

Gay Indians in Brazil

Estevão Rafael Fernandes • Barbara M. Arisi

Gay Indians in Brazil

Untold Stories of the Colonization
of Indigenous Sexualities

 Springer

Estevão Rafael Fernandes
Departamento de Ciências Sociais
Universidade Federal de Rondônia
Porto Velho, Rondônia, Brazil

Barbara M. Arisi
Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinar em Estudos
Latino-Americanos
Universidade Federal da Integração
Latino-Americana
Foz do Iguaçu, Paraná, Brazil
Department of Social and Cultural
Anthropology
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Foreword

Why address gay Indians in Brazil? Or, more broadly, why focus on Native peoples' sexuality in particular? One could offer an ethnographic consideration of Indigenous modes of desire and eroticism, developing a comparative discussion of how they do and do not fit non-native patterns of social life. In a different vein, one could focus on how experiences of gayness among Brazilian Indians indicate their cosmopolitanism, the ways they participate in contemporary formations of sexual life and identity with non-natives as part of their integration into national and international cultural circuits. While the first kind of project might seek to locate and specify Indian difference, the second would seek to illustrate how the increasing assimilation of Native people(s) suspends or transcends such supposed difference. However, in *Gay Indians in Brazil*, Estevão R. Fernandes and Barbara M. Arisi refuse these options, challenging the idea that Indigenous peoples self-evidently serve as the object of scholarly investigation rather than focusing on the colonial conditions to which such peoples continue to be subjected. They begin by inquiring, "what can we learn not *about* natives' sexualities, but *from* the colonial history of sexualities?" This rhetorical and conceptual maneuver condenses their immensely important intervention into ways of engaging Native peoples and histories in Brazil. Instead of seeking to explain Native sexualities by comparing and contrasting them to those of Euro-Americans, Fernandes and Arisi highlight the ongoing colonial frameworks and processes through which non-natives come to inspect, analyze, surveil, name, regulate, and discipline Native sexualities in the first place.

This book neither makes a bid for liberal inclusion for gay Indians nor does it seek to chastise Native peoples for not being properly tolerant. The aim lies less in arguing for acceptance of a given category of persons that can be described as "gay Indians" than in surveying the colonial histories that shape how Native forms of desire, gender, home, and family get assessed, catalogued, and judged, including sometimes by other Native people. While noting that homosexuality often can be seen by other Native people as a European import, and thus as evidence of the loss of Indigenous distinctiveness or cultural knowledge and belonging, the book shifts attention from gayness to modes of settler colonial heteronormativity. If issues with respect to sexuality tend to be treated by Indigenous movements in Brazil as

“individual demands” having to do simply with isolated personal proclivities, as Fernandes and Arisi suggest, *Gay Indians in Brazil* offers a crucial theoretical reorientation by tracking how portrayals of Native embodiment and intimate relations have been central in non-native efforts to manage Indigenous lands and labor and in validating settlers’ authority to do so. While denying the idea that homoeroticism did not exist among Native peoples prior to Euro-contact, Fernandes and Arisi understand the denial of such erotic possibilities among Native peoples as a legacy of the ways heteronormativity has helped structure and legitimize colonial invasion, displacement, and superintendence.

In contrast to the naturalization of existing sexual identities as simply part of human history (the idea that certain people simply are “born this way”), Fernandes and Arisi situate extant ways of comprehending desire and eroticism within histories of Iberian colonialism and post-independence national efforts to define Native peoples in terms of Eurocentric modes of personhood, family, and social life. Indigenous communities were cast as aberrant and in need of European tutelage and/or discipline, as vicious savages, or as backward-yet-assimilable subjects. As they argue, “the settlement process is, at its core, a compulsory heterosexualization process,” and they address the ways that what we currently tend to characterize as “sexuality” comprises a number of areas of social life, including marriage, kinship networks, homemaking, property ownership, and gendered labor that historically have been soldered together through shifting institutional and ideological processes. The book provides a compelling and necessary genealogy of how some of these areas become fused to each other over the *longue durée* of colonial occupation in the Americas. From this perspective, current attempts to decry Indian perversity, including intra-Indian forms of homophobia, can be traced to longstanding practices of casting all Indians as unnatural and, therefore, in need of training, subordination, and subjugation. Fernandes and Arisi illustrate how the range of acts loosely clustered under the term “sodomy” came to be linked to disobedience to God, the disruption of political unity under the divinely ordained will of the King, and the disordering of nature itself (including through cannibalism), and this syllogistic slide among, in their terms, conceptions of “nature, sex, sodomy, and hierarchy” allows the various terms to come to stand in for each other. Charges of “sodomy,” then, functioned as something of a condensation through which to figure Native polygamy, nudity, lust, reputed incest, and other forms of supposed excess in which Native bodies were understood as reflecting a “corrupt nature.”

More than demonstrating the emergence of this assemblage of meanings and cross-references in early-modern Europe and European colonialisms, the book shows how these ecclesiastical discourses are translated into secular ones as part of projects for seizing and controlling Indigenous lands and labor. Over the course of the eighteenth century, a transition occurred from invocations of divine rule and punishment to the assessment of Indigenous peoples’ relative “civilization” (such as in charges of Native “indecentcy” and “filth”), giving rise to legal efforts to modify Native patterns of inhabitation, family formation, and everyday practice. By the late nineteenth century, a more “scientific” framework arises in terms of understanding Native peoples as a racialized population whose erotic and domestic practices need

to be managed in the service of promoting more regularized structures of labor that also are gendered in ways consistent with Euro-American norms. Over the course of the twentieth century, the Brazilian state extended its control over Native peoples, including through the creation of the Indian Protection Service, as part of an initially eugenic and then developmentalist, even multicultural, attempt to justify further expansion into Indigenous territories and to proletarianize Native people(s) in networks of agricultural labor. Under the aegis of bringing “health” and “hygiene,” the state interpellates Indigenous polities into Euro-American political and economic systems, drawing on discourses of sexuality to stage intervention and invasion as the gift of modernization that will enable Native peoples better to participate in the benefits of contemporary life.

Fernandes and Arisi quite powerfully outline the history of institutionalized efforts to dominate and regulate Indigenous peoples in Brazil through the employment of discourses of sexuality, and in doing so, they engage in the immensely important intellectual work of clearing conceptual space in order to think the *politics* of Indigenous gender and sexual identities. Attending to such topics provides crucial information about how the colonization of Native peoples operates—how it is validated as normal and given—while also suggesting that part of the work of decolonization lies in challenging inherited and imposed Euro-American notions of who Native people(s) are and should be. Contemporary nationalist discourses and projects of integration/assimilation continue the colonial legacy of assessing Indigenous peoples and their social formations through Euro-American standards of normality, in which Natives appear deficient, deviant, and regressive and, therefore, in need of Euro-American aid to be brought to God or civilization or health and well-being—as these colonial tropes change over time. While sexuality may not often be thought of as an important element of Indigenous self-determination, Fernandes and Arisi forcefully and effectively illustrate how challenging received ideas about gender and sexual identity can open onto broader analyses and critique of dominant conceptions of Indian backwardness and perversity. Rather than reiterating non-native assumptions about what is normal, they show how tracing the role of discourses of sexuality in the history of colonization can make room for Indigenous articulations of identity that refuse the supposedly civilizing terms that have been imposed over hundreds of years. Instead of asserting that Indians are normal within a Euro-American framework, *Gay Indians of Brazil* insists that Native peoples can reject colonial conceptions of naturalness and normality in favor of embracing their own visions of their desires and destinies.

University of North Carolina at Greensboro
United States of America

Mark Rifkin

Acknowledgements



The above engraving was done by Theodor de Bry in 1594 as part of his *Les Grands Voyages*; it represents the description by Pietro Martire d'Anguiera in *De orbe novo* about how Vasco Núñez de Balboa, a Spanish nobleman and *conquistador* of Panama, threw the brother of the chief of Quaraca and forty of his companions to the dogs—thereby killing them—because they were dressed as women.

In light of this, and many other atrocities suffered by the natives whose sexualities did not (and do not) fit the hegemonic model, this book is dedicated to them, their history, and their struggle. If monuments and tributes have been made to Balboa, let this book be a monument to the martyrdom of Quaraca.

In the effort to write a book that represents a counter-hegemonic narrative, the authors thank Ana Luiza Pinhal, Bruno Fiuza, Crithian Teófilo da Silva, Emílio del Valle Escalante, Walter Mignolo, Mark Rifkin, Roy Gigengack, Helena Maisonnave and Victoria Marina Koopman. Without their support and inspiration, this book could not have been written.

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