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# Tourist Attractions: Performing Race and Masculinity in Brazil's Sexual Economy, Book Review of

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**Tourist Attractions: Performing Race & Masculinity in Brazil's Sexual Economy.**

*Gregory Mitchell.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 264 pp.

**CHARLES H. KLEIN**

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This is an intimate and innovative ethnography on male sex work in Brazil. Building on in-depth research in three Brazilian cities (Rio de Janeiro, Manaus, and Salvador) from 2006 to 2015, Gregory Mitchell adeptly fuses theories of affective labor, eroticized authenticity, and queer kinship to develop a nuanced analysis of how shifting performances of masculinity and race shape not only sex workers but also their clients, girlfriends or wives, and families. In studying these complex sexual economies, Mitchell artfully connects rich ethnographic data, including extensive participant observation in sex work locations and interviews with 50 sex workers and 40 foreign tourists, to broader themes of sexual subjectivities, sex tourism, gay consumerism, and contemporary neoliberal capitalism. From the first descriptions of the *garotos* (male sex workers) working to seduce clients in a sauna, Mitchell takes us into a social world that cannot be understood in terms of victims and villains, a standard framing device for buying and selling sex. The writing captures the erotic nature of these spaces without being lurid, and Mitchell's empathy for both *garotos* and tourists is evident. I am particularly impressed with how Mitchell shares his shifting sense of comfort and discomfort that emerged during fieldwork, and then uses these spaces of friction as entry points for his analysis.

The book's first three chapters ("Hustle and Flows," "Typecasting," and "TurboConsumers™ in Paradise") present a compelling analysis of sex work in Rio de Janeiro

through the lenses of performative labor and bounded authenticity. Seeking to meet client erotic preferences, most *garotos* present an extreme form of *bofedade* (butch masculinity). Building on the work of Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003) and Elizabeth Bernstein (2007), Mitchell analyzes how these “commissioned performances” of masculinity result in “a lot of macho straight men trying to perform a version of straight masculinity constructed and desired by gay men” (38). This performance of masculinity is strongly racialized—in the case of Rio, the dominant pattern is North American clients seeking “whiter” *garotos*, while in Salvador, the focus of chapter 5, African American gay men seek Afro-Brazilian men. Yet, the more effort *garotos* put into maintaining a butch presentation, the more likely their performance may seem artificial and call their own masculinity—and sexuality—into question. And adding yet another level of richness to the discussion, Mitchell highlights the *performative danger* of queer desires represented by male prostitution, where (putatively) masculine sex workers may end up having real affective bonds with their clients.

Using narratives from *garotos* and gay tourists, Mitchell compellingly portrays the contradictions present in *garoto*/client interactions and relationships. On the one hand, most clients express a desire for macho, working-class men who are total tops, and *garotos*, in turn, present themselves as total tops, even though many will bottom for the right price. Many of the clients also have what Mitchell calls a “mission impossible” (87) mentality in which they apply a gays rights–based conceptual framework to justify their attempts to free *garotos* from both the closet and prostitution through forming ongoing, “egalitarian” relationships with them. Yet, these relationships work against the clients’ underlying sexual attraction to *garotos*, which is predicated on their heterosexual masculinity.

On the *garoto* side of the equation, many men desire the stability and economic possibilities of longer-term relationships with clients. Yet, these relationships, in which sex is typically less important than in one-off sauna encounters, may end up unsettling their sexual identities. In these cases, *garotos* often describe themselves as bi, a label more about acknowledging emotional connections between them and their clients than about sexual identities or[?] practices. In chapter 4, “Godfather Gringos: Sexual Tourism, Queer Kinship, and Families of the Future,” Mitchell takes this analysis a step further, and—in what for me is the most fascinating part of the book—presents several examples of how *garotos* integrate clients into their family lives, including ongoing interactions with their wives and children. Here, Mitchell’s analysis shines as he describes the queer dimensions of these shifting relationships while situating them within long-standing Latin American practices of godfathering children.

The final chapters, “Ecosex” and “Sex Pilgrims,” shift the focus from Rio de Janeiro to Salvador and Manaus and examine the ways in which tourists seek racial or ethnicized “authenticity” in their travels. In the Amazon, Mitchell uses detailed descriptions of ecotourists at one of the largest destinations in Manaus to show how ecotourism consciously provides an erotic framework for tourists to understand local residents and the places they visit. Mitchell argues that the tourists’ interest in having encounters with a pristine and eroticized indigenusness results in social misremembering and symbolic violence in which tourists freeze indigenus people in time. In Salvador, Bahia, the Afro-Brazilian heart of Brazil, African American gay men seek both a connection to their African heritage (what Mitchell calls *subjective nostalgia*) and romance with other black men. Toward this end, they may study Afro-Brazilian culture, attend *candomblé* ceremonies, and learn *capoeira*, a traditional martial art/dance form). Yet, given the different (ways in which Brazilians and North Americans

construct race, the Brazilian *garotos* read their (to them) wealthy clients as “white” and do not see them as their (black) brothers. Chapter 6 concludes with a fascinating discussion that applies the concepts of cultural memory and cultural repertoires to examine how a sexualized, “circum-Atlantic masculinity” (pp. 214-215) is performed by African American men, gay and straight, and their Afro-Brazilian partners.

*Tourist Attractions* will appeal to a broad readership and would be a great ethnography for undergraduate and graduate level courses. I would have liked to see more analysis of the economic transformations and class mobility provided to the *garotos* through sex work, and I found Mitchell’s sweeping generalizations on US gay culture, consumerism, and neoliberalism more blunt than his much more subtle analysis of *garoto/client* interactions. But these are small critiques of what is overall is an enthralling analysis that masterfully links empathic ethnographic description and cutting-edge theory.

## References

- Bernstein, Elizabeth. 2007. *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cameron, Deborah, and Don Kulick. 2003. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge: University Press.

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