

# In Search of Happiness

Connecting Racism, Gender, and Class across borders

## Buscando la felicidad

Conectando racismo, género, y clase a través de las fronteras

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### Summary

In this article, I highlight the major complexities related to the industry of sex tourism in Brazil, focusing specifically on the relationships between white European men and light skin Brazilian women. My analysis takes into account the intersectionality of race, gender and class in this type of tourist encounters, and argues that sex tourism reflects the redefinition of geopolitical and economic disparities in the global arena. I examine the emergence of this industry in Brazil in connection not only with socio-economic policies such as neoliberal structural adjustments, and the revitalization of tourism in the Latin American region, but also with the impacts of global economic changes that affected those countries in Europe from where the vast majority of these tourists depart.

**Key words:** Racism, Post-Colonialism, Intersectionality.

### Resumen

En este artículo se ponen en evidencia las complejidades de la industria del turismo sexual en Brasil explorando de manera específica las relaciones entre hombres blancos europeos y mujeres brasileñas no blancas. Enfocando el análisis de los encuentros en este tipo de turismo en la interseccionalidad de raza, género y clase, se argumenta que esos encuentros reflejan la redefinición de las desigualdades geopolíticas y económicas que se dan a nivel global. La emergencia de esta industria en Brasil es examinada en conexión no solo con las políticas socio-económicas de ajuste neoliberales, incluyendo la revitalización de la industria turística en la región latinoamericana, sino también con los impactos que los cambios de la globalización económica han tenido en los países europeos de los cuales la mayoría de esos turistas provienen.

**Palabras Clave:** Racismo, Post-Colonialismo, Interseccionalidad.

## Introduction

On March 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 2021, a mass shooting in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, USA, left 8 dead, six of whom were East Asian women. The shooter, a 21 years old white man, targeted massage parlors and spas in an attempt, as he alleges, to eliminate a source of temptation for his sex addiction. While he denies any racial hatred motivation, these murders happened in a climate of anti-Asian sentiments that have been on the rise ever since Mr. Donald Trump, when President of the country, blamed the Chinese for the COVID19 pandemic, mocking it as the *China virus*, or *kung flu*. Given the content of my article, I wanted to open with the mention of this unspeakable act of violence to attest to the ubiquity and widespread intersectionality of patriarchal and racist violence. This article is dedicated to the women who lost their lives in this rampage, with the hopes that research and feminist scholarship will continue to shed more light on the multiple forms of violence that target women, especially women of color.

In the last two decades, I became increasingly interested in the changing demographic landscape in my native Italy, and the corresponding immigration fluxes that brought thousands of people to cross the Italian border from different departure points<sup>1</sup>. Considered a point of entry to Europe, Italy became a *replacement destination* (King, 1993:288), where many people escaping violence and poverty from developing countries ended up remaining in their attempt to reach other European destinations. During my yearly visits to Italy, I started to collect articles from newspapers and magazines that exposed the reactions of Italians and the Italian governments to immigration. My collection ranged from political news to social commentaries, as well as ads and visual representations involving immigrants, especially those who were not citizens of countries located in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Although I focused mostly on visual ads, recurring publicity promoting cheap charter flights to Natal and Fortaleza in the northeastern Brazilian coast caught my attention. That curio-

sity was the point of departure of my inquiry into the sex tourism industry in Brazil. The material that I present in this article allowed me to start exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in anti-immigrant discourses in Italy that re-propose colonialist fantasies and relationships.

As argued by many feminist scholars and activists, analyses of the sex industry are extremely complex and defeat simplistic depictions of the relationships of those involved under the *episteme* of predator-victim<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, they also challenge a one-dimensional focus on agency and free choice, or empowerment and resistance, which runs the risk to obscure the relationships of profound inequality often ingrained in such industry. The case of **sex tourism** is a more recent addition to the discussion of the sex industry, especially for Latin America and the Caribbean. As Piscitelli reminds us, this industry emerged in some Asian countries (Vietnam, Indochina, Korea) where the presence of foreign military due to wars contributed to the growth of the local sex industry involving local women and foreign soldiers. In the post-conflict era, the industry expanded into a tourist attraction that led white male tourists from affluent countries to seek the sexual prestations of local Asian women, many of whom of lows socio-economic status. Framed typically in terms of heterosexual sex, the sex tourism industry in Asia relied mostly on paid sex labor that reenacted orientalist fantasies of colonial roots about the supposed docile and subordinate nature of Asian women available for the pleasure of white men.

In the Latin America and Caribbean region, the sex tourism industry emerged towards the end of the 1980s due to a confluence of different factors. In her analysis of the sex tourism in the Caribbean, Amalia Cabezas (2004) argues that although sex and sex labor have been always paramount in the political economy of colonialism and its post-colonial restructuring, *the implementation of neoliberal reforms combined with the exigencies of globalization are some of the factors driving the growth of sex tourism* (Cabezas, 2004:1010). Yet, as many studies show, in this region the relationships between tourists and their companions

<sup>1</sup> According to the latest ISTAT data, there are 5.065.000 foreign residents in Italy (8.32% of the resident population) of which 51% come from other countries of the EU, 20,75% from Africa, 20,20% from Asia, and 7,53% from America (mostly central and south) (ISTAT, January 2018). These figures, of course, only refer to legal residents.

<sup>2</sup> I make here a distinction between countries that are geographically located in the European continent and countries that are members of the EU, as the two do not always coincide.

<sup>3</sup> Revisiting this debate is beyond the scope of this article. For a discussion of feminist debates about the sex industry see Piscitelli (2012). The reduction to predator-victim episteme would fall into what according to Spivak, accounts for the epistemic violence of silencing the voice of the subaltern (Spivak, 1988).

include a wide range of engagements from prostitution to romantic liaisons and concubinage<sup>4</sup>.

My analysis of sex tourism in Brazil focuses mostly on heterosexual relationships involving white European male tourists and local Brazilian women. The data I present were gathered in the summer of 2007 in two cities on the northeastern coast of Brazil, Natal and Fortaleza, as I participated as a consultant in the initial process of the making of a documentary on sex tourism.<sup>5</sup>

In my article, I analyze sex tourism as one possible entry point into the complex set of relationships that intertwines with issues of citizenship, international development, and global economics. I contextualize the sexual encounters between European men and Brazilian women within the expansion of global capitalism and the circulation of people and ideas that such expansion has entailed in the last three decades. Such flows, I argue, have revamped colonialist imaginaries reenacting white men's sexual fantasies in the terms of *colonial desire* (Young, 1995). This happens in the backdrop of economic processes that have aggravated the condition of poverty and inequality globally, and eroded middle-class economic perceived stability in most post industrial societies. Therefore, my examination weaves together the spatio-temporal specificities of colonial and post-colonial imaginaries, both understood as situated in the transnational history of the developments of capitalist economies and geopolitics. I am interested here in examining how such specificities reproduce continuity and discontinuities of racial, gender, and class formations once they connect to globalized narratives of power and control.

I also incorporate a feminist perspective, highlighting the role that a predatory form of masculinity plays in remapping relationships of power in a global context<sup>6</sup>. As underscored by feminist scholarship over many decades, women have played always a pivotal role in the production and reproduction of global capitalism and politics. Yet, as Enloe cogently demonstrates, their subordination has been reproduced across class, race, ethnicity, and locations (Enloe, 2014). Sex tourism, with its unequal and complex sets of relationships between racialized masculine and feminine/feminized bodies, becomes a metaphor redefining geopolitical and economic disparities.

In the context of Latin America, the **Brazilian sexscapes** become another site for the discussion

of the colonality of power (Quijano, 2014). In this case, new forms of globalized inequalities and the colonality of power converge on the body of light skin Brazilian women to create the image of Brazil as a sexual paradise (see Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento, 2010). Through tourism, countries like Brazil (called it developing, third world, post-colonial countries) have become an endless reservoir for the sexual pleasure of men, and of women, of so-called developed, first world, ex-colonizer countries. As I will analyze later, the relationships of power where men and women engage in asymmetrical exchanges of sex for either money, romance, or the chance at a better life embody and simplify the economic and geopolitical inequalities of North-South relationships. The transformation of beach vacation settings into sexscapes in coastal areas such as the south of Italy, or the French Cote Azure is simply unthinkable. Tourism in that part of the world is understood as art, entertainment, natural beauty and history, culture, and old traditions, culinary and otherwise, all of which intersect in different ways to produce an image of "decent" or refined tourism for people of any age. However, new forms of global exploitation and exchanges contributed to the revamping of post-colonial countries as exotic sites, perfect for "indecent" tourism, places where "decent" men and women can go to satisfy their "indecent" desires and aspirations, far away from the moralistic and judgemental stare of their equals. These opposite images re-propose old and renewed imaginaries and tropes of colonial origins, according to which the ex-colonies are still perceived as the cradle of the pristine, of the wild and untamed nature in which the "indecent" and the "natural" meet. In such locations sex tourism, therefore, came to coexist with ecotourism, adventure tourism, or, to a less degree, with cultural tourism, mostly archeological or new age inspired. In my analysis, I explore the conditions that turned Brazil into one of the major sex tourism destinations for European tourists by connecting the production of such sexscapes to issues of international development, immigration, and global economics.

Rather than treating tourism, in this case sex tourism, as a liminal space of suspension of social and economic roles and responsibilities (see Ryan and Hall 2001,) I consider it as a space in which such roles and responsibilities are reaffirmed by displacing them onto "exotic" bodies and places. Such displacement allows tourists for a temporary assertion of power and control over their own lives and desires. The spatio-temporality in sex tourism is not that of a momentary liminal condition, but that of a promise of a journey of transformation shaped by the many arrivals and departures, farewells and returns, and the life that happens in between those, a life ridden with political, economic, and cultural obstacles, duress, and in some cases profound deprivation.

<sup>4</sup> See Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento (2010); Brennis (2004); Carrion-Moises (2020); Cabezas (2005); Kampadoo (2004) and Piscitelli (2007), among others.

<sup>5</sup> That is now a finished film titled *Cinderellas, Wolves and an Enchanted Prince* by Brazilian filmmaker Joel Zito Araujo. We conducted short conversational interviews with tourists and women alike in beach settings. We also interviewed some of the young women in more in-depth, and talked with activists, researchers, and social workers who offered their expert views into the local sex tourism industry.

<sup>6</sup> See Scott (1986).

In these journeys, men and women, tourists and their “friends”, sex workers and their “clients”, engage in unpredictable encounters in which each of them seeks to find an answer to their most pressing life concerns and needs.

My analysis focuses on different experiences collected in Natal and Fortaleza, only linked by the arrival of European men, mostly from Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and their encounters with young mulatto and fair skin Brazilian women of low socio-economic conditions (mostly from shanty towns in the case of Fortaleza). The age of the tourists (late twenties to mid-thirties in Natal, older in Fortaleza) and of the girls (minors in the case of Fortaleza), and the type of encounters they engaged with proposed very different scenes. In Natal, people met in a vibrant and lively atmosphere made of bars, clubs, and restaurants on the

Ponta Negra beach. In Fortaleza, the encounters happened in much dispersed fronts: since the city beaches are polluted, tourists go to beaches in the outskirts of the city far from the bars, clubs and restaurants where they go at night. Finally, I take a brief look at Italy, the country of origin of the majority of the interviewed tourists. I considered that as a necessary insight into this complicated puzzle of unequal encounters. It speaks of the economic and social transformations in Italian society that have fostered racist, sexist, and anti-immigrant sentiments. These settings and the circumstances under which the encounters of tourists and local women unfold, guided me into a contestation of labels and categories related to people, places, and social phenomena. Given the content of my analysis, all names used are pseudonyms.

## “Happy Tropics”

Natal, Brazil, 2007. From very early in the morning, the beach of Ponta Negra was inhabited by people of any age, strolling and basking in the sun: local men, women, families with kids took advantage of the early morning hours to beat the heat. The demographics started to change towards the end of the morning, when younger people arrived to lay lazily under the umbrellas, sipping drinks and cocktails. What would become very apparent was the striking gender dynamics: those resting and drinking were mostly young men very attentive to the passage of young girls, strolling up and down the beach gazing around. Approaches would eventually be made by the young men when they saw a girl who interested them. They would invite the girls to join in and drink with them; the girls would accept the invitation and follow their new friends in what could appear as a courtship game in a beautiful vacation setting. A few hours into the afternoon, the promenade of Ponta Negra got very busy: all the restaurants and bars pullulated with young men and women, eating, drinking, and laughing. Nightlife continued in the internal district not too far from the Ponta Negra beach, where the tourists and the young women converged to enjoy their night: bars, clubs, restaurants all concentrated along the same street. One of the clubs, Honey, was the notorious meeting point for male tourists who were looking for the company of young local women. These settings made of Pon-

ta Negra a sexscape: foreign tourists, mostly European men, looking for sexual encounters with young and exotic Brazilian women, in the context of a thriving yet localized tourism business made of restaurants, bars, hotels, club owners, taxi drivers, and all those who had something to offer to those tourists.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the streets of Ponta Negra exuded energy, playfulness, people smiling at each other, laughing, and having a good time.

However, this uncomplicated happy picture turned less naïve once adding the comments of those young men and women. The tourists we interviewed were in great numbers coming from Italy and Spain, some from Germany. They traveled in small groups of male friends, and when interviewed, they told us they had come to have a good time, as Natal was famous for its beaches and beautiful women. They never admitted they had come to Natal to look for women, and always said it was a possibility that they found once there. Ranging from the late twenties to middle age, those tourists all agreed on one detail: Brazilian women were open, natural, gentle, and sweet and knew how to take good care of their men. On the contrary, they portrayed their European female counterparts as cold, calculating, and too demanding, or as one Spanish tourist put it: *Eu-*

<sup>7</sup> This type of tourism has been defined as *artesanal* (hand-crafted) to underscore its *ad hoc*, almost improvised workings (see Piscitelli, 2015).

ropean women? *they make you sweat to give you a kiss!* Some of them commented on the body of the Brazilian woman, so curvy, exotic, and dark, the myth of the Brazilian *mulatta*. Some of the younger tourists interacted so friendly and playfully with those girls that it looked as if those relationships could eventually have a future and a happy ending. Yet, only a few of those men had found a love in Natal to whom they returned whenever they could. A German man in his late forties had initiated a family there but preferred to go back and forth between Germany and Brazil instead of moving back to his country with everybody. The vast majority of those men would leave at the end of the vacation; some would maybe return some others would not. Their encounters with those girls had not happened by chance; most of those tourists had disembarked at the airport of Natal from special charter flights, whose passengers were almost exclusively men traveling either alone or in small groups. Those tourists did not go to Brazil to look for a wife.

The young Brazilian women also had dreams and fantasies. Often, they saw in the arrival of European men their chance at a romantic adventure in hopes it would evolve into something more serious that could take them out of Brazil and into Europe. Many of the young women we interviewed, often called *garotas de programa*, did not regard themselves as prostitutes; they accompany tourists during their vacation time, spend time with them, and act as their girlfriends. Most of them were after the chance at a better life that could bring them some happiness. Lara, a 19 years old girl, had left her job as a sales assistant in a shop; she went to Fortaleza first to join a friend who had told her about the tourists and how much that could improve her life.

*They bring you to nice restaurants to eat, they buy you nice clothes and presents, money and they treat you nicely. Now I have so many clothes and purses, and shoes I have never had before and it would be impossible for me to give up all this. Every time I want more. I had a job before but I made very little money, I made 200 reais in a month (roughly \$100); now I can make it in a day. I want to get married but not to a Brazilian man, God spare me! They are rude. I want Europeans, only Europeans. I want to go to Europe. There is no life here.*

Many other young women we interviewed expressed very similar opinions about their choices. Coming from disadvantageous economic conditions, many from the countryside, from families whose perspectives were not hopeful, they saw that type of interactions with European men as a trampoline from where to jump into a better life. Aside from the economic improvement, they also were looking for a chance at a love relationship that could make them feel happy and

respected. As per Lara's words, the dream was to marry one of those men and follow him to Europe to have a life together there. They perceived European men as gentle and chivalrous, unlike Brazilian men who they saw as cheaters, rude and violent. As one of the women said: *Brazilian men use us and throw us away after that. I never feel this way with a tourist. White men know how to treat a woman well.* Many said that white foreigners made them feel beautiful, made good conversation, and said nice things to them, specially men from Spain, Italy, and Portugal who constituted the majority of the tourists in Natal. Northern Europeans, mostly Dutch and Norwegians by contrast, were considered tight fist and less chivalrous. As one girl put it: *They drink a lot, are cheap, and don't wash themselves.*

Some of the stories we collected in Natal talk about men's and women's dreams and fantasies, which defeat simplistic renderings of sex tourism as a predator-victim relation, or sex hunting-money-making enterprise<sup>8</sup>. They also escape easy equations of prostitution with sex tourism. As some of the *garotas de programa* said, they do not do it for the money, but love, happiness, economic stability, and the access to a lifestyle that to them is more desirable<sup>9</sup>. Even if they end up not marrying, they see the possibility of a long-distance relationship as access to financial and emotional support. Their aspirations, however, can be framed as a post-colonial form of concubinage underscoring the profound inequalities implied in those relationships (see Stoler, 2002). They also speak of the impacts of the cultural homogenization brought about by globalized cultural models in post-colonial societies. Gaining access to consumerism (and the lifestyle it supposedly entitles to) has become the surrogate for a way out of economic inequality in a global economic system in which neoliberal State' policies could not guarantee all citizens access to at least their basic needs. On the other end, their dreams also talk about gender relations and the changes women have experienced in their own society. Coming often from families or environments in which men are either absent or abusive, they aspire to a life in which the relationship with their mates is based on mutual respect, and in which men are responsible for their loved ones. Being symbolically and purportedly the cradle of all goods, European, or affluent societies in general, appear to them as being also the reservoir for such type of men to women relationships. Having a European husband who looks after them becomes their hope at gender

<sup>8</sup> See Brennis and Cabezas (2004) for Dominican Republic, and Carrier-Moisan (2020) and Piscitelli (2007, 2015)

<sup>9</sup> See also the graphic ethnography by Carrier-Moisan (2020) about the modalities of these engagements in Natal from the point of view of the women, how they vary from more traditional monetary exchanges for sexual services to romantic ones.

equality. These dreams, though, do not account for the double racial and gender standards of the majority of those white male tourists. Tourists' encounters with Brazilian women are in the majority of the cases the key to reaffirm a predatory masculine model that decades of feminist struggle have seriously questioned. The perceived "openness" and easiness of Brazilian women make them an easier prey with whom male tourists could revamp the myth of man the sexual hunter, and boost their predatory masculinity. Most of the male tourists did not consider local women as marriage material. An Italian tourist in his early thirties clearly said it: *It is good to come here and have a good time, but I could never marry one of them, only a European woman.*

*I fell in love with an Italian man -Linda told me as soon as she heard I was Italian- just a few years older than me, a photographer from Naples. Alessandro was different from the others. He loved me; I could see it in his eyes. We talked and laughed, and were happy together. I wanted to go away with him; I would sell everything I owned and leave but he got scared. He told me that he could not provide for me there, that it is very hard to find a job for me there and he was not sure what his friends and family would say.*

She asked me to translate for her a text message that her beloved friend had sent her after his departure. It was a poem in Italian of love and defeat. Linda got moved, then she hugged one of the stuffed animals on her bed and told me: *see? I told you he loved me* (personal communication, 2007). The only words of comfort I could express in that situation were that being from Naples myself I could assure her that he was right when he said it was very difficult to find a job there, for anybody.

Linda was a little different from the other young girls we met in Ponta Negra. She was already 23 and lived with a Spanish man, much older than her, who spent 6 months out of the year in Natal. She said back in Spain he was a cop and lived with his mother but when he was in Natal, he liked to have a good life, out every night to clubs drinking. She said she was getting ready to leave him because she felt the relationship was not going anywhere, and she was tired of that life.

*I started to drink a lot, sniff a lot just to follow him at night. See, I had a job before I met him, I was a waiter in a restaurant and lived out of that. Then I met him, we started to go out and then he rented this apartment, bought me a motorcycle and here we are, being here for three years now but nothing ever changes. I would like to have a family, and he said yes at first but now he says he doesn't want to marry and have kids. I hoped we would go to live in*

*Spain but he has no intention of doing that, he likes it here, but for that, I don't need him. I can go back to my job.*

On her fridge, she had posted postcards and letters she had received from friends who did go to Europe following their European prince. When asked how they were doing, she went one by one and told us (the filming crew) their stories. Germany, Spain, Italy, all those women, with one exception out of five, had had their dreams broken, one even ended up in jail because undocumented. Two of them returned to Brazil completely disillusioned but resumed the same life because they had no other options: *I would have gone for Alessandro because I love him, but I know that it is hard out there for us, and I am not sure it is worth it.*

Linda's story reveals that the chivalrous yet sexist dynamics described in Ponta Negra's encounters often holds as long as the relationship does not go any further. Most of the women who made it to Europe complained about how poorly they were treated by the members of their men's family back in Europe. As Linda's beloved Italian man told her, he was concerned about the reaction of his family and friends. Once there, these dark, sweet, and open women in the eyes of the receiving society turn automatically into "whores", often treated by their partners as domestic workers, in charge of cleaning, cooking, and satisfying their needs. Many times, they do not get married, so after some time, they are forced to return to Brazil, in some cases even leaving kids behind because the fathers do not let them go<sup>10</sup>. Although there is no direct correlation between these journeys to Europe and cases of human trafficking, we heard of a woman who had gone to Spain with a Spanish man she had met on the beach, and then went missing.

In contexts like these, sexual desire has a cultural and economic history that traces back to colonialism and the way in which the body of the dark colonized woman came to epitomize the very act of conquest, domination, and exploitation of a people, its territory and its resources (Young 1995). That dark body was (and this applies to dark male body as well) associated with the wilderness of nature and, therefore, its sexuality considered untamed, exaggerate, and even abnormal. The immediate historical reference is that of the so-called **Hottentot Venus**, a Khoisan woman from South Africa who in early 1800 was exhibited naked in freak shows and fairs throughout the UK and France as a demonstration of the savagery of the black race epitomized in the abnormality of African women sexual organs (Holmes, 2007). As abundantly discussed in feminist and critical race scholarship, the body of non-white women has been hypersexualized in media, advertising, and social commentaries in

<sup>10</sup> See Piscitelli (2007).

many different locations<sup>11</sup>. In the case of Brazil, Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento (2010, among others), analyze the complicity of the Brazilian public and private sectors in creating the image of the country as a tropical sexual paradise. The voluptuous body of the Brazilian mulatta appears often as an iconic image advertising the country's beauty to attract tourism. I argue that the changes in global economics coupled with immigration fluxes that have arrived all over Europe in the last three decades, have revamped such exoticized and racist depictions of blackness, specially female, and nurture the sexual fantasies of white men for whom black, dark and non-white women may fulfill their dreams of domination. As argued by Wieviorka (1991), racism never disa-

<sup>11</sup> For Latin America, see Piscitelli (2005), Rahier (2011) and Gilliam (1998), among others.

appeared, on the contrary: it reignites every time socio-political and economic restructurings in capitalist societies threaten privilege and dominant ideologies. Racism and the sexual domination of the black female body have reignited in many European societies where the presence of immigrants of color is perceived as a threat to national identity and values. The attraction for the darker female body by white European men is mostly confined to the exoticism of certain places or women's availability, and never becomes part of their outmost sexual fantasies according to which white women with big breasts remain their first yet unattainable choices.<sup>12</sup> Even in the realm of predatory heterosexual sex, dark women are second-class citizens.

<sup>12</sup> See Adriana Piscitelli's argument in her study on online sex tourism (2005).

## Tropics Revisited

Fortaleza, state capital of Ceará, offered a different insight into the sex tourism industry than the one presented in Natal. Praia do Futuro, where most of the tourists go, is located about 7 miles from the city; a beautiful long white-sanded beach famous for the many restaurants, *barracas*, and resorts located right on the beach, which offered food and live entertainment. Here sex-hunting tourists mingled with local families and young middle-class people who went there just to enjoy the beach. Several testimonies of social workers, sociologists, and researchers lamented the poverty and economic depression of the city and indicated it as the major cause for the rise in prostitution. The stories that we collected in Fortaleza talk of very young girls living in situations of extreme economic dire and often of drug addiction, whose resort to sex tourism did not necessarily bear dreams of happy married life in wealthy Europe. Stripped from the bubble of the romantic love stories we heard in Natal, the stories collected in Fortaleza showed a very different and more complex face of the sex tourism industry.

According to sociologist Renato Rozendo Oliveira, poverty and social degradation in Northeast Brazil had worsened since the late 1980s as a consequence of the structural adjustment policy that interested the whole Latin American region (interview, 2007). The northeastern region, which was already poor, suffered the most. In Fortaleza,

65% of its 2.500.000 inhabitants lived back then below the minimum salary line. As complement to the structural adjustment policy, deregulation opened up the market to international capital. In the 1980s, the **Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)** and the IMF had identified tourism as a source of economic growth for the whole Latin American region. As a result, a combination of foreign and national investments went to develop the tourism industry in Brazil. In 1994, the IADB initiated in the Brazilian Northeast the first phase of a tourism development intervention with the development of infrastructure: airports, four stars hotels, and luxury resorts. Dr. Gilda da Matadías, a social justice and environmental advocate in the Public Ministry of the state of Rio Grande do Norte, defined this type of tourist development as *savage capitalist tourism*, which focused on infrastructure and luxury tourism, mostly led with foreign investments. However, no attention was paid to local social impacts, and community economic growth (interview, 2007). She gave the example of Pipa, a fishing village 60 miles north of Natal, which became an ecotourism destination, with many luxury resorts, restaurants, and bars. To build the infrastructure and transform it into this sort of *natural* paradise for foreign tourism, local fishermen were displaced to the interior of the village where they were given small plots of land to farm. However, they were not farmers so little by little, they lost their

way of life and their economic sustain. A few of them, the youngest, found employment in the local tourism industry, while all the rest migrated to the nearest cities to look for jobs, feeding into the urban informal economy.

The growth of this type of savage tourism also brought along money laundry investments, which developed the real estate market. This is where it connects to the growth of sex tourism. Rozendo Oliveira asserted, for example, that most of the small apartment buildings along the Iracema beach in the city of Fortaleza were the result of money laundry operations by European mafia-like organizations, which saw in real estate a good niche for their investment. Aside from the temporary young tourists who we saw having fun with local women, also some older tourists live more permanently in Fortaleza. These were men well above their thirties of low to middle-class or lower, many of them single, who could not afford to buy a property in their own country in Europe. They became the preferential customers of those apartments along the Iracema promenade, making Fortaleza their habitual vacation destination. Luigi, an Italian activist involved in the fight against sex tourism, further explained to us that these men would obtain mortgages in their own countries, and buy a small apartment in Brazil where they would come back every summer. This real estate operation turned into a bubble with, according to the sociologist, 70.000 new apartments in Iracema still unsold in 2007.

According to Luigi, most of the Italian tourists involved in sex tourism in Fortaleza were low middle class nonprofessional workers mostly in the thirties and forties, who traveled with very cheap all-inclusive packages offered by some travel agencies in Italy. These agencies organized the charter flights, and worked together with some local hotels and club owners. Once at their destination, taxi drivers would take them to the women. Upon returning a few times, some of those men had decided to buy a small studio or one-bedroom apartment to which they could return every time they had the chance. Some even maintained a lover there to whom they sent some money when they could. Whether married with kids back home or single, those who had a local concubine often disappeared and find themselves a new one. As a side comment, Luigi said: *you should see them when they arrive: they are transformed, they get rid of their gloomy and worried looking faces, put their bandanas on, and go wild!*

The interference of organized crime organizations had been confirmed to us by other experts among them the Federal Police Delegate of Natal Dr. Rómulo Fish de Berredo Menezes (interview, 2007). He talked of two different types of operations in which his office had been involved to stop mafia actives: one that saw the collaboration of the Brazilian and the Norwegian police thanks

to which they arrested 14 people of a Norwegian mafia group, which invested in real estate with money coming from kidnapping, bribery and illegal gambling. They operated through a local construction company and normally acquired permits and legal residency by marrying Brazilian women. The other type of operation dealt with trafficking of young Brazilian women, some minors, to Portugal. Normally the dynamics were the same: they lured these women with the promise of jobs in Portuguese hotels either as waiters or as dancers. Once there, they withdrew their passports and initiated them into prostitution. Again, the collaboration of Brazilian and Portuguese police (**operation LUZA**) led to few arrests. They also were able to cut short operation Corona in Natal, designed by the owner of the club Ilha da Fantasia, to manage the local prostitution market and initiate the trafficking of women to Spain and Italy. According to Fatima Leal, a researcher involved in the fight against women's internal and international trafficking, those arrested were only the small fish, not the chiefs, which meant that operations would only be put temporarily on hold (interview, 2007). She shared the result of an investigation done at the national level (the **PRESTRAF report**) which confirmed the existence of international trafficking but also shed light on another type, one internal to Brazil and more related to the sex tourism industry. According to the report, young Brazilian women, any age from eight to 25, were brought from the interior areas to the cities of the northeast to work as escorts, *garotas de programa*, or as prostitutes. The pimps, middle-aged Brazilian men, usually hotel and club owners, would in some cases provide for their *education*, to turn these girls into professionals, or *montadas* as they are called in jargon. They would give the girls to the care of older women who would teach them how to walk, dress, hook up, and the many arts of sex. Dr. Leal considered this operation as sex trafficking because, especially with the minors, the girls were lured into prostitution with the promise of a good domestic job for some rich family to then put to work with foreigners. For Dr. Leal, the connection of sex tourism with the local prostitution of minors had remained invisible for too long, and that explained the lack of policies and measures to try to control it<sup>13</sup>. Even if such strict links between prostitution and sex tourism are not always the case, her comments resonated with emerging responses in Brazil that condemned sex tourism. While some concerns, such as Dr. Leal's, related to the issue of exploitation and abuse of minors, in other cases sex tourism and prostitution were all deemed morally dubious. For example, in Natal as in Fortaleza, some club and hotel owners had taken different initiatives to fight sex tourism (for example strictly contro-

<sup>13</sup> In Brazil, prostitution is legal unless involving minors.

ling admissions), which they considered detrimental to the tourism business, and the image of their country overall. Such initiatives expressed a widespread middle-class moralist position according to which the sex industry in all its forms offended the image of cities such as Natal and Fortaleza<sup>14</sup>.

Luisa lived in the *barrio* Guararapis, a shantytown in Fortaleza. She was 20 but looked older, her brown skinny body devastated by non-treated tuberculosis. She lived in a shuck with her old, diabetic, and blind grandmother, her three years old son, and an adolescent stepsister who had already started to see tourists. Luisa was originally from a town in the interior where she started as a prostitute when she was 11. Her mother had died and her father had left; brought to the house of a local woman supposedly to clean she instead was initiated to prostitution with local men. One day, at the request of providing sexual services to a woman, she decided to escape and went to Fortaleza where she started to see tourists. She was then 13. Once in the city, she also became a crack addict, lived for some time on the streets, and tried to survive as she could. She told us of the abuses of the tourists, how they forced the girls to take drugs with them, to have unprotected sex, sometimes even beat them up. Trying unsuccessfully to convince her stepsister not to follow the same path, Luisa had stopped seeing tourists. She was sick and wanted to get treatment and get clean but she had no money, not even for food; she had started the treatment for the TBC but she had stopped because the medicines upset her stomach since she did not have enough to eat. With no public options for rehab, she could not afford private clinics, the only ones to offer addiction treatments. She was lucky, though, since a local social worker was trying to

help her get on a TBC treatment plan. *I want to do it for him*, Luisa said indicating her son.

For Luisa, there have been no dreams of enchanting men, or trips to wonderlands, only choices made from among a very restricted range of life options, all of which were doomed from the start. These human landscapes of poverty, neglect, and lack of choices evocate images of disposable lives, humans who become *surplus population*, whose existence is the collateral yet unwanted residue of economic progress (Bauman, 2004:39). Sara, a young girl we interview, showed us the many scars of cigarette burnings on her body left by some of the tourists she accompanied. Skinny, raggedy, and crack addict, with a body not yet formed as a woman, Sara had a habitual customer, an older Italian man in his fifties, who she saw regularly since he had moved to live in Fortaleza for good. He paid her a little better, twenty reais (circa \$10). The vulnerability of young girls like Luisa and Sara, and of some others we interviewed in Fortaleza among which young transgender male prostitutes, seems to satisfy older European tourists' utmost desire of domination expressed on a body whose appearance speaks of poverty, dispossession, and very young age. In an interview with a local hair-stylist, we heard more on the profile of some of the older Italian tourists who had become regulars. He defines those tourists as beasts, men who come to Fortaleza to give free reins to their sexual instincts. Physical and verbal abuse and violence were common in such encounters, specially when involving young poor girls and male prostitutes: *Some of them are fags -he stated- but they don't dare to acknowledge it!*

These stories collected in Fortaleza present a very clear picture of the extent to which sex tourism interconnects with global economy, capital circulation, international development strategies, poverty, trafficking of women and drugs, sexual exploitation of minors, dreams of happiness, and life chances. If for some tourists and some Brazilian women their encounters are the promise of a more rewarding life, for some others, these encounters are a more basic attempt at survival.

<sup>14</sup> See Carrier-Moisan (2020) and Piscitelli (2015) for a discussion of the anti-sex tourism reactions in Brazil, especially when the country was getting ready to host the World Cup in 2014.

## This is not the tropics

In this final segment, I delineate some initial reflections about the links between the sex tourism industry in Brazil and the changes connected to the impacts that global processes and immigration have in Italian society<sup>15</sup>. Like in many countries in Europe, since the mid 1980s many immigrants from Eastern Europe, the African continent, (mostly North and West Africa), from Sri Lanka, Latin America, and more recently from China have arrived also to Italy. Such fluxes are associated with the expansion of the global markets and the unequal distribution of resources that worked as push factors in the migration of people from impoverished countries. Additionally, the expansion of communication technologies contributed to the portrait of post-industrial affluent countries as heavens of wealth and opportunities. The nationalities of the immigrants in Italy ended up determining specific labor niches: Eastern European, Latin Americans and Sinhalese work predominantly the domestic sphere as maids, and elderly caretakers (*badanti*), while immigrants from Africa are mostly employed in the informal market as street vendors<sup>16</sup>. Another sector that has boomed in the last twenty years is street prostitution. Since the beginning of 2000, the number of sex workers in the streets of the major Italian cities has increased 30%, with 60% of them being immigrant women. Scholars and policy-makers who study the sex industry in Italy and Europe consider immigrant sex workers as sex slaves, subject to human trafficking, and often lured into the country with fake promises of a job or a romantic relationship (Melissari, 2017). Even if the nationality of the immigrant sex workers is constantly shifting, the two more representative groups are young Nigerian and Eastern European women. According to some data I collected in 2005 in Castel Volturno, in the south, Nigerian clans organized and controlled street prostitution locally bringing young women from Nigeria with fake documents and luring job prospects. Once in the country, they would retain their documents, and assign the girls to an older Nigerian woman, a *madame*, who would then initiate them to street prostitution<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> This is part of the initial stages of a research project on immigration and racism in Italy. What I present here are just snapshots of some preliminary inquiries into this topic.

<sup>16</sup> King (1993).

<sup>17</sup> Data come from interviews with local immigrants, among them a Nigerian nun, former sex worker herself, who dedicated her life to rescue young Nigerian women from the streets. See also Bernadotti, Carchedi and Ferone (2005).

As well documented by Bernadotti, Carchedi, and Ferone (2005), these young women are kept working the streets as slaves, under threats of violence to them and retaliation against their families back home. *Most clients are Italian men* -my interlocutor said- *they are not rich and they fantasize about Black women but treat them like dogs*.

The impacts of immigration on Italian society have been different from other countries in the EU. What makes the Italian case different is the fact that historically otherness in Italy had been defined in relation to internal racialized differences between its industrialized and productive north and the perceived lazy, dysfunctional, and backward south, therefore, without crossing national boundaries. The Italian society was thus utterly unprepared to deal with the massive presence of people of different nationalities, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds. It is telling that the very first law regulating immigration was issued only in 1990 (the **Martelli Law**), when the immigration phenomenon could no longer be considered as a sporadic event.

The growing visibility and availability of immigrant laborers has generated heated political and social debates on how to integrate immigrants, called *extracomunitari*, into Italian society. Italian borders have become increasingly thicker, following a similar pattern as in other countries in the EU, in which the steady arrival of immigrants fueled restrictive immigration laws and policies. The impacts of immigration also supported the rise of right-wing parties, with racist and xenophobic rhetoric addressing immigrants and the immigration problem. In Italy, the rise of the right started with the center-right government of Berlusconi's Forza Italia between 2001 and 2011, followed by the more recent political affirmation of the right-wing party the (Northern) League, both of which have exacerbated anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments. In my discussion here, I focus mainly on racism towards immigrants of color because their presence in Italy is a more recent phenomenon. The once sporadic immigrant population coming from Italy's ex-colonial possessions in the Horn of Africa has increased since the 1980s even in those parts of the country where there had been no Blacks in the past. Episodes of racism and xenophobia against people of color in Italy have increased at an alarming rate ranging from acts of brutal violence and daily micro-aggressions to mediatic and

scandalous uproars.<sup>18</sup> Yet, talks about racism, among laypeople in everyday chats and conversations, often point fingers at other countries, the USA more often, as the ones to have issues with racism. In a society in which the colonial past seems to have been obliterated from its national collective memory and history, the task of even understanding the many complex and multifaceted ways in which racism operates has proved to be very difficult. In a series of discursive strategies similar to the ones described by Dulitzky (2005) for Latin America, the existence of racism in Italy is denied or minimized. In one proposition, racial discrimination is dismissed as an issue of class not of race; or by blaming the victim. For example, the Italian soccer player Balotelli, who is Black, is booed often in stadiums around the country, especially in the northern regions, which are the political stronghold of the League. Amidst critiques of his playing style, sports commentators seem to specifically draw attention to his volatile behavior on the field, and rather than considering it as a potential reaction to the constant booing and micro aggressions, they highlight it as unnecessarily angry and exaggerated. The “balotellate” (*Balotelli-style behaviors*) become therefore the focus of the attention, not the insults that may cause them.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, the racist comments and the booing are not attributed to racism but to Balotelli’s bad character, and therefore, almost justified. Another discursive strategy, more widespread in the south of the country, focuses on Italy’s history as a country of emigration. The memory of the trials and tribulations suffered by Italian immigrants in different parts of the world is perceived as an antidote towards the emergence of racist anti-immigrant sentiments. Incidentally, one of the countries of destination for many Italian emigrants at the turn of the 1900s was Brazil. After the abolition of slavery in 1888, the Brazilian government sponsored a guest worker program to bring a new labor force into the country. These policies were not unique to Brazil as countries in the Southern cone, like Argentina and Uruguay, among others, adopted the same measures. However,

<sup>18</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the many episodes of racism in the country. One worth mentioning is the defamation campaign against Cécile Kyenge, an Italian citizen of Congolese origins who served as Minister of Integration in the center-left Letta government in 2013. In July of 2013, during a political rally organized by his party, then Northern League, Roberto Calderoli, Vice president of the House of Senate, compared Minister Kyenge to an orangutan, underlying what was, for him, a striking resemblance between the two. A collective and mediatic uproar ensued denouncing the racism of the comment by many political and social sectors, including the Vatican. The requested resignation of Calderoli never happened and in 2015 the Senate voted to absolve Calderoli from accusations of incitement of racist feelings.

<sup>19</sup> See Supereva, Home-Sport. n.d. <https://www.supereva.it/pessima-opinione-di-balo-clamorosa-delusione-14124>

one other purpose behind these policies was that of “whitening” their population by making it more European, which explains the presence of poor farmers and peasants from Italy and Spain to replace slave labor in the fields.<sup>20</sup> The arrival of masses of Italian immigrants to Brazil is still recorded in Brazilian popular culture. For example, the telenovela *Terra Nostra* chronicles the story of a poor Italian family that arrived in Brazil with nothing to become later successful and powerful. Back in Italy, Brazilian connections were maintained via both family relationships, and the liaison that the two countries had in the past. While many Italians also migrated to Argentina as part of the same policies, there is almost no presence of the Argentinian connection in Italy. Yet, images of beautiful, curvy, dark, and attractive samba dancers became a common repertoire in Italian popular culture.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of immigrants in Italy coincided with many transformations in Italian economic and social settings. The neoliberal economic policies adopted globally since the 1980s, the globalization of the capitalist system after the collapse of the USSR and the socialist block, and the creation of the EU marketplace are all factors that transformed the economy of the country. The economic power of the Italian low and middle classes gradually eroded, and underwent a process of readjustment from which not all social sectors came out in good standing<sup>22</sup>. The labor market became more vulnerable, and job contracts not always supported by benefits, stability, and social guarantees. The collapse of the socialist block also led to the weakening of workers’ unions, which had been very strong allies and supporters of workers’ rights up until the 1970s. However, this process also brought many middle-class women, of the generation born in the 1960s and 1970s, to join the labor market, and not just out of necessity. While for middle-class households, two incomes became pivotal to sustain their lifestyle, the influence of the feminist movement that reached its peak in Italy in the 1970s, motivated middle-class women to question the traditional gender roles of their mothers’ generation, and join the labor force for their personal aspirations.

The 1990s also brought a profound political transformation caused by the collapse of both the Italian Communist Party, the PCI, and of the Christian Democrat Party, the latter having ruled the country for over 40 years. This political restructuring weakened leftwing and progressive forces, favoring new right-wing formations such

<sup>20</sup> See Skidmore, Smith and Green (2010).

<sup>21</sup> A parody of the fascination with exotic samba dancers if offered in the popular TV show *Indietro Tutta*, created by Renzo Arbore, that aired on national tv on RAI 2 in 1987 and 1988. See video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy4YOBPU-4OU>

<sup>22</sup> See King (1993) and Van Mol-de Valk (2015).

as **Forza Italia** founded by Silvio Berlusconi, and the (Northern) League<sup>23</sup>. The country then entered a new political phase, known as the second republic, baptized as *berlusconismo* (2001-2011). Under the spell of Silvio Berlusconi, populist and nationalistic rhetoric conquered the hearts of many Italians. Being a successful media mogul, Berlusconi ably created a myth around his persona, presenting himself as the self-made man who knew no fear and would stop at nothing. His political impersonations also promoted an image of predatory masculinity according to which he extolled his *macho* nature. He often appeared surrounded by attractive, young, curvy women, in festive occasions, and phantasmagoric parties, sometimes dressed very informally, with a bandana on his head. It became common to see him entangled in scandalous news of sexual encounters with escorts, and women 40 years younger.<sup>24</sup> The image of success he projected was of a strong heterosexual, macho, white, and wealthy man whose lifestyle was not concerned with social commentaries nor contained by moralistic preoccupations.

All these snapshots of the transformations that occurred in Italy in the last thirty years provide a pixelated image of the society, debates, cultural and political histories that are part of the imaginary of those Italian male tourists, especially the older ones, who board cheap charter

flights to reach their coveted tropical paradise. To them, Brazil is a familiar exotic place, as they may have seen it on TV through the sexualized images of samba dancers, a place where their modest income can afford them more than a street prostitute. They venture to a remote destination to pursue the extravagant way of life, and the possibility of homeownership that will make them feel successful. The beaches of Natal and Fortaleza are a promise of satisfaction, places where they can surround themselves with beautiful, young, curvy women whose skin color guarantees their availability to fulfill their men's fantasies and desires. As Luigi said, finally they can put their bandana on and go wild!

The stories that I presented are stories of common people whose lives converge at some point in a quest for a chance, for some a chance at happiness, for others at survival. Yet, these stories, and the relationships of young Brazilian women with their European tourists, are also the reflection of the process of uneven development and power differential that exists in a world where globalization has not at all meant the offering of equal opportunities. On the contrary, people continue to be marked unequally by their race, gender, and nationality. Such markers still determine an unequal access to resources, and restrict people's choices as well as their dreams, leaving to serendipity or destiny or to the blind goddess of fortune the possibility of striking a happy ending. Rather, it is a matter of degrees: while for some young women the encounter with tourists is just one possible piece in the complicated puzzle of survivor, for some others it still represents a move forward, or a new opportunity, even in the absence of a prince.

<sup>23</sup> Born as the Northern League, la Lega Nord, under founder Umberto Bossi, the party now goes by the League, la Lega, led by controversial rightwing leader Matteo Salvini.

<sup>24</sup> See, among others, "Sesso e Scandali: Berlusconi citato tra i più clamorosi" In *Globalist, Politics*, 1/12/2014, <https://www.globalist.it/politics/2016/05/08/sesso-e-scandali-berlusconi-citato-tra-i-casi-piu-clamorosi-53295.html>.

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