

# Intersections of the Transnational

## Brazilian dancers in New York City's gentlemen's bars<sup>1</sup>

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For some time now, researchers have been calling attention to the need to question our methodological and conceptual tools to respond to the challenges brought about by globalization. It has been argued that identity can no longer be seen as bounded to place, or closely associated with either local community or the nation-state. Concepts such as “deterritorialization,” flows and networks (Hannersz 1996; Appadurai 1991) indicate that place and locality have been academically short-changed in comparison with the emphasis given to the mobility of capital, goods, people, and information (Gille and O’Riain 2002). In contrast, there has been growing concern with the production of spaces and how “place” can be used as an essential tool for studying the ways global or transnational processes are refracted into the local, and conversely, how those macro processes are also made possible, and delineated through everyday practices, grounded in specific spaces (Heyman and Campbell 2009, Burawoy 2001, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Massey, 1994). No longer bound to traditional borders, localities have been seen as “meeting places” or “moments” (Marcus, 1998) in a much wider trajectory of travelling relations and subjects across nation-states. I contend that ethnography helps bring place back because it enables us to examine processes that occur at different scales of social relations: the local, the regional, the national, and the global or transnational.

New York City’s gentleman’s clubs represent one emblematic space of intersecting flows, where men and women from diverse national, ethno-racial,

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and class backgrounds meet. In the encounters that occur in those bars, they recreate a new locality and new forms of social interaction that refract contemporary transnational circulation of people, goods, and information. In the borough of Queens, where I conducted my fieldwork, there is a large concentration of Brazilian and other migrant groups; the clientele of gentlemen's clubs is constituted by men from different Latin American countries, "white" American men from the working classes, Greek construction subcontractors, Italians in the restaurant business and a new generation of Albanians, among other ethnic and racial groups. The majority of the dancers are Brazilian women, followed by women from Colombia and the Dominican Republic. What are the processes and flows that brought together such an array of people from different places? How do apparently "disjunctive" (Appadurai 1991) flows of ideas, finances, people, and goods intersect to create a new sense of place and identity? What kind of spaces and places are being produced in the intersection of those flows and how can we approach them analytically?

The presence of these women and men in Queens' gentlemen's bars might be understood as a consequence of political and economic transformations that brought the central management of world financial companies to downtown NYC and attracted migrant workers from peripheral countries. However, it is also a result of global flows of representations and fantasies of self and alterity. As recent scholars of globalization and sexuality have argued (Constable 2003; Altman 2001; Kelsky 2001; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; Jolly and Manderson 1997), contemporary encounters between people are informed by a representational regime that, originating in colonial periods, has been re-configured according to contemporary dictates of globalization and transnationalism. Brazilian women have been represented as "mixed race," a view that attaches a particular racialized and sexualized value to them in global arenas. As scholarship on the intersection between sexuality, gender, and national formation in Brazil has argued (Stolke 2006; Pinho 2004; Correa 1996; Moutinho 2004; Parker 1991; Sommer 1990), the desire for and desirability of Brazilian women have been fundamental in early projects of Brazilian nation-building, tapping into colonial images of white male conquest and the imagination of the black and mulatto female body. In global cities like New York, representations about women that equate race, body, and nation reverberate through perceptions, at times reaffirming, and others contradicting the lived experiences of intersecting flows of people.

Although there are Brazilian women from different social and racial backgrounds working as erotic dancers in New York City, since beginning my research, I was struck to learn that a large proportion of these women occupied the whiter spectrum of Brazil's complex racial configuration. They did not fit the stereotypical views of the darker "mulattas," symbolic of the Brazilian nation in and outside of Brazil. In Brazilian terms, most of these women would be classified as "morenas." Previously dismissed by most researchers or clustered alongside "mulattas," "morena" as a racial position has only recently caught the attention of researchers (Piscitelli 2007, Norvell 2001, 2002, McCallum 2005) as a category generally associated with the middle-classes. They have argued that, while the category "mulatta" implies a racial mixing through the sexualization of women of dark skin colors and came to be associated with spaces inhabited by the lower classes, "morena" evokes a somewhat antiseptic, and whiter, mixture. As a polyssemic category, "morenidade" changes meaning according to the semantic contexts in which it is used. It might imply a kind of racial mixture that took place prior to colonization, in a reference to the Moors on the Iberian peninsula, or a suntan acquired on the beach, a practice associated with the leisure classes. "Morenidade" can also refer to a voluptuousness associated with mulattas in public celebrations such as carnival and public parades, when darker skin color becomes the most valued signifier of the Brazilian nation (Norvell 2001, 2002, McCallum 2005).

As a result of this combination of flexibility of origins and a care for the body associated with the middle-classes, "morenidade" became a "transparent," or unmarked category, thus able to be attached to different meanings at different moments. For the case of Brazilian dancers, "morena" may also signify the capacity of women to embody different races and cultures, a capacity that in Brazilian nationalist discourses becomes the mark of Brazilian modernity.<sup>3</sup> In parallel to what Kelsky (2001) defines as "narratives of internalization" for the case of Japanese transnational women, I argue here that "morenidade" becomes central to defining the imaginative horizon of migration of Brazilian women from the middle classes; a category through which they can envision both their relationship to whiter bodies at the centers of power, as well as their migration to a place where those bodies can be encountered.

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3 For discussion about alternative models of modernity, developments, or manifestations see: Knauff (2002) and Rofel (1999). See also Pinho (2004) for discussion about the intersection between race/culture and modernity for the case of the category "brau" in the context of Salvador, Bahia.

Despite the class and social location that make middle class “morenas” racially “unmarked” within a Brazilian context, in New York, these Brazilian women’s social and racial positioning undergoes profound transformations. Although they occupy a privileged position within Brazil, they come into the United States in a position of subalternity. In Queens, and particularly in Queens’ gentlemen’s bars, Brazilians, along with other Latin American dancers, tend to be clustered into the category of “Hispanics,”<sup>4</sup> a subordinate structural position within the larger society. Still, depending on their prior racial and class positioning in Brazil, and particularly in the case of those women from middle-class backgrounds, Brazilian dancers actively mark their Brazilian identity and distance themselves from “Hispanics,”<sup>5</sup> As inscribed in the social geography in New York City, these broader identifications become highly contested in the space of specific gentlemen’s bars, particularly in encounters among dancers and between dancers and clients. In these spaces, moments, or meeting places, women and men from various classes, racial and ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, and places of origin interact, reinforcing differences and creating new social and racial hierarchies.

The information in this article comes from fieldwork conducted among Brazilian dancers in New York City from 2004 to 2006. Although I talked with a large number of women, I concentrated my research on a small number of middle-class women,<sup>6</sup> with whom I developed a trusting relationship. I also identified with them, for we were not only of the same social background, but also from the same part of the country, Bahia. Thus, in this article, I will examine a particular network that spanned from New York to Bahia. I would frequently go to bars with some of the women from this network and spend the night talking to dancers and their clients. The bulk of my data comes from the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for over two years at gentlemen’s bars in Manhattan and, particularly, at three specific bars in Queens,

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4 In this article, I chose to use the term Hispanic instead of Latino/a in order to be consistent with the usage of my subjects.

5 The on-going negotiations between Brazilian and Hispanic identities are also found in other studies of Brazilians in the U.S. such as Ribeiro (1998), Beserra (2005), Margolis (1994).

6 Following Bourdieu’s (1984) definition of class identity, this article understands that one’s position in the social class system is given by a complex combination of subjective and objective factors. In identifying the women as middle-class I am considering a number of combined variables such as income and ownership of land, houses, and durable goods, as well as one’s family history, ethnic-racial background, taste, aesthetic preferences, and relationship to other classes.

where I became a familiar presence to dancers, clients, and management. I also visited the dancers in their apartments, went out with them and their boyfriends, and attended weddings and birthday parties. I have been with them at times of separation, deception, and longing. Some of these women became my best friends in New York, and it was with their trust that I could construct a portrait of the women presented in my work. Rather than pretending to present a statistically representative population of Brazilian dancers in New York, my purpose is to bring out the experiences of specific women and the field of possibilities they inhabit, given the context of New York's bar scene.

I begin with a brief profile of the women who participated in my research. Next I focus on the transformations in New York's sex-industry that occurred as the women became erotic dancers. The final section examines the relationships developed between dancers and their clients at Blue Diamond,<sup>7</sup> a gentlemen's bar in the neighborhood of Astoria, Queens. By "strategically choosing" (Marcus 1988) to focus my research on the dynamics and relationships that happen in reference to a specific gentlemen's bar, I hope to demonstrate how the "local" and the transnational are interconnected and delineate the social repositioning of middle-class Brazilian women as they move between Brazil and the United States.

## Women in Transit

The presence of Brazilian women in New York is part of a larger Brazilian migration that gained significance in the 1980s and led Brazilians to different parts of the United States, Europe, and Japan.<sup>8</sup> This movement, boosted by the hyperinflation and economic and political crisis of the so-called "lost decade," articulates with a long history of participation of Brazilians, and, in particular, Brazilian women, in the global arena. The desirability of these women must be understood in connection to cultural discourses about their

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7 The name of the bar and the name of the dancers are fictitious in order to protect the identities of women who participated in my research.

8 There is now a growing literature on the migration of Brazilians to various parts of the world, and I do not attempt to review it in this work. I will cite only those that relate more closely to the issues raised in my work. For an extensive list of studies on Brazilians in the U.S. see a bibliography organized by Maxine Margolis [http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/iSwFIQ/Margolis%20Bibliography\\_.Bib.doc](http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/iSwFIQ/Margolis%20Bibliography_.Bib.doc)

sexuality that make Brazil a major sex tourism destination, and, simultaneously, creates a market for Brazilian migrant women in the centers of power. In the 1990s, Brazil became one of the most important locations in the world sex tourism circuit, after Thailand and followed by the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and the Philippines (Kempadoo 1999, Piscitelli 2004). Concomitantly, Brazilian erotic dancers have become the majority of workers in Switzerland, and Brazilian dancers and prostitutes have changed the face of small towns in Portugal and Spain (CHAME 2000). Although the traditional images of sex workers were of women from the lower social classes, the sex industry's growth and diversification means that women from different classes and backgrounds began to enter the scene. In some cases, sex work has become a middle class phenomenon.

The women who participated in my research are part of this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> All of them have come with support from a network of friends and family members, some of whom also worked as erotic dancers and informed them about what erotic dancing entailed, with the first ones informing latter arrivals. All the dancers I interviewed arrived with a place to stay and were introduced to club management by relatives and friends. They knew how much they would be able to make, and had ideas about the behavior clients expected. The network that I examined in my research was composed of women from different ages and points in the life cycle: those in their forties, usually divorced, with a good education but no college degree; thirty-something women who usually had gone to college but their degree did not bring them the expected income; and still others in their twenties, or a bit younger, who are in college and took some time off for an experience outside of the country and to make some money. The reasons these women came to New York varied according to the particular moment in their life trajectory, educational differences, and class positioning within a seemingly homogenous middle class.

The network that is the focus of my research initiated in the early 1990's, when Gina, 45, recently divorced, decided to join a divorced friend in the United States. These women were experiencing downward social mobility, the result of their divorces and of Brazil's economic crisis. At home, Gina was the

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9 Although I have heard of women that came to this country through the contact of agencies, all the women I interviewed, those who were and those who were not part of Clara's network, came with the help of their own network of family, friends, or acquaintances. See Augustin (2005) for a discussion of agency among sex workers.

owner of a clothes “boutique,” but this did not allow her to maintain the lifestyle that she had expected. Gina belongs to a traditional family from southern Bahia, an area known for its cocoa production, which had augmented the local fortunes of many hacienda owners. Gina’s family had benefited from this production, but starting in the 1980s, many have lost their fortunes with the fall of cocoa production and the downfall of cocoa prices in the international market. Family and a difficult economic situation, along with her divorce, were the reasons behind Gina’s decision. She was the first of eighteen women from her extended family to come to New York City, including her niece Clara, a 34 year old lawyer who was my key interlocutor in the field.<sup>10</sup>

Clara’s mother, a biologist, always encouraged her to have a career of her own, and sent Clara to private schools through the university. When Clara was 13, her parents divorced, and she moved with her mother and sister to Salvador, the capital of Bahia, even though she spent time in the smaller city where her grandfather was mayor. On her 15th birthday, her mother sent her to Disney World for a holiday and in the 1980s she went to law school, where she nourished high financial expectations about life as a lawyer. In 1995, after passing the bar exam and getting her permit to work as a lawyer, Clara’s reality fell short of what she expected. She began work in the office of an established lawyer, but soon realized that to advance her career she would have to open her own practice. She started taking on small cases, while trying to save enough to open her own office. The hardship was colossal, and at the end of each month, Clara would earn about \$150.00 dollars, after expenses. After two years struggling with her financial instability and lack of prospects for advancing her career, Clara decided to follow the path of aunts and cousins already in the United States working as erotic dancers. With Clara migrated two other lawyers about her age from her university: Nana and Nadja. As Clara says:

“When I started dancing, my aunt was also dancing and my mother knew about it...all my [female] relatives were dancing here, and...they were not prostitutes,...they were here only to make some money, it was just dancing wearing a bikini or short skirts. It was not such a big deal, from the point of view of Brazilian, of Brazilian women in general, since, you know, in Brazil there

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10 Since Clara became my main interlocutor in the field I will, from here on, refer to the network that which she is part of as Clara’s network.

is always the beach and dance groups, so I got into dancing. I started making a lot of money, I could make in a week five times as much as I was making in Brazil in a month. And I worked only three days a week, because I was not here to kill myself. I lived with my aunt, and started going to English school, I knew I had to invest in my English, and I had no children, nothing to worry about. So I began to know the city, to study, to work, and to have fun. I had so much money; I could do a lot of things.”

Although economic considerations were of foremost importance in their decision to work in New York’s sex industry, they were not the only ones. As middle-class women, they identify with values and practices associated with modernity. In tune with nationalistic “modern” views of “morena” bodies and middle-class *habitus*, women have particular ways of understanding their bodies and its entailments, care, and instrumentality. They choose the sex industry over domestic work<sup>11</sup> precisely because the latter allegedly harms their bodies. In particular, they mention how cleaning products spoil nails and skin, the harm their vapors caused to the lungs, and how cleaning postures harm the back. They also refer to the isolation of domestic work, where they are alone for long hours and not able to meet people. In contrast, the bar scene and New York’s nightlife are viewed as more appealing, exciting, and better paid. The advantages of dancing are described through a language of “fun” and according to nationalistic discourses about Brazilian’s “natural” inclination for dancing and “modern” identification with hedonistic pleasures of the body.

Despite a discourse of fun and pleasure, however, the work of erotic dancers is surrounded with secrecy and stigma. Dancers talk freely about dancing, clients, and work only with dancers or others who are immersed in the bar scene: such as those who sell outfits, cab drivers, and bartenders. Even at large family birthday parties, where most people are dancers or know about dancing, there is nearly a taboo about speaking of these issues, and at times, an awkward silence when the subject is inadvertently broached. On occasions when I went out with dancers and their boyfriends or male friends, the subject was never talked about; when other dancers were present, the women I accompanied secretly singled them out. These women live in a sort of

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11 Domestic work, particularly cleaning is the most common job available for migrant women, since it does not require a work permit and can be done without major language skills. See Fleischer 2002 for an analysis about the work of Brazilian housecleaners in Boston, Massachusetts.



fractured identity, between what they do for work and their identity in daily life vis-à-vis Brazil. With few exceptions, friends and relatives in Brazil do not know what they do for a living in the United States as most say they work as waitresses or bartenders in upscale restaurants or in fashionable clothing stores.

Outside the bar scene, they try to detach themselves from their work, though this is rarely achieved. Because of the long hours working at night,<sup>12</sup> dancers cannot hold a second job or take classes, and end up living in a tight circle with the bar scene at its center. This has profound consequences for their sociability in New York, as it becomes very difficult for these women to enhance their possibilities for other career and life prospects, and a path out of the dance scene. Dancing as a form of labor is limited in terms of age, so dancers recognize the need to leave as soon as they earn enough money to support other life and career projects, or find a suitable marriage partner that could help them to have another life style. Although there are dancers in their late 40s or even early 50s, most assume that they will have to leave the industry by then. For, as I show below, different bodies are valued differently in New York City's sex industry, in an hierarchy based on age, weight, ethno-racial and class markers, and proximity to established ideals of beauty.

### **Hierarchies of Bars and Bodies: Global Sex and New York City**

*“The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies” (Grosz 1998: 43)*

As Brazilian women were entering the gentlemen's bar scene, New York City was being transformed into the new world financial center, a global city from which the global economy is managed and regulated (Sassen 2001; Smith 1996). This has led to the gentrification of areas of New York City, a process that has been articulated through the regulation of the city's sex industry, such that there has been an hierarchization of gentlemen's bars between those in Manhattan and those in Queens. Particularly during the conservative government of NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani (1994-2002), the ban on sex-related

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<sup>12</sup> A shift in most Queens' bars is from 8:00 PM to 4 AM, although there are bars that also have afternoon hours, when dancers' shifts are from 12:00 PM to 8:00 PM.

industries in gentrifying areas was managed through campaigns against pornography, leading to the creation of specific zoning laws. This process of “zoning the city” according to sexual practices used a language of morality, associating public, commercial, and alternative sexualities to criminality and unruly behavior.

In a conservative climate accompanied by the mass arrival of immigrants, American citizens who saw their standard of living shrinking with the loss of secure jobs, joined corporate and real estate forces in reclaiming the space of the city in name of traditional values and “quality of life.” In an analysis of “quality of life” discourses used by New York City’s government to justify the expulsion of sex-related businesses from areas such as Times Square, social geographer Papayanis (2000) exposes the absence of any real evidence for the association of such businesses with criminality. Papayanis argues quite the opposite, that sex related businesses, which moved to decayed areas, like Times Square, in the 1960s and 1970s because of their low market value, actually helped upgrade these areas. That is, the rise in real estate values in Midtown Manhattan in the 1990s was facilitated by the presence of sex-related businesses following the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, which, when gentrification was underway, were expelled both under zoning laws that marginalized them and by high rents imposed on them by real estate interests that dictated, through their ties with the government, the zoning of the city.

In 1995, in the middle of much heated debate over pornography, the New York City Council and Planning Commission approved a new zoning code, which became a turning point in the way public sexuality was organized and managed. Other cities have dealt with sex-related business in two different ways: first, by concentrating such businesses into “red-light” districts (Amsterdam and Bangkok); or second, by dispersing these businesses to lessen their impact on specific areas of the city. Arguing that the concentration of such business was the reason for the decline of quality of life and family values, and anticipating a renovation of the large Times Square area, city government opted for the latter; thereafter, spaces for commercial and public sex came under the category of “adult entertainment business.”<sup>13</sup> In

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13 In accord to *Zoning Amendment 12-10*, adult establishments are so classified when they “regularly feature” or devote a “substantial portion” of their business to displays that contain: 1 *Live performances which are characterized by an emphasis on “specific anatomical areas” or “specified sexual activities”*; or 2. *employees who, as part of their employment, regularly expose to patrons “specific anatomical areas” and which*

accordance with these new zoning laws, sex related businesses were barred from operating within 500 feet of residences, schools, houses of worship, and hospitals; those that did not comply were closed or removed. As a result, by 1998 most sex-related businesses in Manhattan had to relocate. Once the heart of city sex-related business, Times Square has now been gentrified, pushing small gentlemen's clubs, peep shows, and stores selling pornographic material to outer boroughs.<sup>14</sup> The number of sex-related business in Times Square dropped from one hundred and twenty to nineteen (New York Post, Feb 25, 1998), with many converting a percentage (60% in accordance to the zoning laws) of their space or materials into non-adult use. XXX-rated rental places now devote a portion to mainstream videos and tourist paraphernalia and others relegate the back space to peep shows and nude performances. Some gentlemen's bars now segregate nude women from the clothed.

Only a few of the most upscale gentlemen's clubs benefitted from the new zoning laws; most moved to Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, areas that received the bulk of the city's recent migrants.<sup>15</sup> What followed this reorganization of the city's sex industry was a redistribution of bars and bodies along class and ethno-racial lines, as well as their proximity to ideal body types in terms of weight, age, and shape. Thus, the gentlemen's bar scene was now divided between "upscale" Manhattan clubs and the more "neighborhood" bars of the outer boroughs. Such spatial distribution is refracted in the social composition of the clientele and dancers of the different bars, the types of performances, and the contacts allowed between dancers and clients, thus shaping the possibilities of social encounters within and beyond the bar scene. Thus, the law and its capillary powers have had an impact not just on the location of the bars, but also on the dynamics within the bars; the way the women dress, the distance between clients and dancers, the way they touch, the exhibition of nude parts, and the types of performance are also under government jurisdiction.

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*is not customarily open to the general public during such features because it excludes minors.*

14 See Delaney (1999) and Friedman (1986) for a description of Times Square sex scene in the 1980s, just before the gentrification of that area began.

15 In 1990, Brooklyn and Queens accounted for 60% of the total population of New York, and housed 2/3 of migrants. According to the 2000 US Census, Queens had the largest absolute population increase of (277,781), a growth rate of 14.2%. White non-Hispanics comprised 32% of the borough's population, while Hispanics comprised 25%, Black non-Hispanics 19%, and Asian non-Hispanics 17.5%. For an excellent analysis of neighborhood politics in Queens see Sanjek (1999).

Although there are clubs in Manhattan that are similar in style to Queens' "neighborhood bars," due to tight laws and high costs for an establishment in Manhattan, most there can be classified as "upscale." Located in the city's privileged areas, they cater to a "whiter" clientele of businessmen, Wall Street brokers and investors, tourists, and international politicians. Targeting an upscale clientele, these bars must combine the allure of foreign women with the sophistication demanded by patrons. They employ mostly white American women<sup>16</sup> as well as women from Western Europe, such as Spain, Italy, England, and Denmark. Given the global preference for and value on light skin color, there is a significant presence of women from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc. Adding to the aura of exoticism, there are also women from Asia, such as Thailand and the Philippines, as well as from Latin America.

Wherever the women come from, the management of Manhattan bars makes sure they display the class markers desired by the clientele. Such markers are defined both symbolically and materially, as inscribed on the body and behavior of dancers. Dancers who work in Manhattan are more likely to have better language abilities or have more body work done (such as breast augmentation), to fit the playboy image demanded. Among the networks I studied, younger women were most likely to work in Manhattan bars. Of those in their thirties that were part of Clara's network, only Nadja, age 33 and also a lawyer, worked in Manhattan bars; she sought to compensate her lack of language ability by improving her body, putting on hair extensions, having breast enlargements and liposuction of buttocks and thighs.

Located in busy commercial areas, and in accordance with city jurisdiction, the women in Manhattan bars perform topless and offer more personalized services, like "table dances" and "lap dances."<sup>17</sup> These patrons relax in comfortable lounge chairs around small individual or group tables; they sip drinks and talk to each other while observing dancers on stage or as they "work the room," offering lap and table dances. There are two kinds of stages

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16 Yet, there are also upscale bars that are "specialized" in black bodies, or that dedicate one night of the week to particular "race" or "national" bodies.

17 Those are more intimate dances that women offer to clients, commonly on a one-on-one basis. They can be performed in the bar area (table dance) or in a separated area called Champagne rooms (lap dance). See Lewis (2000) for discussion of the ambivalent positioning between stripping and prostitution.

in Manhattan bars: long, elevated platforms where many dancers perform at the same time, and small circular platforms for solo dances. The stage dance functions to advertise the dancers; it is a place where dancers work by exchanging gazes with the viewers and performing their special numbers, while identifying the clients to whom they will shortly later offer a table or a lap dance, because they usually do not make any money dancing on stage.<sup>18</sup> Patrons closely inspect dancers' bodies and performances and choose those who most fit their taste. Because of the large number of women dancing (from forty to sixty dancers) and the structured competition between them, dancers must be aggressive in selling dances. After descending from the stage, women approach clients and offer a dance; since it is the lap or table dance that provides the dancer her payment, not much time is spent talking.

Compared to competitive upscale bars, Queens's bars are described by dancers as more "relaxed" and can be better described as "neighborhood" bars. One reason that some dancers gave me for working there was this "relaxed" or more "familiar" atmosphere. The sense of familiarity is heightened by the fact that Brazilian women are the majority of dancers there and that the women join an already established network of family and friends. Neighborhood bars are usually smaller and have fewer dancers, from 8 to 15, depending on the day of the week. The stage consists of a long platform surrounded by the bar counter, which separates clients from dancers. When on stage, dancers receive their money in the form of dollar bills, although part of their job is to socialize with clients and encourage them to buy drinks (for which dancers receive a small percentage). During their shift, women dance for about 20 minutes and then socialize in the bar for 40 minutes until their next set. While drinking with clients was once optional, it has recently become a requirement that a dancer must earn a minimum of five drinks a night.<sup>19</sup>

Bars in Queens also differ according to their geographic location. In bars located near more isolated areas or close to manufacturing buildings or parking lots, women dance topless and perform lap dances in the bar's corners.

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<sup>18</sup> While in Manhattan dancers earn from \$700.00 to \$1,000.00 dollars on a regular night, dancers in these Queens' bars receive from \$100.00 to \$400.00.

<sup>19</sup> There is a fine line between what is required from dancers in terms of drinking with clients and the limits they must impose on themselves in order to maintain their physical and mental health. A strategy is to spread out the drinks throughout the night, or to order what it is called champagne, which is, in fact, a quite expensive sparkling drink with no alcohol.

Those bars are considered more “edgy” by most dancers and women in their forties were most likely to work there, as more upscale bars prefer younger bodies, closer to hegemonic body standards. Brazilian women in their thirties have more chances to work in bars located close to residential areas, which they describe as having a more “familiar” atmosphere. These are defined as “go-go” bars, meaning that no topless dancing is allowed and no lap dances can be offered. In “go-go” bars, women wear small tops and minuscule shorts or skirts and/or G-String bottoms.<sup>20</sup> These bars also vary in regard to the types of bodies, depending on the class and racial composition of the specific areas where they are located. Nevertheless, both the “go-go” bars and those in more isolated areas share the same dynamics between “stage” and “floor,” a crucial detail in delineating the kinds of relationships that are fostered there. While Manhattan dancers make their money “on-the floor,” in Queens’s bars women make theirs dancing on stage and are not allowed to take money from clients while “on the floor.”<sup>21</sup> Yet part of a woman’s work is to socialize with clients and the money she makes on stage and dancing depends on the relationship she has with clients on the floor. Such distinction between the interactions encouraged in Manhattan and Queens leads to crucial differences regarding the kinds of personal encounters that are likely to occur.

In Manhattan, as in Allison’s (1995) study of hostesses in Japanese clubs, men usually go to bars in groups and, rather than engaging with dancers, they tend to be more concerned with establishing ties with business partners. They use the visit to seal business contracts and sponsors (usually a single employer) may use the opportunity to bond with employees. What Allison defines as “corporate masculinity” is less concerned with satisfying desire through a relationship with a dancer than how his contact with a dancer is closely watched by business partners.<sup>22</sup>

Men who go to Queens’ bars, on the other hand, have a different set of expectations and behaviors. Clients are often “locals” or “regulars,” categories that imply that they live in the area and frequent the bars. They may drop by on their way home after work or come for a chat or a night of adventure

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20 See Maia (2007) for a detailed description of the differences between these two kinds of bars.

21 The percentage they receive from the bar per drink is very small, functioning more as a form of management control to make sure the women are accompanying their clients.

22 This does not mean that there can be no closer relationships between dancers and clients, or different variations in the expression of desire against this patterned background of behavior.

with friends. Men's motivations vary according to their identity and social positioning, but they have a common interest in interacting with dancers in more intimate ways than they would if at a Manhattan bar. Although they appreciate a so-called good performance, they are usually less interested in the dance *per se* than in the small talk that follows it and many clients know their favorite dancers by name, just as dancers know their frequent clients' names. Such familiarity, as we will see below, invites an intimacy between clients and dancers that transcends the bar scene into transnational spaces.

### **Dancers and Clients in Blue Diamond**

My data for this section comes particularly from my ethnographic observations of a specific bar, Blue Diamond, where most dancers in Clara's network were in their thirties. My research at this bar was facilitated both by my age similarity to these women, by the proximity of this bar to a subway line, and by the fact that the manager was Brazilian. Blue Diamond is located in Astoria, an area of Queens located right across the Queens-Borough Bridge from Manhattan. Considered one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the world, Queens, which has received the bulk of recent immigrants, is a patchwork of languages, customs, and skin colors that intersect at certain moments and spaces. In Astoria, a large concentration of Brazilians live next to Greeks, Italians, Albanians, Colombians, Dominicans, Serbians, among others, as well as a small number of "white" Americans, particularly of Italian and Irish descent.<sup>23</sup> Because no one ethno-racial or national group dominates, Astoria can be defined as an "ethnic stew" (Foner 2000). Stew has both the connotation of slow cooking or simmering, and of a state of heat, affliction, or irritation. This definition seems to define well the ethnic-racial dynamics in Astoria. For the most part, there are apparently no major conflicts and the different groups seem to be just "simmering" out their differences. Yet there are tensions around markers of social positioning and different access to material and symbolic goods. The interplay of approximation-simmering and distancing-afflicting happens in daily encounters: at the deli across the street, the movie rental place, at the gym, restaurants, and bars. Some places or encounters are inconsequential, just a stop by, while others, such as the

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23 See Margolis (1994) for ethnography of the Brazilian presence in Queens.

ones that happen in Astoria's gentlemen's bars, may have a more lasting affect on the lives of the people involved.

As indicated above, the dynamics of Queens' bars invites close contact between dancers and bar patrons. With some clients, dancers develop a relation of avoidance, while others become their friends, boyfriends, lovers, husbands, or sponsors. The kinds of interactions depend upon dancers' perceptions of a customer's "performance of masculinity." The way a customer holds his drinks, how he tips, how he gazes at women, and his general bodily display and manners are signifiers that dancers must decipher. Dancers, who are themselves "racialized" in the bar scene, classify clients according to racial and class categories vis-à-vis U.S. and transnational norms, and for the chances of social and spatial mobility they offer the women.

Most dancers come to New York carrying a tourist visa, which permits a six-month permit stay without work. A woman who overstays her visa knows the legal risks, which include an inability to reenter if she leaves. A dancer basically has two options: either she stays and makes the most money she can and then leaves never to re-enter, or she gets married and re-gains legal status. For immigrant women who come for work as erotic dancers, the possibilities of meeting friends and prospective husbands are somewhat limited as busy night schedules limit their social life outside the bar. As opposed to "native" U.S. dancers immersed in larger networks of family, friends, and acquaintances (Frank, 2002), the personal encounters of most Brazilian dancers will occur mainly with bar clients, encounters that will be shaped by women's legal and material considerations.

However, as Constable (2003) notes for the case of Chinese and Philippine women who engage in mail-order marriages with American men, the fact that these relationships are so embedded in political economic factors does not mean that they are devoid of emotions and affection. Although chances to meet partners are somewhat constrained to the bar scene, it is not likely that these women will establish personal relationships with just any man. Women's choices are determined by two considerations. First, the encounters that women have with men in the bar scene is mediated by their own considerations of the racial and class locations of different men, as manifest in their manners and appropriate displays of sexuality and gender. Second, women also attend to their own desires, which, while occurring in the backdrop of political economic factors, are related to complex, and at times contradictory,



ideas of romance, love, and adventure. These women, we must remember, are experiencing situations for which they have no prior models or traditions to follow. The recent intense global flows of capital, information, and people, have created unforeseen conditions and situations. I now explore some of the new and varied forms that personal relationships take, given the transformations that have occurred in women's material conditions and subjective lives.

"Clients" is a large category dancers use to talk about men who frequent bars. Usually, dancers and clients know each other's names (real or, more likely, fictitious), their form of work, country of origin, and, sometimes, about their family or love life. Clients buy drinks for dancers, who sit with them while they observe other dancers on the stage. This interaction can remain the same for months or years; once a client starts favoring a particular dancer, however, he becomes "her client." Yet this does not imply exclusivity, for a dancer may have a number of recognized clients who come on the same night and a client can also have a number of favorite dancers. The status of favorite dancer or client changes often and is a source of accusations of "lack of class" and competition between dancers, fomenting animosity and division among them. An experienced dancer will build up her clientele. The role expected of a client with an acknowledged relationship to a preferred dancer is to give her more generous tips than he gives other dancers and to keep buying drinks for his dancer during her breaks. If it is an established relationship, a dancer can always count on one of "her clients" to buy her drinks, since bars require that a dancer have at least five drinks bought for her each night. She also can count on him to give her enough in tips so she does not have to "work the room" much.

All dancers in Clara's network consider older Greek and Italian men the best "clients" in Blue Diamond. They tend to be married or separated men who have a significant amount of disposable money. Generally restaurant owners or owners of construction companies, these men could, in terms of income, be considered part of the American middle class. However, they do not identify with their income-level *habitus*. Lacking a college degree, these men have not acquired the taste for concerts, books, or movies that constitute the Western canon, and instead identify with other foreigners like themselves who do not feel awkward about their working-class background. These clients usually spend generously on favorite dancers in exchange for attention and for pampering reflective of their status and relative male

privilege. The bar becomes these client's main space for socializing and dancers their best companions.

The relationship between a middle-class Brazilian dancer and a Greek and Italian older man may develop outside the bar, with the bar scene reference. Commonly a client gives his telephone number to a dancer, hoping or expecting them to call so that he can ask her out for dinner or drink. A dancer, seeking to gain financially from a date, will tell him that she will have to miss a day of work to see him outside the bar, thereby suggesting that he should compensate her. A good client, aware of his role, may slip what he calculates is fair compensation into her hands, usually two folded \$100.00 dollar bills. An experienced client will not necessarily expect sex from this exchange, just because he is paying. This encounter outside of the bar is more like the work of an escort than that of a prostitute. The money is to pay not for sex but for the display of a beautiful female companion, in turn for increasing the client's public persona more than satisfying his private sexual urges.

As a relationship between a dancer and a favorite client becomes closer, he may become her "sponsor." Clara, like most of her aunts and cousins, had clients who, at times, became her sponsor. This was how she defined Demetris, a Greek man twenty years her senior, and a regular bar patron for over ten years. Like other Greek patrons in Queens, Demetris had his own subcontracting construction firm and a reasonable yearly income. After their meeting, Demetris became a profitable client for Clara, and for about a year, the relationship remained within the bar. It changed when Clara decided to rent her own apartment. In exchange for his generous help with moving, buying appliances, fixing, and furnishing, Demetris started frequenting Clara's apartment and they began a more intimate, boyfriend-lover type of relationship. Demetris was no longer supposed to have other "favorite" dancers, although that was rarely the case. Over time, Clara also began to have other boyfriends and lovers. She knew that her relationship with Demetris, while pleasurable and convenient, had "no future," as she said. Demetris, like other older Greek and Italian clients was not legally divorced from his wife, and thus could not be Clara's avenue to a green card.

In contrast to Greeks and Italians, from the perspective of most dancers in Queens' bars, Albanian clients are not considered desirable. Nana, 34, another of Clara's lawyer friends from Bahia who married an American of Irish-Italian descent, once told me, they are "psychopaths." Coming in the recent

wave of migration after the incorporation of Eastern Europe countries to the European Union, Albanian clients are usually much younger than the Greeks and Italians and occupy an inferior position in the national hierarchy. Their “performance of masculinity”<sup>24</sup> as compared to other men’s, includes more unruly behavior, talking loudly, drinking heavily, and allegedly snorting cocaine. Rumors circulating among dancers that alleged that some Albanian men were part of the mafia, proved true when one of them was killed in a conflict with the Italian mob. Even if this generalization does not hold for all Albanians who frequent Blue Diamond, this is the impression that middle-class Brazilians have and no dancer I met had a relationship with an Albanian man beyond the bar scene. Despite such associations, however, their European origins and the perceived whiteness locate Albanians structurally right below Greeks and Italians in the hierarchy of Astoria bars. Two other groups of clients visit Astoria clubs in smaller numbers: “white” Americans and “Hispanic” immigrants, who are diametrically opposed in terms of U.S. class and racial classifications and dancers’ perceptions.

“Hispanics” can be considered either “amigos” or “bagaçeiros.” In Brazil, this latter expression refers to a person who removes the sugar-cane residue after the liquid is extracted; or it can also refer to an animal that eats “bagaços” or leftovers. For dancers, this category implies an activity associated with the lower class, revealing the ways in which class intersects with racial perceptions in defining peoples’ interactions. Many “Hispanic” men, like many dancers, might be from the middle class in their home countries but in New York they occupy jobs deemed low in income and status: taxi drivers, busboys or kitchen assistants, temporary construction workers or day laborers. Still, as Nana says, ranking men according to their perceived behavior towards dancers, they are “acceptable” as “amigos”: fine for conversations and company within the bars, even though their low income does not permit them to tip dancers generously. Brazilian men occupy a similar position as “amigos” and very rarely go to bars as clients. They may drop by to see a dancer friend and have a beer, although most I met in Blue Diamond go there with friends moved by curiosity. Some who live nearby accompany a friend in the city for a visit. They usually seem somewhat uncomfortable seeing compatriots, many of whom are middle-class “respectable” women, working as

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24 See Gutman (1997) for discussion of the construction of differing styles of masculinity.

dancers, a comment that I heard repeatedly. Since they do not see themselves as clients, they do not feel obliged to tip, and dancers consider Brazilians “cheap.” Yet Hispanics and Brazilians are fine as “amigos.”

In contrast, other Hispanics are “bagaçeiros.” While the latter may have jobs and income similar to other Hispanic men, their country of origin and class and ethno-racial location (defined transnationally) make them “unacceptable” to women in Clara’s network. They usually come from more modest class backgrounds and have little formal education; some may even come from the countryside or have indigenous features. Thus, in the eyes of middle-class Brazilian dancers, they do not have the proper social markers. Even if some “bagaçeiros” or “amigos” have green cards and could provide the women the legal means to stay in this country, dancers considered such a relationship “problematic.” Out of the women examined in my work, only Barbara, also part of Clara’s network, married a “Hispanic” man. She was from Brazil’s lower middle class, and had moved up in the social scale by marrying a son of a local doctor from Clara’s extended family and opened up a clothing store. After her divorce, Barbara decided to move to New York when she recognized that she had little social capital of her own to sustain the material comforts to which she had grown accustomed. A few years older than Clara, but younger than her aunts, Barbara was still of marriageable age. As she told me, she had decided to stay and would “make it happen.” Barbara had anticipated getting into an arranged marriage, but after a few months of dancing, she met a man who quickly became her husband.

This marriage was always frowned upon by the other women in the network, but accepted largely because her new husband, Davi, a U.S. citizen of Dominican descent, was her access to a green card. While significant, this was not the only reason why they married. They were attracted to each other, had a common taste for New York City’s nightlife, and spoke a similar language, which was crucial since Barbara could not speak any English. However, problems soon appeared. Although he owned a small moving company in a recently gentrified Manhattan neighborhood, Davi could not offer the same services as his competitors, and like many Hispanics in Lower Manhattan (Smith 1996), he began to be marginalized by the newer “whiter” residents. As his business failed to make ends meet, Barbara could not stop working and invest in another career as she expected. Reconciling marriage and dance, as some other dancers told her, was not a long-term option

because Davi's economic woes brought fits of jealousy and, finally, divorce, involving allegations of abuse and violence. In cases such as Barbara, there might be a clash of expectations and behavior on both sides, since they shared little besides being from Latin America.

If they married for green cards, some dancers in my research choose men of African American origins. Not only are they usually not related to the bar scene, these men are open to a more strictly business relationship. At the time of my research (2004-5), an arranged marriage for papers cost about US \$10,000, plus a few years of follow up with immigration officials. That was what Sara, Clara's aunt (age 47), did, as did other women in her age group. In Brazil, Sara had a government position that, although it provided her with some status, did not allow her access to the kind of material comforts she expected, which became clearer as her growing daughter increased her financial demands with education. Divorced when she moved to New York, Sara was very critical of gender hierarchies and did not expect a marriage that would combine affection, intimacy, and a convenient access to citizenship. Following the path of other women of the same generation, who had little expectations of finding an "ideal" relationship, Sara decided to straighten out her legal situation by marrying an African-American man who had other relatives who had married women from her network. Although I spoke to Sara about her work and her relationship to other men, Sara kept this paid marriage a secret. Her silence seems to reveal not only her attempt to keep its semi-legality hidden; it may also be symbolic of her discomfort with having a close commitment with someone considered her racial subordinate in both Brazilian and U.S. terms. In the United States, her association with people of African descent could be a reminder of her own ambivalent social status.

The ideal man to marry, according to middle-class Brazilian dancers, is a "white" American man. These men represent more than a legal means to live and work in the United States; they also symbolize the possibility of better access to American cultural institutions, and the material and symbolic benefits of belonging. In *Blue Diamond*, those classified as "white" Americans are mostly men of Italian and Irish descent likely to live in Queens and adjacent Long Island. These usually regular clients have union jobs as firefighters and electricians, and part of their performance of masculinity is to come to bars with friends after work or for a night out. They are part of a generation that grew up in suburbs during the expansion of the American economy after

WWII<sup>25</sup> and have income levels that would position them as middle class by Brazilian standards. Yet they do not share other class markers considered crucial to dancers' middle-class values, such as a college degree. What may be seen as merely a detail at the beginning of the relationship, however, will significantly impact the ability of these women to transcend material and symbolic borders and to live comfortably between the United States and Brazil.

The case of Renata, a woman in Clara's network at the Blue Diamond who married a "white" man, illustrates the kinds of advantages and dilemmas embedded in such relationships. Renata had a secretarial job in a bank for four years when she was fired due to the downsizing typical of Brazil's economic restructuring in the early 1990s. Different from the other women who had a more positive discourse about dancing, one framed in terms of national identity, Renata never liked dancing, but preferred it to working as a manicurist, the only other job at which she had experience in the United States. Besides disliking the subservience required for this kind of work, Renata's decision was particularly a financial calculus. With New York's high rents and cost of living, Renata would need many years of working as a manicurist to earn the kind of money she wanted. Although she considered finding a sponsor, Renata did not find it morally acceptable; she also knew that a relationship with either a Greek or Italian man would not lead to marriage and she did not find Hispanic men suitable. Through a combination of calculus and coincidence, Renata met Brandon, a firefighter about her age, a few months after she began dancing. Brandon thought he could help<sup>26</sup> Renata integrate into American society.

Soon they got married and Renata stopped dancing at Brandon's request. This request, however, was a double-edged sword. Although Renata now has the material comforts she expected - a large house, a four-wheel drive vehicle - she frequently complains of the isolation of American suburbs. Nor does Brandon's family fully accept Renata, and she told me of her alienation whenever his male American friends made racist and sexist jokes about Brazilian

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25 See Roediger (1991) for a discussion of the role of race in the construction of working class America.

26 In her work about sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, Cabezas 1999 analyzes the use of a language of "help" in defining men's "performance of masculinity" and relationships to both sex workers and girlfriends.

women. Renata anticipated that the hardships that she was enduring would be compensated by the expression of that comfort in Brazil, such as buying a house there and sending money and presents to her family before a much expected happy return as a married woman. This was not what happened. Through a series of misunderstandings and confused social conventions, which Renata recounted to me, Brandon's behavior when they went to Brazil, though common among people of his social position in the United States, was not acceptable to Renata's family's and friends' middle-class values. After many such incidents, Renata's trips to Brazil became infrequent and her ties with her family grew weaker. As often happens with migrants, her life became "in between," one in which she simultaneously occupied spaces constructed in reference to one another.

## Conclusion

In this article, I examined how different intersecting flows of people, finances, goods, and ideas construct particular places and spaces and delineate the encounters within their confines. By examining New York City's gentlemen's bars as a strategically chosen space for research, I showed how what occurs in specific spaces shapes the direction of transnational flows and affects people's lives in different places. Here I focused on a particular network, Clara's network, which began in the early 1990s and reached from a city in southern Bahia to New York. Today there are eighteen women from Clara's extended family living in New York and working as dancers. As a result of the migration of these women, other friends also came. All are middle class and defined in Brazilian terms as "morenas." As a polysemic category, "morena" is associated with different meanings depending on the semantic context to which it is associated. In Brazil, "morena" might mean just a sun tan from being on the beach, or a racial mixture that might predate colonization, or may even refer to the characteristics of the darker "mulatta" (as the most valued symbol of the nation in carnival parades). "Morenidade," as a structural position, affords people defined as such to be nearly "transparent" or racially and socially "unmarked," the zero point in Brazil's complex racial spectrum.

However, as they move to New York, "morenas" experience a profound social repositioning, becoming almost immediately racialized. As Frankenberg (1997) argues, "racialization" is an on-going process of subject-making that

happens in conjunction with one's position in the labor market and in terms of gender and sexuality, and shifts as one crosses national borders and occupies particular spaces and places. Moving to Queens, a working class neighborhood home to mainly transnational migrants from peripheral countries, already represents a major change for Brazilian women. In Queens, and particularly in gentlemen's bars, they are further "racialized," as the fluctuating signifier, "morenidade," becomes attached to other forms of identity that these women hold and to various spaces in the city.

Entering New York's sex industry since the 1990s, Brazilian women, like those I examined here, have occupied a context undergoing dramatic political economic transformation as New York became a global center of financial management and the hub of one of the largest immigrations ever. This transformation led to a thorough restructuring of the city, with downward economic pressure on some neighborhoods and the renovation of privileged areas. This restructuring was articulated through the redistribution of the sex industry and of sex clubs that did not comply with high-brow standards, expelling them from Times Square to the outer boroughs. Not coincidentally, boroughs like Queens, where a number of Brazilian women work, have received the bulk of the migrant population in the last few decades, turning this previously native working-class area into one of the world's most ethnically- and racially-diverse neighborhoods. Queens, and particularly Queens' gentlemen's clubs, constitute points in space in which different flows and networks intersect. The encounters occurring in these clubs are not confined to their spatial borders, but extend beyond national boundaries. Transpiring in the context of these bars, as I explained, the encounters between Brazilian women and clients have broad lasting consequences affecting their experiences in the United States and Brazil. These encounters simultaneously bring about the consolidation of networks and flows, the construction of new spaces and places, and the re-signification of existing ones.



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