Spaces of Secrets, Sex, and Subversion: How Motels Embody Brazilian Society

by

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I. Introduction

Driving by a motel in Brazil, a travelling tourist would most likely never guess the intended purpose of the building without previous knowledge of Brazilian culture. Motels in Brazil are designed specifically for the sole purpose of sex, but as people grow familiar with these spaces, they have also found other means of utilizing and adapting them to accommodate their lifestyle and desires. More importantly than the service it provides is its effect on Brazilian society and sexual culture. Prioritizing confidentiality as one of its main commodities, the motel functions as an accessible venue for secrets and non-normative behavior. Even though it expands and stimulates a range of illicit activity, it does not alter public perception of sexuality or the moral standards of the Brazilian people. The influence of globalization and other cultures cannot touch the core of the country’s moral values, which are rooted in purity, family, and a conservative identity.

Despite its overt sexuality, the motel promotes traditional Brazilian values by relegating illicit activity outside of the home, a space that is not entirely private. Because of the behavioral restrictions that members of the household must follow within this space, the house impels people to visit motels. The far-reaching effects of the nation’s Christian faith shape gender relations and the construction of the family, and perpetuate a traditional definition of the house. Motels assist in promoting the religious ideal of purity by making available the opportunity to manifest one’s sexual desires without detracting from the wholesomeness of the home. These spaces of extreme privacy support religious conservatism by suggesting there is no space for sex in the house, yet motels subvert religious values by promoting
new forms of non-normative deviance. In a country where established morals coexist with the sexual culture, society ameliorates the tension by adding exceptions to these strict conceptions of moral values. The motel as an accepted space in society, the ambivalent opinions of women regarding sexuality, and the public festivals of Brazil—these elements of the country converge to form paradoxes and contradictions that define the nation, yet also make it so difficult to describe. The interaction between sex and tradition gives rise to tension, but the motel curbs the conflict. A space to explore clandestine interests, the motel is a respite from rigid virtues while maintaining the illusive guise of purity. As exuberant and sexually liberal the country’s identity may be perceived, the motel prevents change within the social fabric by eradicating the need for confrontation between its value systems and the prevalence of sexuality. As a result, people can maintain the purity of the house and of their identity, comfortable in their own illusion, which creates contradictions that are difficult to resolve. And so, these ambiguous incongruities are accepted as an inevitable part of society.

Motels are overlooked in analyses of Brazil as indicated by the lack of academic resources on the subject, possibly due to their straightforward sexual aspect. This work relies on academic texts on Brazil with a focus on its culture and women to learn about the motel’s role and significance in Brazilian society. The opinions of people I interviewed in Brazil supplement and round out this essay, creating a more complex view of motels and their position in Brazilian daily life. My position as the outsider adds distance between Brazilian society and myself, which helps in discerning and clarifying the salient traits of the culture. Brazil may have a predisposition for
subversion, but recognition of its larger and historical context along with an awareness of contradictions contributes to a better understanding of the motel and how it envelops multiple aspects of Brazil in one space.

II. A Background of Motels

The motels of Brazil are not the same as the ones in America, though they share the same name. The motel, a portmanteau of motor and hotel conceived by Arthur Heineman, originated in America in 1926 in San Luis Obispo, California. The name came to label “a wide variety of highway-oriented accommodations,” though Arthur Heineman’s Milestone Mo-tel was definitely not the first of its kind. The American motel started out as a service to migrating miners and their families, but it shifted towards addressing tourists as automobile travel increased in popularity after 1910. The growth of motels, accompanied by the rise in personal transportation, peaked in the 1960s when around 61,000 motels were in operation. The popularity of automobile travel solidified the motel’s identity as a way to accommodate travellers’ needs.

In Brazil, it is the needs of society enveloped in a conservative atmosphere, and not travellers, that encouraged the birth of motels. Servando Fernandes Davila built the first Brazilian motel in 1968 in Itaquaquecetuba, a city in the Metropolitana region of São Paulo as a means to avoid censorship

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
from the military dictatorship at this time. The government implemented strict laws to ensure *bons costumes*, or “good manners,” as cited in the Decreto-Lei Nº 1077, or Decree Law. This tumultuous time period lasted from 1964 until 1985—two decades marked by censorship, civilian abuse, and a dictatorship driven by an ardent fear of communism. The Catholic Church endorsed the coup that gave rise to the military dictatorship, creating a patriarchal social structure that relied on “the dominance of the Catholic Church, and the organization of gender relations.” Despite the efforts of the “popular church,” a small group of believers that advocated secular change and social justice, conservatism took over during the following decades with the fortification of the Vatican and the government’s shift towards democracy. The weakening of the Brazilian Church—which at that point was “the most progressive in Latin America,” suggests an underlying desire for liberalism, which was eventually quelled by the strengthening of Catholicism.

The defining feature of Brazilian society in this period was “the organization

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11 “Brazil: Dictatorship, Democracy.”
12 Ibid.
of relationships between women and men,” whose “sexual claims, desires, and practices” gave a rigid regulation to their gendered interactions.

The police also exercised power over these claims. As the law required dwellers to stay in their rented rooms for at least 24 hours, police were able to regulate how people used hotels. According to Fernandes Davila in a news article about his start in the motel industry, if they attempted to leave before the appropriate time, hotel goers would be escorted to the police station and imprisoned for 15 days by policemen, who often situated themselves outside hotel rooms. “Cultural protests at this time against the government ended with the imprisonment and exile of protest leaders, which established a larger tone of political oppression.” The 1960s were coincidentally a time period where the contraceptive pill and IUD were becoming commercialized, further augmenting a desire among civilians for more freedom, or more privacy rather, since the former would not be offered during the peak of dictatorial repression. Fernandes Davila addressed this conflict with the creation of the motel. He drew inspiration from the United States, where he saw that clubs were sometimes equipped with apartment rooms for rent. He brought the concept to Brazil, and circumvented police enforcement by claiming the apartments were for the exclusive use of club members. Relying on the argument that these were not actually hotel rooms, the motel exists

13 Inciardi, Surratt, and Telles, Sex, Drugs, 30.
14 Carpani, “Primeiro motel.”
and thrives in this loophole, and addressed the conflict between human desire and the societal regulation during the dictatorship.

Since the 1960s, motels have grown into a larger business and considered staples in Brazilian culture and society. The country now has around 5,000 motels, and they continue to grow as more people interested in the industry catch on to its lucrative benefits. Though motels vary from one another in thematic appearances and aesthetics, the core purpose and main traits unite these marginalized spaces as localities that are separate from society, and still define and actually foster its operation. The motel can be understood as a heterotopia, a term created by Michel Foucault to label spaces that are designed to separate certain actions or people from society, created for “individuals whose behavior deviates from the current average or standard.” According to society’s standards, however, many people find themselves in ‘total breach of their traditional time.”

One of the main characteristics of the heterotopia is its geographic distance, which explains why motels are usually situated on the outskirts of the city, accessible only via highway. Their distance from the city center creates “the existence of an analogy between the local geography of motels and the distribution of a discourse on sex in society on a larger scale—both

17 Carpani, "Primeiro motel." The motel industry generates 4 billion reais per year, or approximately $2 million dollars, according to Antônio Carlos Morilha, one of the directors of the Associação Brasileira de Motéis.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
are situated on the periphery, or in other words, they fill in a space that is, at first sight, not that relevant." Nevertheless, in larger cities, such as São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, they cluster together in neighborhoods known for their nightlife. Arquitetura de motéis cariocas explains the reason behind the distant location of motels: In designing the first motel, Fernandes Davila found himself in the geographic and moral periphery. He chose Itaquaquecetuba as the city for his first motel, despite the general lack of support from others, who claimed the remote location would deter business. However, Fernandes Davila attributed the success of his motel to this very reason: “Those who frequented more the hotels in the center of São Paulo were prostitutes. I noticed that there were other types of clients who appeared. They were married couples or people in extramarital relationships.” The motel, though it fostered socially unpermitted relationships, was not limited to those in the moral outskirts. The positive reaction it received implies that its existence was versatile enough for all to take advantage since under the moral standards of Brazil, many people would fall under the deviant category. The location especially benefitted women because “in this period, women were more reserved, and liked to go to places that were farther, where nobody would

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22 Guimaraens and Cavalcanti, Arquitetura, 26. Original: “existência de uma analogia entre o local geográfico onde se situam os motéis e entre aão do discursos sobre o sexo na sociedade mais amplia – ambos situados na periferia, ou seja, preenchendo um espaço de, à primeira vista, não muita relevância.”

23 Information on locations of motels within São Paulo gathered from personal interviews with two natives of São Paulo.

24 Carpani, “Primeiro motel.” Original: “Quem frequentava mais os hotéis do centro de São Paulo eram as prostitutas. Percebi que aqui eram outros tipos de clientes que apareciam. Eram casais de namorados ou pessoas que tinham casos [extraconjugais].”
know them.”

Catering to the need for privacy for both men and women, Fernandes Davila established a fundamental characteristic of motels—that of their distance from the city center. His decision set a precedent for future motels to serve as spaces that ensure confidentiality through their physical organization and their purported function.

Though motels are located away from city centers and the public eye, they are still highly visible to those who use the roads. The motel, after all, must be removed far enough from the general populace, yet still catch the attention of those who seek its services. The façade of the motel connects to the speed of the cars, and demonstrates the strategies that can be used to attract those driving by. Oftentimes, motels display an “exuberant’ style, so that it can be noticed as much as possible, thus attracting clients.”

According to Sílvio Sampaio, a motel constructor that Guimaraens and Cavalcanti cite in their book, “the motel is a construction to be seen by car that is going at least 80 km/hr. For that reason, it needs to be visually strong.” This is reflected in the horizontal lines of the motel’s physical design, which “give a notion of infinity without disturbing the driver,” whereas vertical lines must be sparse in order to keep the focal point of the observer. The horizontal stripes blend the motel with the rest of its surroundings; yet, they also make these spaces salient in one’s vision and visual memory. Furthermore, motels take

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25 Carpani, “Primeiro motel.”
Original: “Também na época as mulheres eram mais reservadas, gostavam de ir a lugares que eram longe, que ninguém as conhecesse.”

26 Guimaraens and Cavalcanti, Arquitetura, 68.
Original: “‘estilo ‘exuberante’, de forma a ser notado o máximo possível, atrair assim clientela.”

27 Ibid. Original: “o motel é uma construção para ser vista de carro, a pelo menos 80 km/h. Dessa maneira, deve ser visualmente forte.”

28 Ibid. Original: “dar noção de infinito sem perturbar o motorista”
advantage of the fact that all buildings in Brazil have their own water supply by painting their water towers red. Situated on their premises, the tall water tower grabs the attention of those driving by since a large vermilion rod is clearly visible even if one were speeding on the freeway. It acts as a visual calling card to those looking for motels, and is eye-catching enough so those who are not looking will remember. The motel fosters illicit activity because people are aware of an option that is constantly on standby with its high visibility and easy accessibility. Noticeable, but not visually jarring, the façade of the motel echoes the ambiguous niche it occupies in Brazilian society: its existence is clearly evident without seeming foreign or dissonant with society. Like sex and other aspects of one’s life apart from the home, their occurrence is indisputable, yet they are a fragmented and disguised part of society.

As physically removed motels are from the larger society, they even impact those who do not enter the motels, which reveals a permeability of the border between sexuality and the home. The motel makes an impression on children with its memorable appearance, and commences their awareness of these structures starting from an early age, not to mention on an equivocal note. When asked about their first memories of motels, many responded that their first contact with motels were on the road during their childhood, not as actual customers. Many of the people interviewed recounted that the first time they asked their parents about motels occurred while they were in the car. Estefano, 23, said his first memory of motels was when he was “6 or 7. I was inside my dad’s car, and I asked him what a motel was and he said it was

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29 See Figure 1 in Appendix.
a hotel where people can bring their cars.” Though the answer from his father is correct, it omits the sexual aspect, or the main purpose, of the motel. João, 24, revealed his parents were more direct, and told him a motel “was a place for travelers to sleep,” but they later clarified “it was a place to have sex.” Some parents have an even more liberal approach and forgo delaying the truth. Tiago, 22, and Sabrina, 19, both said their parents told them the truth when they saw them from the car as children. The difference in explanations reflect the various ways parents may approach sex education, a problem faced by parents the world over. Nevertheless, the motel complicates this topic, but it also has a constructive role in that it initiates children into understanding the importance of discretion in Brazilian society.

Children learn to stop expressing curiosity when met with nondescript responses from parents, which leads them towards exploring this space on their own accord. The convergence of the home space with the motel space increases as motels expand throughout the country. Both Tiago and Joelma, 20, noted that they live “near a lot of motels,” which represents a physical manifestation of the conflict between family life and personal life. The tendency for avoidance does not apply to all of Brazil, as it is a complex society that cannot be generalized. In a northeast Catholic community of Brazil, parents there have a complex interpretation of innocence. Their treatment of children exemplifies the intricacies of Brazilian culture: “rather

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30 Estefano, personal interview, January 1, 2015. Pseudonym used to protect anonymity. All names used from personal interviews are pseudonyms.
31 João, personal interview, December 30, 2014.
32 Sabrina and Tiago, personal interview, January 1, 2015.
33 Tiago, personal interview.
than subscribing to liberal western discourses that speak of a need to cherish innocence and prolong childhood,” the people of Santa Lucia believe “innocence should not be preserved” so children are prepared for “the moral ambiguity of adult life-world.” Their innocence presents a challenge since the children are in a period of rapid change, making them at risk to outside influences. Their customs elucidate the complexity of how children may be perceived on a larger national context, but the larger societal tendency leans towards the nonconfrontational approach in regards to a discourse on sex.

Their practical approach suggests that adults are sympathetic to succumbing to transgression, and the motel functions as a first step towards understanding the effects and inevitability of feeling desire. The motel functions as an overlap among children in their knowledge of sex, and can be viewed as a means to facilitate children into understanding Brazil’s convoluted relationship with sex without active participation from parents, which may lessen the guilt they would feel in deliberately educating their children and defiling their innocence. Rather than view the motel as a premature impetus into initiating these conversations, it can be treated as an important lesson for children to learn—that confidentiality and an absence of query are often best. They learn that not everything that is visible can be discussed, which leads them to construct their own path of deviance and subversion to explore these curiosities on their own.

From the beginning of their relationship with motels to present day, people are met with obstacles in achieving a clear understanding of motel

35 Ibid., 175.
Parents give the younger generation inconsistent answers when asked. And when people become of age, motels become the stalwart presences that obstruct clarification on actual circumstances surrounding them since information stays within the confines of the motels, protecting the reputation of the clients and motels. Because of the confidentiality of the motel space and of the people who go, others can only surmise who frequents them and what occurs within the motel. Purity is maintained by the family’s efforts, but also fortified by the motel, an institution that does not allow information to leave. The versatility and impermeability of the motel enable moral codes to maintain their unforgiving standards and for the space of the house to deflect misuse. By avoiding a redefinition of the purposes of the home, Brazilian society cannot adopt a more liberal climate, or change for that matter.

The structure of motels, designed to enclose misbehavior to maintain the “sacred and immortal wind of the city,” maintains the motel’s self-sufficiency and contribute to high turnover in clientele. Guimaraens and Cavalcanti use the term *alta rotatividade*, or “high rotation,” to characterize the service of “offering the lease of temporary stay for people who need its services,” which establishes a main difference between hotels and motels.

With its emphasis on *alta rotatividade*, motels serve as a prime example of postmodern Brazil with its capitalist motivations and sense of urgent speed. David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* states the prime benefit of

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36 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces.”


Original: “oferecer aluguel de moradia temporária para pessoas que necessitem de seus serviços.”
“accelerating turnover time” is “to circulate commodities through the market system with greater speed.” The commodity in this case is an available and ready motel room, which must be urgently provided upon the arrival of the client at the motel entrance. The woman’s body converts into a commodity to be consumed on the motel premises as well. The transformation of the body into a product occurs in this environment of efficiency and quick turnover, where the speedy process alleviates and justifies the consumption of sex. Because its operations are covert, people can consider it never happened, and further negate their actions by depersonalizing the situation through capitalism.

Motels have since changed to accommodate changes in sexual behavior and new cultural trends, but the basic amenities have not strayed from the first motel started by Fernandes Davila. He was aware of the new features he was adding to the motel rooms that reinforce the differences between motels and hotels. “In that time, there were no bathrooms in hotel rooms, for example, and I had already opened the motel with bathrooms and a garage in all the apartments,” he states. The turnover rate also must be quick, as motels operate at all hours of the day. Many characteristics of its procedures contribute to efficiency and speedy turnover, desired qualities of motels regardless of the client’s schedule. Motels focus on reducing time intervals—motel guests receive the key to the room immediately upon

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39 Ibid.
40 Carpani, "Primeiro motel." Original: “Naquele tempo não havia banheiros nos quartos em hotéis, por exemplo, e eu já abri o motel com banheiros e garage em todos os apartamentos.”
arrival—and they further differ from hotels and the western conception of motels in its room service operation. Guests can ask for room service, but the attendant does not announce him or herself with a knock on the door. Instead, he or she enters “the antechamber of the room, or a ‘boqueta,’ a type of ‘cabinet’ with a door that opens for the room and another that opens up for the service corridor.” This lack of contact further depersonalizes the motel experience, cultivating the intimacy between two people but at the same time, implying the taboo nature of the relationships that occur within the space because the attendant is forbidden to enter.

The quickness that characterizes the turnover rate of motels coupled with the busy schedules that some clients have further emphasizes the modern atmosphere of the motel. In the interview with Rosy Melluci, an architect who works with motels, she said, “The most movement of a motel is during the morning at seven, eight, or eight thirty, and during lunchtime” for motels that are near larger companies, notably in São Paulo near Faria Lima, an avenue similar to Wall Street in New York. Micromanaging sexual activity evokes a Marxist desire to commercialize and convert sex into a labor practice, where even activities that could be considered leisure are programmed into one’s day for the sake of convenience. Just as many people schedule gym time before work, so do those with busy schedules go to a motel before work. This group usually consists of married men between 40 or

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Translation: “na ante-sala do cômodo ou na ‘boqueta’—espécie de ‘armário’ com uma porta que abre para o quarto e outra que dá para o corredor de serviço.”
Their hours of visiting the motel are limited to working hours, whereas “other times are for married couples and at night, it is normally call girls” who visit the motel. Regulated by their schedule beyond the reserved working hours, even those with the least flexibility manage to adjust to postmodern rapidity without interrupting their daily agenda. Their mechanized schedule possesses the same strictness that defines their moral code. Just as virginal purity cannot compromise its strict definition, so must quotidian life maintain its rigid sequence of events, where the time spent in a motel is as regulated as the rest of their day, yet is not accepted as a sanctioned part of the day.

Besides adults and married couples, students also make use of motels, but in ways that are deemed more traditional. Many motels are located near university campuses, such as Motel Copacabana on Avenida do Café. Situated only a few meters away from the Universidade de São Paulo in Ribeirão Preto, this location is convenient for students attending the on-campus parties organized by the university, often attended by more than a thousand students. When there are no parties, however, students and non-students alike make use of the motels every day of the week. João, 24, surmised, “all kinds of people go to motels. I imagine everyone goes there even though I only have contact with people our age.” Estefano had a similar answer: “I think all the ages [visit motels]. All the people that can’t have sex for their own reasons, such as living with their parents or living with other

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 João, personal interview.
students or if they’re cheating.” Not everyone had the impression that all age groups visited motels. Tiago said, “All people go but mostly students and young couples.” Their theories on the motel demographic varied, yet their answers reflect a general obscurity of who actually uses motels, which demonstrates that their lack of clarity of motels since childhood seeps into adulthood. Clara, 49, posited, “The married people go, those in stable relationships and young people. Older people than me don't go because they still have a preconception.” The reality, however, is that though motels are indeed popular among the youth, older people in their 70s and 80s use them as well, and quite frequently as well, according to Melluci. The wide age demographic exhibits that a preoccupation with maintaining the purity of the casa unifies all age groups, reinforcing and perpetuating the moral and social dimension of the house outside of its physical purpose of providing shelter. The discrepancy in knowledge about who exactly visits these institutions demonstrates the confidentiality surrounding these spaces, and also an unwillingness to discuss the topic for the sake of maintaining one’s identity. The purchasing of privacy in some way withholds knowledge, as the business has a responsibility to the customer to safeguard their secrets. The commercialization of the space and body rids one of identity, as the process is confidential from the moment one enters up to when he or she leaves.  

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46 Estefano, personal interview.
47 Tiago, personal interview.
48 Clara, personal interview.
49 Melluci, personal interview.
50 See Figure 6.
Just as hotels offer physical comfort to lodgers during their stay, so do motels, but their version is of moral respite. Clientele need the service of extreme privacy, even if only for a few hours. The transitory use of the motel lessens the gravity of the acts committed within the space. The almost mechanistic operation of the motel contrasts with the intimacy that is permitted to occur, with the ephemerality of the intimacy emphasized by the strict time blocks of the motel. A difference in ambience aside, the main structural difference that defines the motel is the private garage that accompanies all motel rooms. Each motel room comes equipped with a private garage for one car, which differs from the parking lots of motels and motels in the rest of the world. Though motels in Brazil are designed for “encontros ‘amorosos,’” they have also adopted the function as “a place to lodge so that the traveller can rest up and continue his journey”—the western definition of a motel. Despite this second purpose, the word motel still carries sexual connotations as its temporary stays and sexualized themes are designed for amorous encounters. For example, many carry a name or style that is sugestivo. Names of motels oftentimes evoke romance, such as L’Amour, Eros Inn Motel or Venus Motel, or refer to distant locations, such as Bariloche, Casablanca, Miami, and Copacabana. These names transmit a

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51 See Figure 3.
52 Guimaraens and Cavalcanti, Arquitectura, 21.
53 Ibid. Original: “romantic encounters.”
54 Ibid. Original: “local de pouso para que o viajante pudesse ali se refazer e então prosseguir sua jornada”
55 Guimaraens and Cavalcanti, Arquitetura, 63.
56 See Figure 4.
57 Marco, personal interview, January 1, 2015. Bariloche is a city in Argentina often frequented by Brazilians to vacation and go skiing.
theme meant to create an atmosphere more receptive to women, as they are usually the ones invited to the motel. As a result, women and their preferences establish the standards that the motel must meet to secure business. Despite the efforts of the motels, women and men generally do not view the motel as a romantic locale. The purpose of the motel, according to an interview with Henrique, 20, is “not to be romantic. It’s to be different,” especially if “you are in a relationship.” Anita, 20, echoed similar sentiments: a man may go to a motel for his birthday, but “I think for a woman’s birthday, it would [have to] be a romantic place, so it wouldn’t be a motel.”

Though it is likely people use the motel to experiment and deviate from normative behavior, their actions do not climax in a large shift in thought of the general populace towards accepted behavior and sexuality. By going to a motel “to be different,” users magnify the secrecy of their deviance to a degree that their acts and behavior do not concern the larger public sphere and instead pertain to the exclusive microcosm of the motel.

Though the themed aesthetic of the motel is directed towards women, the view of Anita indicates that the intrinsic function of the motel does not promote romance. Rather, the themes and interiors of the motels reflect the mindset of those in charge of designing them, and their projections of what appeals to women. Whatever differences arise within the motel—as radical as they may be—do not serve of much consequence in Brazilian society since these diverges occur within a vacuum. Without clear dialogue between those creating the motels and its female audience, a motel appearance that reflects

58 Guimaraens and Cavalcanti, Arquitetura, 63.
59 Henrique, personal interview, January 1, 2015.
60 Anita, personal interview, December 26, 2014.
the true preference of women is almost impossible to achieve. The motel has the potential to be a space for women to exercise influence or to even serve as a point of discussion on gender. Yet it only gives the illusion that they cater to the tastes of women, when it actually does not promote female representation since the spread of machista culture reaches even to a space that seeks female approval. A male-dominated industry, motels reflect the lack of authority and genuine influence women have on society even though the aesthetic of the motel is designed for the eyes of women.

The second option for naming motels is to go in a direction that appears assexualizáveis, yet it still achieves the objective of connoting a sexual atmosphere through seemingly neutered themes. In Ribeirão Preto, a suburban city in the state of São Paulo, the most expensive and luxurious motel is the Coliseum, a large motel with a fortress-like exterior inspired by citadels. Its unassuming façade contrasts with the decorated themes of the actual motel rooms, mirroring the contrast between the image-driven identity of Brazilian society and the actual nature of society’s inner workings. These types of names, such as Coliseum, Medieval, and Kalifa are linked to “an ancient or medieval history or infantile themes,” evoking the grandeur of fallen empires along with the stateliness and time period associated with it. The cultural and geographical distance of the motel theme from Brazilian culture emphasizes the strangeness of the motel, which strengthens the lure of the motel for women, many of whom expressed their curiosity in these

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61 Melluci, personal interview.
62 See Figure 2.
63 Guimaraens and Cavalcanti, Arquitetura, 64. Original: “à história antiga ou medieval ou temas infantis.”
institutions while growing up. These themes of antiquated times reinforce the inaccessibility of the motel from the rest of the city: upon entering the motel institution, the clients are entering a new institution sealed off against societal standards and the familial wholesomeness of the home. During an interview, one Brazilian student suggested that asexual themes can ease a woman into the motel because of its genderless façade, which diminishes the sexual atmosphere.\(^4\) The foreboding, heavy appearance of the motel also communicates an impenetrable privacy, sealed off both geographically and culturally removed from society.

Whether a client enters by his or herself, with a partner, or in the company of many, he or she values confidentiality and privacy, even though to some degree, much of it is an illusion. After pulling into the drive-in entryway,\(^5\) the client has his first point of encounter with the motel receptionist. It ranges in level of confidentiality: for some motels, the face of the receptionist is clearly visible; while others, usually the costly ones, offer more privacy between the client and receptionist by using a voice box with a blacked out screen. The motel reduces the moments of interaction between the client and the business, which gives the client the illusion of anonymity. The screen is one-way, where the receptionist sees the client but not the other way around in most cases. On the one-way screen, Melluci comments: “Normally, there is a phone next to the person talking, so it is difficult to see whom he or she is talking to. The client feels intimidated when a person looks

\(^4\) Marco, personal interview. March 1, 2015.

\(^5\) See Figure 5.
at him. It makes him uncomfortable." - The comfort of not seeing the receptionist is based in not having to face—and acknowledge—the employee. Illusory anonymity emphasizes the temporary privacy of the clients despite the reality that both parties are aware of the purpose in visiting. Without a mutual visual encounter, the client can enter and go without guilt since being watched gives one the feeling that the culpability is reflected back onto him. Like a confessional in church, the motel reception booth is more welcoming because it gives anonymity to the person with the heavy conscience.

The confidentiality of the motel contrasts with the prominence of the church, where social visibility during and after service motivates attendances. The utmost care is put into one’s appearance and outfit, and conversations may last for more than an hour once service ends. For many, church is a main opportunity for public socializing, where the act of being seen adds value to their time at church. Their intention is not simply to talk with acquaintances, but also to promote an image of purity so that it overshadows and negates the possibility of a secondary, subversive life. Whereas anonymity with the motel receptionist is parallel to that of confession, going to a motel is almost the antithesis of going to church. The former calls for complete privacy, while the latter begs to draw attention from society.

The work Fernandes Davila has put into the motel has helped solidify the motel as an irreplaceable space in Brazil, whose convenience and functionality continue to garner modern appeal to this day. Motels receive

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66 Melluci, personal interview. 
Original: "Normalmente, ha somente um fone através do qual se fala, então dificilmente se vê com quem está falando. O cliente se sente intimidado com uma pessoa olhando para ele. O cliente se incomoda."
such ample business that the receptionist of Copacabana, a motel chain in Ribeirão Preto, said: “To get rich, all I need is the profit of one motel. I would give up my salary for that... [the motel] is always full with lots of movement.” Since I interviewed him during the Christmas holidays, he quipped, “If it’s full on Christmas Eve, you can’t imagine how the regular days are.” The importance society places on the family unit, combined with the influence of the church in a culture fixated on purity, would generally not have motels, let alone ones that are successful even during the season that brings families together in Brazil. Nevertheless, the high turnover rate in motels during the holidays reevaluates the position and influence of the church in the lives of the populace. Or better said, it presents the possibility that people manage to satisfy both family duty and personal desire because the motel negotiates these two realms without significantly subjugating one to the other.

For a business so oft frequented by Brazilians, there is not much discussion on the topic, due to a unanimous desire to respect others’ privacy as well as his or her own. When they are discussed, however, the conversation does not go into the details of the event. For example, Brazilians in their twenties focused more on cleanliness, price, and quality instead of the experience. Rodrigo, 22, offered that the topic is more popular among single men when looking for recommendations to if “one is cheaper... clean, and it doesn’t look dirty. Most motels are very dirty. You talk about the prices but

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67 Doorman of Motel Copacabana, personal interview, January 12 2015.
68 Ibid.
it’s not a common topic.” Henrique, 23, added: "Yeah, [I discuss motels with my friends] when the subject comes up. The subject of motels, not the subject of sex." The occupancy of the motel mentioned by the receptionist of Motel Copacabana should allude to verbal engagement about sex and motels, when in actuality, neither of these two subjects is discussed much. Their bluntness of purpose converts this subject into a service that is likely taken for granted by the general Brazilian public. When I told some Brazilians that the United States does not have motels designed specifically for sex like those Brazil, they reacted in surprise. One woman asked with genuine concern how people have sex at all without motels available. They do not even consider that Brazilian society may operate differently than other places because the motel is so accepted and integral to a society fixated on a clean identity. It is almost as if sex cannot exist without motels, and that by associating sex with a relegated space, it is removed from regular life.

III. The Social and Cultural Context of Motels

The selling point of the motel is that it offers privacy and protection from one’s own moral standards because it is a non-space, where upon entry, one’s virtues cannot be besmirched because the client is not visible to the outside. A non-space is a point of transition, a space of “solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation between the individual and the public

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69 Rodrigo, personal interview, January 1, 2015.
71 Erdem Üngür, “Contradiction and Ambiguity in Non-Place: Non-Place as a Transitional Spatial Concept”: 1. http://www.academia.edu/2061331/Contradiction_and_Ambiguity_in_Non-Place_Non-Place_as_a_Transitional_Spatial_Concept (accessed April 8, 2015).
The home in Brazil, with its limited privacy authoritarian virtue, is almost the antithesis of Marc Augé’s concept of the non-space. Ironically, the home in its adherences to strict morals drives people towards non-spaces. The moral codes apply to all who reside within the house, and upholds the family to the highest standards. As both a non-space and a heterotopia, the motel presents an escape from public authority and family virtues and also a temporary break from their public and home identity. A mother of two, Clara, 49, clarified that “married people go to [motels] to have freedom to do whatever they want because they have kids at home.” Marco, 22, expressed this possibility when he told in an interview that his parents “said they went to go watch a movie, but it’s been five hours. Maybe they went to a motel.” The motel conserves moral cleanliness by pushing activities that would sully the home to a zone of no regulation at the periferia of the city. The purity of the home contrasts with the sinfulness of the body, a concept promulgated by Christian theology. Exalting self-denial and shunning the body, Christianity sees the body as a threat, a “difficult and dangerous phenomenon” that acts as a constant threat to the soul and its goal of freeing itself from the body. The body, because it is viewed as “a vehicle or conduit for the unruly, ungovernable and irrational passions, emotions and desires” has to be

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72 Ibid.
73 Clara, personal interview, January 1, 2015.
74 Marco, personal interview.
controlled, itself a space of deviance. The motel allows the body to fulfill these passions without infecting the ascetic decency of the home.

To the traditional Brazilian, the idea of the house directly denotes família, and any risk of staining or knocking its morality off track would not be taken. The calmness and the tranquility of the lar, or home, contrasts with the rua, or street, which functions as the basis of social life and movement. Though “the house and the street interact and complement each other in a cycle that is fulfilled daily by men and women, the old and the young,” the spheres remain separate. The house is considered a space solely for the family, as those inside are all “members of a family and of a closed group with well-defined frontiers and limits.” Within this sealed area, these people share the same values, or tradições de família, which everyone knows to “guard and preserve.” Within these spaces, conflict is also avoided as to not damage the purity—a virtue associated with fragility—of the house. Similar to the innocence of children, the purity of the home is constantly under the threat of contamination, and family members make every effort to avoid disturbing its delicate state. Just as people worry about strangers and thieves entering their house, Brazilians are concerned with foreign values and morals entering their house. Along with the protection of the house via regulating its “moral inputs and outputs,” there is also an emphasis placed on “the protection of its most

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76 Ibid.
77 Roberto DaMatta, O que faz o brasil, Brasil? (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco Ltda, 1984), 15.
78 Ibid., 16. Original: “A casa e a rua interagem e se complementam num ciclo que é comprido diariamente por homens e mulheres, velhos e crianças.”
79 Ibid. Original: “membros de uma família e de um grupo fechado com fronteiras e limites bem definidos.”
80 Ibid. Original: “resguardar e preservar”
fragile members, such as children, women, and servants,” since the cleanness
of purity is easily defiled by the outside world.

Yet, the dichotomy between casa and rua does not exactly parallel the
relationship between private and public. Though the street is considered as a
public sphere that limits one’s “freedom of sexual expression,” it functions as a
“domain of both individual liberdade, ‘freedom,’ as well as tentação,
‘temptation,’ and perigo, ‘danger.’” It serves as a venue where one may
explore and fulfill desire without the restrictions of the house or “the rigid
control of at least some form of patriarchal authority.” The motel
encapsulates the benefits of a contained space so as to separate other’s
expression of liberdade and tentação from others. As a private space, the first
and foremost responsibility of the house is to serve as “the domain of the
family,” where group-oriented values rooted in family tradition—such as
honor, shame, and respect—take precedence over the opportunity for sexual
pleasure. Because the home is a “space profoundly defined by strong
morals,” the motel offers a type of privacy that the home cannot provide. The
relationship of the street and the house is not directly parallel to the “inside
and outside, between public and private” since these “clear-cut distinctions…
suddenly dissolve, and the structures of daily life are overturned, relativized,

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81 Ibid. Original: “entradas e saídas morais;” “da proteção de seus membros mais
frágeis, como as crianças, as mulheres e seus servidores.”
82 Richard G. Parker, “Bodies and Pleasures: On the Construction of Erotic Meanings
in Contemporary Brazil,” Anthropology & Humanism Quarterly 14 (June 1989): 60.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 DaMatta, O que faz o brasil, 16.
86 Ibid. Original: “um espaço profundamente totalizado numa forte moral.”
and rearranged.™ Though the house is a family space that is distinct from the public atmosphere of the rua, the motel can be seen as a combination of the rua and the casa as it unites the intimacy of the house with the protective privacy of the public sphere.

The confidentiality offered by the public space cultivates sacanagem, a Brazilian concept that illustrates society’s general preference for subversion in lieu of confrontation. Sacanagem is defined as “the act or behavior of sacana,”™ and sacana translates into “that or he who does not have character or acts unethically.”™ The dictionary does not capture the heavy cultural significance of the word; it can signify trickery, or even “friendly ‘teasing,’”™ and it once carried homosexual or sexually deviant connotations. Its adaptable usage aside, sacanagem presents a common locus in all its meanings: it communicates a desire to break “the rules of proper decorum—the rules that ought to control the flow of daily life... it implies at least some form of symbolic rebellion or transgression—overturning the restrictions which govern normal social interaction.”™ A desire for secrecy and subversion can be found in most people, yet the word’s existence in the Brazilian vocabulary reflects the established role—and societal necessity—of transgressive behavior. Along with sacanagem comes the excitement of divergence from norms since it “open[s] up a forbidden world—a world that is at once

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™ Parker, Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions, 102.
™ Ibid.
unknown and dangerous”. The motel creates this forbidden world rife with temptation and where desires can materialize. The motel, a space that is both regulated and prohibited, provides a satisfactory dose of sacanagem without the actual threat of danger present on the streets. Because the street is a space of unpredictability and manifestations of desires, it also becomes a space of unchecked danger and crime. The motel capitalizes on multiple aspects of Brazilian society: it shields one from the strictness of tradition and the danger of others’ misconduct. By converting transgression into a purchasable commodity, the motel makes sacanagem an accessible way of life, and popularizes the subversion of regulated norms without consequences.

The motels can be viewed as essential to the function of Brazilian society in that it allows a controlled outlet of sacanagem and the innate human need to disregard rules. A spatial means of liberating oneself, the motel is coupled with the temporal means of moral freedom—Carnival. The annual “ostensibly Catholic pre-Lenten celebration... indelibly linked with the very essence of Brazil,” Carnival functions as a nationally approved day to manifest sexuality in a public space, which still defends the home from inappropriate behavior and “maintain[s] the inequalities and social hierarchy for the rest of the year.” The purpose of the festival is not only to satiate the sexual impulses of society while disguising them in the revealing costumes of Carnival, it also impacts society on the grander scale of “hierarchy and class” because it releases many from the dura realidade da vida, or “the hard reality of

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92 Ibid., 103.
94 Ibid., 143.
The cathartic release of Carnival suggests a predisposition towards non-confrontation. Rather than alter their lifestyle or work towards improvement, those affected by the *dura realidade da vida* evade larger change and instead rely on Carnival for momentary indulgence of desires.

As Carnival can be seen as a short-lived cathartic explosion, so can the motel be viewed as a more long-term means of escaping reality. Now, the uses of the motel have expanded beyond solely for escape, but also discovery. It reflects not simply a blossoming creativity of clientele, but rather the pivotal role the motel plays in manifesting the desires and interests of the Brazilian people. In the interview with Melluci, she mentioned a woman who requested a larger motel room for the venue of her sex toy showcase:

“Here in Uberaba there was a person who asked me if there is a hotel with a suite of at least 100 square meters so that she could do a lingerie show and of erotic products for women... She would teach how to use them, so it would have to be a friendly environment where they would serve cocktails and have music... The space needed to be large enough to fit as many people as possible.”

Though this showcase uses the motel for a relevant and physical context for the objects, it differs from the typical uses of the motel in that attendants to these events are not preoccupied with their confidentiality. In this case, it is a show and a sex toy business that the motel temporarily houses. The visitors

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96 Melluci, personal interview. Original: “Aqui em Uberaba já teve uma pessoa que veio me perguntar se havia algum motel com uma suite de pelo menos 100m² para ela fazer um desfile de lingerie e de produtos eróticos para senhoras... Ela ia ensinar como se usa, então teria que ser um ambiente agradável, em que se sirva um coquetel, tenha uma musiquinha... O espaço precisava ser grande para caber o máximo de gente possível.”
are brought to the motel in one shuttle since suites are not designed to accommodate more than one car. As they are there to see products and not to experience them, the customers feel no shame in attending and seeing others in the space. Melluci explains that the decision behind the business owner’s venue is that the sex toy business “has everything to do with the motel,” and the ambience of the rooms is already provided and suitable for the show. Yet, despite their supposed lack of shame, the motel still hides the attendants of the pop-up show from more integrated spaces of society that would permit more freedom of movement to and from the motel suite since visitors relied on the shuttle service. Though they see each other, their interactions are contained within the motel, which decreases conflict between traditional values and a modern, liberal mindset because the motel shelters one’s identity from sexual desire. Visitors of the motel, whether they are there with a partner or for a sex toy showcase, arrive with a sexual open-minded attitude, but they abandon this mentality once they depart from the motel.

Motels have expanded to accommodate other types of parties as well, such as bachelor parties or even small get-togethers. Moments that do call for extreme privacy occur when the client is there for sexual encounters with another or even just himself. Melluci informs that:

“there are a lot of men that I see with high purchasing power... and they use erotic products alone. They come and go with no one. They buy all of the products that are sold and available in motels, and then leave. He can’t bring them back home because sometimes he is a married man, but he does not

97 Ibid. Original: “tem tudo a ver com o motel.”
98 Ibid.
want to be married with a woman, and sometimes he is of a certain age—50, 60, or 70. This is common.”

For this demographic, the motel is not a space of intimacy, but rather of discovery. The newfound learnings of one’s sexuality, however, must stay in the motel. The products and commodification of experiences add value to its privacy, and the motel becomes an outlet for those seeking to break away from their public life and discover their latent desires. The added benefit is that they can explore themselves and others sexually without sacrificing the home’s purity in exchange.

Men are in a better position to explore their sexuality within the motel than women, as their knowledge of motels mostly depends on the other gender. When I asked women of their first impressions of motels, almost half expressed their curiosity towards it, but the opportunity to go to a motel is usually made available by a man. Otherwise, a female would not likely have another chance to enter the motel. Vitoria, 23, said she “had this curiosity to know what people do there because they are beautiful on the outside, like hotels… [but] I couldn’t go inside.” The shielding of women is not localized to motels, but also applicable to the larger society. Contemporary Brazilian philosopher Marilena de Souza Chauí brings in Oswaldo Brandão da Silva’s 1938 text *Iniciação sexual-educacional: Leitura reservada* to “illustrate the normatization of sexuality as a form of repression.” highlight Brazil’s cultural climate during that time period, and how it still carries into today.

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99 Ibid.
100 Vitoria, personal interview, January 19, 2015.
The book, subtitled with “reserved reading,” is directed to “boys of value,” or boys who uphold high moral standards. This made clear that girls should maintain their innocence and not read the book so that they could “be initiated into sex only through their husbands.” With its emphasis on the reliance of women on men for knowledge, the gender relations of Brandão da Silva’s text still applies today, evident in the role of motels between women and men.

Just as representations of different cultures are stripped of depth and accuracy in motel themes, so does society deconstruct the woman’s body until it is bereft of a gendered aspect as a means of maintaining purity through desexualization. The public representation of the female body culminates during Carnival, when bodies are shown off in tropical bikinis while dancing in samba competitions. The event is broadcast on national television, but the display of the body continues into the commercial break. The televised commercials during Carnival feature “full female nudity (although the women do wear body paint).” Known as the Globeleza, a Brazilian woman is chosen annually to represent Carnival in an overtly sexual manner that seems to undermine the carnal nature of the commercial. Broadcast on the national television network Rede Globo for all generations to see, the Globeleza each year shares a common characteristic: she is always of mixed race. She represents the miscegenation of Brazil, and portrays the

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104 Ibid., 144.
“sensuous, erotic mulata\textsuperscript{es} of carnival” as the “ultimate sexual fantasy.”\textsuperscript{as} Despite retaliation from minority women in online forums, the media perpetuates the trope of the sexual, dark-skinned woman as a forbidden body to be explored. This phenomenon recalls the adage Marco mentioned in an interview: proibido é mais gostoso,\textsuperscript{or} or “the forbidden tastes better,” which carries sexual overtones and relates to the orientalist and machista perspective that is responsible for exotifying the dark minorities of Brazil in a culturally sanctioned way. Transforming the Globeleza and the other dancers into a representation of Carnival, Brazilian culture commercializes the body by making it available to the public, and pulling away its sexuality.

Many find troublesome the publicized exaltation of the Globeleza since it recalls a colonial mindset and affirms another Brazilian refrain: “there is no sin south of the Equator.”\textsuperscript{as} Carnival honors the gaze of a “male-dominated society” under the guise of crowning a talented dancer. Sexuality in Brazil reveals itself in two ways. Sex can occur in the confidential realm of the motel, where none may know of it. The second option is for sex to be paraded for all to see, so that it is not showcasing sexuality but simply a woman’s body stripped of its erotic significance. Carnival, as a day of exemption from moral standards, permits displays of sexuality, but bodies still wear a mask of

\textsuperscript{as} The racial term mulata in Brazil has less negative connotations than in the western world in that it can still be found in speech, but is not commonly heard. For example, the lead female singer Ully Costa of the Brazilian band Sandália de Prata once asked an audience in Brazil if any woman in the crowd has ever fantasized about having a strong mulato for a boyfriend. There is growing criticism towards the word for its historical connection to slavery and Portuguese imperialism towards the indigenous population,

\textsuperscript{as} Eakin, Brazil, 144.

\textsuperscript{or} Marco, personal interview.

\textsuperscript{as} Eakin, Brazil, 136.
nongender. Traditionally a celebration that marks “the giving up of meat for Lent,” the event converts the bodies into a last day to enjoy meat before Lent. There are no ambiguous expressions of sexuality—it is either confidential or public—which, ironically, leads to an unpronounced representation of sexuality and Brazilian ideals of purity and family. The explicitness of sexuality is weaved within the cultural fabric as a way to avoid the topic. By flaunting sexuality in plain sight during Carnival—much as the motel does on a regular basis—society commodifies the intimacy of sexuality to neuter sexuality.

IV. Conclusion

As Marshall C. Eakin in Brazil: The Once and Future Country states, “the ambiguities and contradictions in sexual relations are striking.” On the one hand, Brazilian culture exalts purity and morality to a point where these strict values freeze until rigid with no room for negotiation. On the other hand, the culture understands and approves human inclination towards misbehavior, or sacanagem. The motel takes the country’s approval one step further by encouraging transgression by offering a safe and confidential space to deviate from norms and break from the strictness of ideal values. The niche of the motel is fundamental for Brazilian society because it negotiates between these two opposing sides of the culture and offers a solution that also steers society towards turning a blind eye to blatant conflicts. Despite the culture’s overall unfounded belief that the social situation sustains traditional Catholic values,


110 Eakin, Brazil, 138.
there is underlying evidence that the younger generation has progressive ideals among.

In an online forum of almost 18,000 students from the Universidade Federal de São Carlos, fellow classmates discuss and raise topics that range from sexual health to police brutality to government corruption. The forum participants, in an attempt to share knowledge of current events and publicize politicized or gendered issues, communicate a general desire for change among young educated Brazilians and a departure from a culture known to tolerate misbehavior and suppress confrontation. Nevertheless, “certain values and attitudes show a surprising strong resistance to change” and are “rigidly maintained.” The motel intervenes to help the larger populace relieve its frustration with the strictness of their moral code. This creates a culture of self-exemption from moral strictures and a laxity in adherence. Protected by confidentiality and excited by secrecy, those who go to motels liberate themselves from virtue while keeping their identity and family sphere clean. They are consoled by the process of commodification, which negates the guilt they may feel during the consumption of the female body while aware of the moral imperatives of society.

With the motel so readily available, the general public has no need to look for solutions on how to mediate the attraction of subversion and the pull to stay loyal towards culturally esteemed values. The motel takes advantage

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111 The Universidade Federal de São Carlos is a prestigious public research-oriented university located in the state of São Paulo.
of the opposition concerning these contrasting spheres before conflict can arise, and places enough space between them so society can remain secure, albeit comforted by the illusion of immaculacy. When motels lose their attraction of being different or when future generations no longer feel the same motivation to maintain purity as past generations, disagreement may arise as rival entities and render the motel obsolete. In the mean time, however, motels satisfy the ambitions of Brazilians to act according to their desires and follow tradition without having to come to terms with the contradictions of their country. As a result, they can continue their lives in a state of respectability and virtue, sprinkled with the occasional visit to motels.
Appendix

Figure 1: The large red water tower is visible to those on the road.

Figure 2: The Coliseum Motel of Ribeirão Preto.

Figure 3: Each motel is equipped with an individual garage.
Figure 4: The name A2, refers to a *dois*, or “for two,” the answer a couple would give when they ask for a table at a restaurant.

Figure 5: The entrance to the motel, and the receptionist to the left.

Figure 6: The entrance and the exit of the motel are adjacent.
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