayed by queer theory and by most of the literature on tourism and mobility. Gay Brazilian men are not simply the objects of racial exoticism during sexual encounters with foreigners; they are agents who exoticize themselves and others. The men we interviewed have internalized images of Brazilians as hot and sexually desirable, although some are more critical than others regarding these stereotypes. Brazilians do use these stereotypes to their

advantage, however, and dark-skinned men can experience being desired abroad as a respite from the racism they feel at home, despite its relying on global racial hierarchies. At the same time, gay Brazilians also reproduce negative aspects of these hierarchies as they imagine foreign destinations as more culturally advanced and progressive in terms of LGBT rights. They also value foreignness according to its proximity to whiteness and view consuming this whiteness as a way to approach “First-World” status.

Ultimately, even when the touristic gaze is reversed, it reasserts an imaginary that constructs Brazil as inferior to the US and Europe. Instead of promoting homonationalism, LGBT tourism from the Global South instead reinforces political and cultural imperialism and promotes depoliticized gay cosmopolitan identities, as Brazilians imagine the Global North as more tolerant and progressive. Studying tourism from the Global South, however, can also help destabilize or even “provincialize” whiteness as a category (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the hands of Brazilian tourists, whiteness becomes exoticized in unexpected ways and becomes a form of cultural capital that can be consumed through sex, influenced both by the racial aesthetic hierarchies that already exist in Brazil and by gay pornographic media that circulates globally. The fact that whiteness is highly valued, Brazilianness (or Latinness) is hypersexualized, and Asianness is desexualized in a global sexual marketplace demonstrates that desire is inevitably imbricated with racializing processes. Whiteness remains at the top of this transnational hierarchy, but white men are not the only agents who exoticize Others—racialized desire is co-produced by many actors in many different spaces, following colonial legacies and sociocultural patterns. Tourism from the Global South to the Global North thus provides a fresh perspective from which to uncover the power dynamics that structure mobility, race, and desire.

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Notes

1. The use of social media and other forms of online communication is becoming more common in the study of tourism, because it follows the same Internet practices used by tourists (Williams, 2018).
2. For more on the relationship between cosmopolitanism and tourism, see the work of Ong (1999) and Salazar (2010).
3. One interviewee suggested that the image of Brazilians abroad is undergoing changes in the wake of the country's abrupt shift rightward since 2016. Victor, a 24-year old who traveled to Boston in 2018, was reluctant to tell people he was Brazilian and said that the reaction to his nationality was generally negative, a problem he attributed to Brazil's declining reputation globally and its increasing association with homophobia.
4. For more on Brazil's aesthetic hierarchy, see the work of Hordge-Freeman (2015) and Jarrin (2017).
5. As Eng (2001) and Nguyen (2014) have shown, this erasure of Asian men does happen in the Global North as well. The difference is that while in the Global North a subset of gay men eroticize and fetishize Asian men in certain ways, among our Brazilian interviewees

we encountered only erasure. On the ways in which Asian men are sexualized in North America, see Fung (1991).

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