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DOI: 10.1086/528747

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DOI: 10.1086/528747

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- . 1982. "Migrant Workers and Structural Change." *Migration Action* 6(2): 20–25.
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Looking for New Worlds: Brazilian Women as International Migrants

Adriana Piscitelli

The connection between transnational notions of Brazilianness and women's migratory experiences first caught my attention at the beginning of 2000, when I was doing fieldwork in Fortaleza, in the northeast of Brazil. This sunny city, recently integrated into international tourism circuits, is well known for its beautiful beaches and is considered one of Brazil's so-called sex tourism destinations. Trying to understand the impact of tourism on the local population's sexual and affective choices, I observed that middle- and lower-middle-class local women frequently traveled abroad accompanying or invited by foreign tourists. Some women left the city in order to work in the sex industry in Europe. A number of women spent brief periods of time in another country, living as spouses with men they met in Fortaleza, returning disappointed with their experiences. Many others, however, remained overseas, frequently marrying foreigners they met in Brazil (Piscitelli 2004, 2007c).

In recalling these perceptions I do not intend to suggest that Brazilian women's international migration is mainly associated with the sex industry or with the blurred space in which sex and marriage markets are superposed. However, the racialized and sexualized notions about Brazilian styles of femininity that attract sex tourists to the country also mark female international migrants. The vast majority of these out-migrants do not participate in the sex industry. Nonetheless, the idea that they are bearers

I would like to thank Albertina de Oliveira Costa, Mariza Corrêa, and Roseli Golfetti for their comments and support.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2008, vol. 33, no. 4]

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of an intense natural disposition for sex and a propensity to prostitution, combined with ambiguous notions of Brazilian women as feminine, submissive, and joyfully committed to domesticity and maternity, affects them all (Pontes 2004; Padilla 2006; Piscitelli 2007c). These conceptualizations vary in migratory contexts that have different historical relationships with Brazil and also according to the women's social class and "color." With the flux of Brazilian women toward rich countries in North America and Europe, the cultural translation of the subaltern place that Brazil occupies in transnational relationships has a major effect on Brazilian women's gendered experiences.

Brazilian women on the move

Like other countries marked by acute regional inequalities, Brazil has witnessed an enormous internal migration from the poorest to the richest states and from rural areas into cities. This process has changed to a certain degree in recent times, when part of this migration has been redirected abroad (Azevedo 2004; Rios-Neto 2005; Costa, forthcoming). In terms of international migration, Brazil was considered a major receiving country in the very recent past.¹ In the 1980s, in the context of a serious economic crisis, for the first time the country showed a large emigration. Since then, reduced labor opportunities and prospects for social mobility, particularly for sectors of the middle class, have fed the emigration flux.

Governmental reports estimate that around 3 million Brazilians (1.7 percent of the total population) were living outside the country in 2006 (Magno 2006).² A large number live as "irregulars" (i.e., undocumented

¹ According to migration studies, between the 1890s and World War I Brazil was third among receiving countries in the Americas, following the United States and Argentina, sheltering immigrants mostly from Italy, Portugal, and Spain (Menezes 2001, 126). Between 1908 and 1940 they were joined by Japanese immigrants and by citizens of other European countries (Seyferth 2000–2001). At the present time, Brazil receives mostly immigrants from other Latin American countries.

² According to João Magno's 2006 report, the major receiving countries were the United States (1,800,000), Paraguay (450,000), Japan (250,000), Portugal (100,000), and the United Kingdom (100,000). In the past four years, Brazilian migration has significantly expanded in certain parts of the world, particularly in Southern Europe. Since 2005 Mexico has required a visa from Brazilian citizens, making it harder to arrive at the U.S. border. The effects of this shift include an increase in transnational links among smugglers and an increase in the risks and economic costs migrants face trying to clandestinely cross more than one border. As a result, the migration flux directed toward European countries appears to have increased (Secretaria Nacional de Justiça 2007). Consulate agents in Spain and Italy state

immigrants) abroad, which affects the possibility of obtaining accurate statistics. The scant attention paid to gender in data gathering poses further difficulties in estimating the numbers of female Brazilian migrants. However, these women's international displacements appear to be significant. According to the Brazilian Federal Police, in 2005 women represented around 30 percent of the persons sent back from foreign countries. This includes deportees, but the vast majority are those women whose entry was refused in countries that do not require visas from Brazilian tourists, mostly at European airports. In these places, young darker Brazilian women who look poor in the eyes of the migration police are detained for one or more days, humiliated, frequently labeled prostitutes, and sometimes sexually harassed, with no reason other than police disbelief with regard to their tourist status (Secretaria Nacional de Justiça 2006, 2007).

Recent governmental reports about deported women suggest that they are mostly from the lower-middle class (Secretaria Nacional de Justiça 2006, 2007). The majority are single or divorced, in their twenties and thirties; almost half of them have children and, in a country that values whiteness, they mostly consider themselves brown (*morenas*, the most frequently used native term, or *pardas*, the expression used in the National Census for mixed-race persons).³ Economic motivations are the main reason for their migration, which they may undertake either individually or in cooperation with their families. These profiles, however, cannot be generalized. Scholarly studies about Brazilian gendered international migration point to diversity in terms of migrant women's educational and class backgrounds and skin colors. These aspects interfere with the class positions women hope to obtain in their migratory trajectories.

In different receiving contexts, Brazilian women work in commerce; in administrative, educational, and health services; and as small entrepreneurs (Cavalcanti 2006). But, like women from other third-world countries, they are mostly occupied in domestic services, cleaning, and taking care of children or the elderly (Messias 2001; Oliveira 2006). Particularly in Southern Europe, they also work in the sex industry (Mayorga 2006; Piscitelli 2007a). Although only a fraction of Brazilian women are occupied in this sector, the relevance of this activity is amplified by press

that they are offering services to a much larger number of Brazilian residents than was the case four years ago (Piscitelli 2005, 2007b).

³ In the Brazilian census, as well as in academic research, "color" is defined according to the subject's self-classification.

coverage that frequently merges international displacement for the purpose of working in the sex industry with trafficking of persons.

Research reports allow us to perceive that, according to the Palermo Protocol, there are cases of women who are trafficked in the context of international migration, mostly being exploited as domestic or sexual servants.⁴ This happens in travels toward rich countries in Europe and North America. It also happens in the Brazilian borders with Suriname and in the triple frontier: in the borders with Argentina and Paraguay (Figueiredo and Hazeau 2006; Magno 2006). However, these studies also show that there are women who, far from being forced or deceived and/or used as bound or forced labor, decide to work in this sector in rich countries. With this objective, like other migrants, they mobilize social and familial support networks in order to travel abroad (Ministério da Justiça 2004; Secretaria Nacional de Justiça 2006; Piscitelli 2007a). For nontrafficked sex workers as well as for Brazilian women engaged in other economic activities, their main concerns are related to the possibility of obtaining papers in order to legalize their status abroad and to labor conditions that can be highly exploitative for undocumented migrants (Juncks 2004).

Women's presence is particularly striking in the Brazilian communities of Southern Europe. They constitute more than 60 percent of the Brazilians living in Spain and approximately half of the Brazilian population in Portugal (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras 2005). In these countries, as well as in Italy, they are considered to be significant in the sex industry, and they also constitute one of the main groups of foreign women married to national men.⁵ And in these countries, the strikingly few transnational marriages involving Brazilian men suggest that Brazilian women acquire a particular value in the marriage market, driven in part by notions about Brazilian femininity that mark it with sensuality but also with the valorization of domesticity and an interest in motherhood. Having (or not having) residence and work permits and job opportunities,

⁴ The Palermo Protocol is the short name for the most important contemporary international legal disposition regarding trafficking of persons, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, issued by the United Nations in 2000. For the text of the protocol, see <http://untreaty.un.org/English/TreatyEvent2003/Texts/treaty2E.pdf>.

⁵ In 2006 Brazilian female spouses were the second-largest group of foreign women marrying Spanish men. See the INEbase database at the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Spain, for the years 2005 and 2006 (<http://www.ine.es>). In Italy, according to an analysis of the 2001 census, Brazil was the main non-European country furnishing foreign spouses, mostly women, to Italians (Istituto Nazionale de Statistica 2005).

marrying men who are citizens of the receiving countries, and giving birth to children in the migratory contexts are major differences that distinguish one Brazilian woman's experiences from those of another.

Images of Brazilianness

Stating that women from diverse backgrounds are affected by the images connected to Brazilian styles of femininity means considering that, although women from the global South get confined to specific occupations, they do not constitute a homogeneous category. In the frame of the unequal relationships between North and South, the differences among women from the global South are frequently translated into attributes that evoke ethnosexual frontiers (Nagel 2003). According to the context, these borders affect women from distinct ethnicities, regions, and countries in different ways. It could be thought that, in the United States, "tropicalizations" (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997) might impinge on any Latin American person. In the system of ideological fictions with which the dominant (Anglo and European) cultures trope Latin American and U.S. Latino/a identities and cultures, subjectivities connected to these regions are frequently coded as tropical, exotic, and hypererotized sexually. However, research points to the fact that, both in the United States and in Southern Europe, racialized and sexualized notions of femininity mainly affect women from certain countries. Brazil, Cuba, and Colombia, associated with racial blends that bring to mind African traces, are among them. While Latin American women from different nationalities are occupied as domestic workers and more broadly in service work, Brazilian, Colombian, and Cuban women are also considered significant in both the sex and the marriage markets in some Southern European countries.

The effects of these notions are more attenuated among the Brazilian women who attain better class positions in the receiving countries. Nevertheless, women (no matter their background) locate themselves among positions of overt resistance and apparent complicity at various times, rejecting but also using postcolonial images to negotiate their positions in unequal migratory contexts. In an interplay that reinforces certain stereotypes while weakening others, both in the labor and marriage markets (Pontes 2004; Piscitelli 2005; Beserra 2007), the connections of female Brazilianness with friendliness, joyful domesticity, cleanliness, and natural propensity for care and even sensuality are turned into part of the arsenal these women implement in their struggle for a better place in those harsh new worlds.

These negotiations are depicted in studies that show how Brazilian

women deploy some of these attributes in order to obtain access to privileged levels of paid domestic work in Boston, where Brazilian women's openness, joyfulness, and special care are set out in order to attract clients for their own housecleaning agencies. These "ethnic" attributes are activated with the aim of opening small enterprises in which Brazilian immigrant women sometimes function as bosses of males who are their kin or part of their social networks, enterprises that offer what women consider to be a well-paid and autonomous activity (Assis 2004).

The connection between Brazilianness and sensuality annoys women, who are frequently harassed in several milieus. In order to avoid it, some migrants even lie about their national origin (Beserra 2007). However, it also seems to be strategically performed. The ethnic sex appeal is conceived as an asset for undocumented women working in the sex industry, who feel it helps them attract clients. But it is also perceived as offering benefits for diversely positioned Brazilians, whether documented middle-class women in the academy in Los Angeles (Beserra 2007) or public service workers in Lisbon (Pontes 2004). Nonetheless, the major benefits that women who do not work in the sex industry obtain by embodying sensuality appear to be related not to the labor but to the marriage market. In these cases, women combine sensuality with other attributes, performing the image of sweet, submissive, caring, domestic, and sensuous wives eager to be mothers.

American and Southern European husbands seem to perceive relationships with these women as an opportunity to recreate traditional patterns of masculinity with the additional spice of enjoying a particular style of sexuality (Assis 2004; Piscitelli 2005; Beserra 2007). For Brazilian women, performing this combination of notions opens the way for desired marriages. "Mixed" marriages expose women to risks, particularly for those with fewer resources, who are subjected to more intense degrees of inequality and racism. However, these weddings are most desired since they offer women the main way to obtain residence permits in the context of highly restrictive migration policies. And these marriages are also valued as symbolic resources that contribute to achieving cultural citizenship abroad.

International migration and feminist activism

Brazilian women living in foreign countries organize themselves in groups that suggest feminist concerns but work with different objectives. Some try to disconnect the representation of Brazil from the sexualized image of its women created through music and carnival (Beserra 2007), while

others intend to empower migrant women by helping them to learn the new language and obtain jobs and intend to protect them from the domestic violence that particularly affects married women and to support them in divorce processes, especially in terms of legal rights over their children, which are threatened when they divorce in some countries (Zingaropoli 2003).

Feminist activism in Brazil is particularly vigorous in diverse issues connected with women's rights in internal migration. It also engages with some of the matters that affect migrant women abroad, mainly by discussing and rejecting the traveling notions of a sexualized Brazilianness. Working with other human rights groups, the feminist movement has successfully interfered in the official sexualized marketing of Brazil in the international tourism sector. However, in terms of international emigration, the main feminist concerns are related to the trafficking of persons and to the connections between sex tourism, migration, and trafficking.⁶ At this moment, the latter is one of the major working themes of important Brazilian women's coalitions.⁷

While trafficking is indeed one of the most serious violations of women's rights, the scholarly production and governmental reports about gendered emigration point to an array of acute problems faced by women. The limitation of their right to free movement under the accusation of being prostitutes is only one of them. But these issues, acknowledged abroad, are not yet included in the main activist concerns in Brazil. The almost exclusive focus on trafficking of persons in terms of emigration has the effect of effacing other significant difficulties while at the same time posing the risk of reinforcing a one-dimensional and stigmatized vision of Brazilian women as international migrants.

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⁶ The program of the tenth Feminist Latin American and Caribbean Meeting that took place in São Paulo in 2005 included three panels, two of them prepared by Brazilian activists, related to these issues and also a panel connected to prostitution but none related to female migration at large.

⁷ See Conferência Nacional de Mulheres Brasileiras 2002 and Sempreviva Organização Feminista at <http://www.sof.org.br/>.

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