

**Betina Botox and Lobixomen “Tão Engraçados!”**  
**Queer Brazilian Televisual Representations Shaping Spatial (Im)possibilities in Newark**

**Yamil Avivi García**  
**University of Michigan**

**ABSTRACT:** This ethnographic essay examines the ways two “tão engraçados” [very humorous] televisual Brazilian queer representations—those of Betina Botox (a questionably-middle-class gay male from São Paulo) and Lobixomen (a heterosexual man who turns into a wolf in drag under a full moon)—impacted queer Brazilian informants who lived in the Ironbound, a renowned lusophone immigrant neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. These representations influenced queers’ enactment of or resistance to norms of “good ethnicity.” Ultimately, I show the ways these representations are symbolic of either LGBTQ+ publics at the center or Latinx counterpublics at the fringe within this exceptional neighborhood.

**Key words:** non-heteronormativity, homonormativity, (counter)publics, queer worldmaking, good ethnicity

Brazilians often find themselves in a liminal position regarding whether or not they identify as Latino, a question that was recently explored by an August 2016 NPR radio program with Maria Hinojosa entitled, “Are Brazilian Americans Latino?” This grey area is reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s (2003) examination of how the cultural identities of immigrants or diasporic subjects are not static (even while policed by sending and receiving states) but always changing relative to hegemony or homogenizing global projects of race and sexuality. What does this in-betweenness among Brazilians in Newark, New Jersey, an African American and Puerto Rican majority city, suggest about the ways in which they identify or not with social and political agendas of African American and Latino minority groups, especially when given the historic white and black racial boundaries of the city? Within Newark, Brazilians have resided in one of the historically immigrant white neighborhoods, known as the Ironbound, that remained immigrant-based even after the white flight of the city riots in 1967. However, the geographically whitened positioning of Ironbound Brazilians essentializes the ways these

immigrants may also relate to or reach connectivity with the city's minorities outside and within the neighborhood.

Specifically, this essay examines the moments in which queer Brazilian immigrant men I have come to know, who live in the Ironbound, show some form of identification or not with queer African American and non-lusophone Latino gays within and outside of the Ironbound. This is to say that this in-between positioning in which queer Brazilians may find themselves puts them potentially in multiple positionings that identify with several communities at different moments, across race and/or ethnicity, and that are also tied deeply with sexuality, as my queer interlocutors will show. In light of my ethnographic research and interviews of documented and undocumented Brazilian immigrants in the Ironbound, I want to examine moments when my interviewees participated in more homogeneously Brazilian or mixed Latino social circles and what that says about their subjectivity.

Queer Brazilians, according to my ethnographic research, navigated and/or enjoyed different nightlife scenes in Newark that were either Brazilian or Latinx spaces. By "Brazilian scenes," I am referring to ethnic-centered and largely or all Brazilian geographically central venues of the Ironbound. These scenes often reified a U.S. dominant white, global, and consumer-driven LGBTQ+ community depoliticized around race – see Aponte-Pares 2001, Mananlansan 1997, Hames-Garcia 2011, and La Fountain-Stokes 2011. In contrast, Latinx scenes at the fringe of the Ironbound had a significant or majority Latino presence across ethnic, racial, class, pan-sexual or gender diverse groupings within Newark's Ironbound neighborhood and its emerging local gay nightlife. Nonetheless, the participants I engaged and interviewed engaged both social boundaries, or a queer lifeworld or worldmaking (of a more fluid and tolerant world of different multipositionalities in spaces and scenes) (Buckland 2002) that portray a more nuanced understanding of their queer immigrant lives in Newark. These possibilities articulate the ambiguity of their Brazilian queer racial and sexual subjectivity at the center and fringe of Ironbound's dominant heteronormative publics. Yet, these multiplicities of racial and cultural identification did not come without state racial and sexual policing.

I use two Brazilian transnational televisual representations I observed in my ethnographic fieldwork, Betina Botox and Lobixomen, to examine both Brazilians' idiosyncrasy relative to other local queer minority groups and their symbolic power over my participants to assimilate or not among whitened immigrants in a black majority non-heteronormative city. Betina Botox ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_r3OyI3t6KA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_r3OyI3t6KA)) is a white-skinned and eccentrically gay and self-perceived "in" nightlife clubber in São Paulo, Brazil. Lobixomen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tPUivesH3c>) is a publicly identified heterosexual male who turns into a darker and effeminized dragged wolf with a homosexual orientation. I argue that Betina Botox inspires among my participants an affinity with LGBTQ+ identity at the center of Ironbound life by adhering to mainstream ethnicity and citizenship whereas Lobixomen's racially brown and night-oriented characterization encourages a Latinx subjectivity at the fringes of the neighborhood and the approximation with non-whites across gender and sexual transgressions that form unpredictable and uncontrollable groupings of non-heteronormativity.

### **Living Brazilian and Queer in Newark's Ironbound: A Historic White Immigrant Neighborhood in New Jersey's Black Majority City**

The Ironbound neighborhood has historically been one of Newark, New Jersey's immigrant neighborhoods and a symbol of the city's industry, vitality, and progress. Since the

1900's, this neighborhood has experienced waves of ethnic successions of different immigrants and their families that included the Portuguese, Spanish and Cubans. Until Newark's civil riots in 1967 and eventual white flight, the Ironbound had been marked as one of Newark's remaining white neighborhoods. By the 1970s, the Portuguese had defined the dominant culture of the neighborhood. Brazilians, Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Central Americans would arrive later. It was predominantly the Portuguese and Spanish food and fish markets, cafes, renown family and world-class restaurants, and retail European/Portuguese clothing, shoe, and jewelry stores that attracted white collar tourists from outside of Newark to venture into this "safe" ethnic neighborhood to enjoy Portuguese and Spanish food and culture particularly prior to the city's beautification in the early 2000s. In a *New York Times* article, Cole (1987) documents how artists found in the Ironbound "close-knit communities of Portuguese and Spanish origins...[that are] thriving and stable" compared with the rest of [black and Puerto Rican majority] Newark and therefore moved in (401). In effect, the whiteness of this neighborhood represented a haven of safety compared to the rest of "violence-ridden" black Newark.

Prior to the arrival of the Brazilian immigrant community in the Ironbound in the 1980s, the longstanding Portuguese immigrant community of the neighborhood had achieved honorary distinction as good citizens of Newark, making them a model for Brazilians and other racial and ethnic minorities to aspire to within Newark's neoliberal context, a context in which "good" ethnic groups contributed to the health of America's civic life and economy. In *Performing Folklore: Ranchos Folclóricos from Lisbon to Newark* (2005), Kimberly Da Costa-Holton refers to how Newark's mayor, Sharpe James, addressed in a keynote speech that the Portuguese Ironbound neighborhood and its people were "often singled out" for having the neoliberal qualities that brought "rebirth" and "growth" to Newark. As she further explains, the mayor applauded good ethnic contributions—masking the white and black racial tensions within the city—to highlight the Portuguese's impact on the city's tourism industry, "boasting low crime rates, carefully maintained residential buildings, and a booming commercial district replete with ethnic restaurants and shops [of] Ironbound's 'Little Portugal'" (2005, 178). In effect, Mayor James distinguished the Portuguese in Newark as having a good ethnic character and culture that were marketable and perpetuated a neoliberal ideology of good ethnicity, good citizenship, heteronormativity and economic development.

For the city as a whole, the Ironbound has often been perceived as anomalous compared to the rest of Newark, which perpetuates binaries and social and racial boundaries where commonalities and grey areas actually exist, especially with regard to race and sexuality. Several historical monographs about pre- and post-Civil Riots Newark focus on the racial and social inequalities of African Americans and Puerto Ricans that define the city's dominant narrative of black politics and power (Curvin 2014; Tuttle 2009; Gillespie 2013). However, there is a distancing, or what Kevin Mumford (2008) calls "a lack of shared values [or relationality] with whites" in light of "gained" black power and empowerment (6). In the case of Ironbound Portuguese and Brazilians, such a disconnect maintains them as a homogeneously white outlier relative to the rest of black and Puerto Rican majority Newark, eliding their contradictions of race, gender and sexual non-heteronormativity that also genuinely tie them with these past and current black movements of equality, justice and democracy. One example is Mayor Cory Booker's Administration's pro-LGBTQ+ stance to empower this community against the hostility and violence it faced socially, in schools, and in the workplace. This administration's pro-LGBTQ+ initiative<sup>i</sup> founded Gay Pride Week (in 2006), an LGBTQ Advisory Board (in 2009), and a city queer oral history project at Rutgers University, which were responses to the long-term

struggles of Newark's African American and Puerto Rican LGBTQ+ community to achieve dignity, inclusion, and protection within the city in light of the deaths of Newarkers like Sakia Gunn, Shani Baraka (sister to Newark's current mayor, Ras Baraka) and Rayshon Holmes.<sup>ii</sup> However, my ethnographic research finds that my queer Brazilian participants and Portuguese queers are peripheral to these pro-LGBTQ+ developments of the city, given the steep racial and social boundaries between the Ironbound and the rest of Newark.

On a broader level, Brazilians have similarly been depicted as exceptional in Newark's neoliberal economic development but have met resistance. Brazilians were not equally cast in the celebratory way that the Portuguese were; they have met with resistance to their racialized body language and sexual overtones of cultural difference from the "conservative old world" Portuguese, as detailed in Mary Jo Paterson's 2000 *New York Times* article, "Cultures Collide in Ironbound," despite their commonality as lusophone ethnic groups. In effect, this article demonstrates how Newark Brazilians have had to work harder and queer Brazilians harder still to belong in the neighborhood by taming their non-heteronormative (racialized and sexualized) body and spoken language in public (Avivi 2015) for those who would perceive them as differing from the standards of heteronormativity and model minority status of the Portuguese and Spanish in this exceptional neighborhood. In *Street Therapists: Race, Affect, and Neoliberal Personhood in Latino Newark* (2012), Ana Ramos-Zayas offers an ethnographic account of the ways Brazilian and other Latino immigrants in the Ironbound demonstrate an affect that reflects good neoliberal personhood (good ethnicity, self-sufficiency, industriousness, progression, individualism, progression, and middle class tastes) and positively impacts the development projects of the city.

In light of "good ethnicity," I show how my queer participants identify or not—through their actions—with a neoliberal ideology of "good Brazilianness" and heteronormativity by examining their reactions to transnational Brazilian televisual representations of queerness as embodied in Betina Botox and Lobixomen that situate, address or police publics and counterpublics (Quiroga 2000, Munoz 1999, Rodriguez 2003, Warner 2002). Specifically, these representations are based on a homonormative ideology (Luibheid 2008 and Puar 2007) under U.S.-first world global neoliberal practices that invite certain queers to become model minorities and citizens in defense of nation-building or homonationalism (Puar 2007) and global enterprises like the LGBTQ+ market. Like heteronormative subjects, these homonormative subjects are a class of white(ned), individualist, consumer-driven, depoliticized, financially sufficient, commodifiable, and family-oriented gays and queers who further U.S. nation-building through assimilation, individual success, and patriotism in an increasingly competitive global economy in which citizens and immigrants must fend for themselves in the context of growing state privatization and declining provision of social welfare. Their aspirations to homonormativity relate to how these queers identify with a U.S. and global LGBTQ+ community model that reifies whiteness, assimilation, depoliticization of race, and individual market-style success (i.e. in a gay niche market). On the other hand, they also indulge in moments of Latinx groupings or unpredictable possibilities and (moments of) relationalities with brown, black, and gender-variant subjects within the policed and exceptional neighborhood of the Ironbound.

### **My Interviewees through the Ethnographic I: Carlos, Nelson, and Other Queer Brazilians**

Between 2004-2009, I was an active member of a local Lutheran church, which had a non-English/Portuguese speaking congregation of predominantly Brazilian immigrants along

with a small but growing number of Central American and Ecuadorian immigrants. Eventually, I organized a circle that formally brought queer Brazilians and non-Brazilian Latinas/os together within the church, mainly to initiate a group that would inform undocumented immigrants about their rights. In the process of meeting Brazilians at church, I became connected with several undocumented Brazilian men like Carlos and Nelson who I feature in the rest of this essay. The queer men I engaged who knew through me or others of my queer sexual orientation either identified as gay or did not specify their sexual identity/subjectivity but had sex with men. Like Carlos, many were from the smaller towns of Minas Gerais such as Governador Valadares and Ipatinga. Nelson was from Vitória and had lived in Governador Valadares for a couple of years. About half of my interlocutors were undocumented and were between the ages of 25-35 and 45-55. Carlos was in his mid twenties while Nelson was in his mid 50's. My ability to speak and understand Brazilian Portuguese helped me connect more easily with several informants.

Several of these men gave me the opportunity to be a part of their social circles and participate in their outings in the neighborhood and in the nightlife in Newark, throughout New Jersey, and in New York City. My ethnographic fieldwork is based on these social engagements in public and private spaces. I witnessed many of them develop casual or intimate friendships and relationships with Brazilian and non-Brazilian (mostly Latino and white) men through friends' home parties, online gay dating sites, or at gay bars and clubs. In the Ironbound, we went out to gay nights at Guitar Bar and Brasilia Grill, and karaoke nights at Riverbank Café, a gay-friendly bar. During 2007, I compiled recorded interviews of gay-identified and discreet men who had lived in the Ironbound for at least two years. Among the 15 men I engaged for two to three years in the Ironbound, I interviewed six, including Carlos and Nelson; two additional men I interviewed were friends of friends. The interview form was semi-structured, informal and lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours.

My engagement and relationships with my interviewees were impacted by certain privileges. I was a university student and worked in office jobs. Many of my interviewees worked in labor-intensive informal service industry, construction, and domestic cleaning jobs. Both Carlos and Nelson worked independently cleaning apartments in New York City. Many informants preferred to speak English with me as a native and educated speaker over Portuguese because they were ambitious to learn standard English, which greatly improved their chances of moving up the social and economic ladder. Aside from these advantages, my immigrant background and brown-skin Latinx and Colombian-American identity contrasted with the backgrounds of their white friends from middle- to upper-middle-class white suburbs who they met online, at clubs, or through other friends, and suggested that I was in a less privileged position than they were.

Aside from the urge to learn English, my participants also developed linguistic and cultural familiarity and identification among hispanophone speaking queers, which in fact, I am. I noticed that my Brazilian queer participants often articulated either Portuguese or Spanish, for example, in phrases from Latin pop songs, foods, slang and sexual innuendo phrases of their engagement with Latino friends, who often recognized how the language and culture can be very similar, as was pointed out in Maria Hinojosa's NPR program noted earlier. I remember how a Brazilian queer caught onto speaking Spanish with his Colombian partner and grew fond of Colombian popular food and culture. I often went out with my participants to eat, for example, Brazilian pão de queijo [cheese bread] and almost always acknowledged the similarity to Colombian pandebono. These everyday and seemingly insignificant moments of language and cultural exchange showed both a panethnic convivencia [coexistence or cohabitation] (Ricourt

and Danta 2003) among lusophone and hispanophone queer immigrants as well as local transcultural identity and language, similar to the ways gay second-generation Cuban Americans developed a hybridized gay Miami language and culture. This local transculturation decentered dominant Anglo-white gay global culture and local racial and social boundaries, as Susana Peña describes in her essay “Pajeration and Transculturation: Language and Meaning in Miami’s Cuban American Gay Worlds.” In Newark, local queer transcultural identity and language among luso- and hispanophones offers the possibility of Latinx relationality outside (the static notions of) the Ironbound that pushes the dominant white versus black Newark narrative to grey zones of connectivity among ethnic and racial(ized) subjects.

Class markers relating to consumption, however, tie with ethnic and racial markers and boundaries. My interviewees found me too anti-consumerist and too overly critical of the gay white mainstream scene. Many of them expected that I should have a better car, an iPhone, property, and designer clothing given my privileged status. Carlos and his friends were very much into these consumer items and enjoyed flaunting them after a long day of physical work; physically fit and attractive, they looked like light-skinned Ambercrombie & Fitch pinup boys. Such consumer purchasing and assuming of self-mobility represents a dynamic similar to that described in Ulla Berg’s study on Andean Peruvians, *Mobile Selves: Race, Migration and Belonging in Peru and the U.S.* (2015), in which Berg demonstrates that “the quest for transnational migration is much more than just an economic project. It is a cultural and class aspiration, and a demand for citizenship status and belonging...at the very center of the always unfinished process of social becoming” (5). Like the non-elite and racialized Andean Peruvians in Berg’s study who were viewed statically as “cholos”<sup>iii</sup> in U.S.-Peruvian transnational circuits and who came from peripheral geographical areas of the country, the majority of my participants also migrated from smaller cities in Minas Gerais, which typified them as less sophisticated or “less than” white elite Brazilians from major cities like Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, and São Paulo. Berg (2015) shows how indigenous Andean Peruvians perform cultural and class aspirations through their ability to purchase clothes and gain privileges in the U.S. that represent upward mobility and incorporation within their transnational circuits of U.S. and Brazil. Being influenced by Carlos’ taste in high-end clothing brands like Diesel and Armani, which also blended well with gay-niche trendy wear, Nelson bought much less and more conservatively given his older age. Nelson found that Carlos was sometimes slightly too feminine for his taste; Berg (2015) also found that even while having “money” to obtain certain status-markers like high end clothing or technological products, the “lacks or excesses” of non-elite or out of center origins maintained indigenous Peruvians as inauthentic from the perspective of “elite [hetero- and homonormative] social spaces and symbolic capital” (9). Yet, Carlos and Nelson’s ability to purchase these items in the U.S., which they could not as easily do in Brazil, was a personal marker of achievement as well as a sign of becoming more incorporated in the U.S. and in a gay white and consumer-driven mainstream scene.

### **Transnational Queer Televisual Images “Tão Engraçados<sup>iv</sup>”: Race, Sexuality, Public Policing and Counterpublic (Im)possibility**

In this section, I will offer in-depth description of both Betina Botox and Lobixomen and two specific ways they had impacts on queers like Carlos and Nelson. One way is that Betina Botox, as a hegemonic representation, policed Brazilian queers to reify ideological values or what Molina Guzman (2010) terms “symbolic colonization,” which in this case involves

homonormativity in a (global) LGBTQ+ market and community. The second is that Lobixomen fostered what Molina Guzman terms “symbolic ruptures,” or the challenging of dominant ideology, in a way that encouraged queers to forge seemingly impossible counterpublics and engagements of an anti-state Latinx identity, especially when associated with Latinx gay or queer spaces. Both of these televisual queer representations inspire symbolic ruptures and colonizations in my participants that maintain them in liminal positions between state containment and self-determination with regard to state projects of race, gender and sexuality.

### **Betina Botox**

During the summer of 2007, Nelson invited Carlos and me over to watch Terca Insana’s “Betina Botox,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3OyI3t6KA>) a parody and monologue of a flamboyant and eccentric gym bunny in São Paulo of aspiring middle class origins that aired on Brazilian national television and reached Brazilians living in the Ironbound, including my participants. Nelson also found clips of Betina Botox on youtube, which he and his friends could play whenever they wanted instead of having to catch it on television or video. Nelson and his friends would repeat Betina Botox’s eccentric lines from her script.

Betina Botox declares herself to be “super moderna e praticamente clubber” [“a super modern girl and practically a clubber”], which suggests to “her” audience “her” sense of mobility and belonging in the “in-crowd” of São Paulo’s gay club scenes. However, Betina is actually what Benedicto 2008 and Manalansan 2003 call a “bakla,” or a premodern queer subject or contradiction outside modern first world globalization LGBTQ+ projects, which include the building of gay first world/U.S. Westernized markets of depoliticization and consumption in the third world and the diaspora (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 2002). Betina Botox is a parody of sexuality and gender in São Paulo’s globalized LGBT niche market and club scenes, similar to the bakla Benedicto (2008) describes within the globalizations of Manila’s gay scene. Unlike Betina Botox and the bakla, who are overly effeminate and assumedly play the receptive, bottom role in having sex with other men, Cantu Jr. (2009) and Decena (2011) note that in a global market Latino queer men become less constricted to top or bottom roles, which makes them more modernized. In effect, this versatility discourages a passive and bottom role persona and encourages traditional masculinity among men that is grounded in middle to consumer class homonormativity. Further, Benedicto (2008) posits how the bakla, which was once the main marker of local queer identity in Manila, becomes an “interruption” or “specter” of Manila’s transformation into a mainstream white and globalized LGBTQ market that flattens or homogenizes identity to reify heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Benedicto (2008) proposes that the bakla in Manila is now a marginal subject; the bakla and Betina Botox serve as reference points for others who aspire to assume a global gay identity. In this case Betina Botox believes “she” is an “in” and desired clubber given that “she” conforms to global and neoliberal constructions often found in seemingly inclusive dance spaces (Rivera-Servera 2011, Rivera-Servera 2012, Roman 2011). However, Drucker (2015) helps us to understand that everything with Betina Botox is “wrong” within a homonormative and neoliberal context because “her” appearance is outdated and will not fit the global identity and consumptive practices in the mainstream gay scene. Drucker (2015) explains, the lack of diversity among a homonormative scene excluded those with “...the wrong bodies, the wrong clothes, the wrong sexual practices, the wrong gender or the wrong colour skin viewed [because it was] bad for marketing...[which] increased stigmatisation and marginalization for...LGBT people [of color]”. “Her” overly gelled, dyed blonde hair, colored berets, faux and conspicuous

pearl necklace, and so called “antique” (but actually cheap brand) sunglasses are not up to the standards of consumers of the gay niche global market or the gay class of power and consumption in São Paulo, despite her whiteness. Therefore, both Betina Botox and the bakla do not fit within the “in” scene of exclusion and consumer identity; their excess represents a politicized diversity not in tune with the assimilation codes (or conformity to dressing right and being right) in a market-driven neoliberal public.

While Carlos and Nelson replayed the skit over, they repeated Betina’s use of “ninguem merece” [“no one deserves this much misfortune”] or “me poupe” [“give me a break”], suggesting that “her” white gayness is not treated with respect and dignity in São Paulo nor in its global LGBTQ+ scene. In other words, Betina Botox’s use of these expressions conveys that her sense of social stigma is great. Yet, given “her” dignified spatial-temporal positioning in São Paulo (or race and class urban identity from the center that is legible or incorporable into dominant state narratives), despite being questionably non-heteronormative and tacky according to middle class hetero- and homonormative standards, Betina Botox can exude the eccentricity and gender transgression she does, like when she explains in her act that she caused a scene in the metro among commuters after an older woman publicly asked “her” about her sexuality. My participants specifically laughed and repeated a moment in the skit when Betina says eccentrically in Portuguese, “Por a caso você acha que eu assumi meu sexualidade neste vagão?” [“Do you think I’ve assumed my sexuality in this train car?”] They found this amusing because to them “her” flaming punch line—the idea that she can contain “her” tacky queerness anywhere—is not convincing. When my participants imagine and mimic Betina Botox as if they were “her,” they express how far “she” is from their everyday “strategic silence” or tacit queer positioning (Decena 2011). That is, queer Ironbound Brazilians do not have the same kind of spatial-temporal positioning as Betina Botox has, which would allow them to be out as publicly and eccentrically as Betina in the community of the Ironbound. For example, Nelson constantly policed Carlos to prevent him from becoming “muita louca” [very effeminately gay] and falling into Betina’s premodern misfortune, due to his local undocuqueer status as a queer immigrant who was not in the country legally.

Carlos began exploring the passive role intimately and sexually while also displaying more feminine forms of behavior and dress, frequently going to Brazilian waxing salons, wearing facial foundation and shaving his eyebrows thin in a way that could label and stigmatize him as a hypersexual and non-heteronormative queer like done up “Botoxed” Betina. But this femininity also expressed his identification with how Brazilians, particularly Brazilian heteronormative women, are deemed highly “attractive” in comparison to Puerto Ricans, South Americans, and African Americans in Newark (Ramos-Zayas 2013, 216) and the nearby New York City metropolitan area in ways that can help their life chances and their incorporation into the U.S. That is, Ramos-Zayas (2013) points to how Brazilian women face being exoticized in ways that maintain them as having marketable bodies of “emotional and body labor and self-care” that exude an “urban competency” and set them apart from most brown and black racial and immigrant subjects as desirable workers (216-229). Ramos-Zayas (2013) raises that not only Brazilian women but also more recently, [queer] Brazilian men are sexualized in the U.S. popular imagination (220).

Similarly, queer Brazilian immigrant men’s attractiveness and self-care arguably fare better than other black and other Latino queer men in a neoliberal economy. For example, Carlos has used his emotional and body labor, including his Brazilian feminine attractiveness, to build his own self-employed cleaning business in a female-majority industry instead of persisting

in the local construction industry of heterosexual men. Nelson, however, also in the cleaning business, reminds him that he must tone down his eccentricity – like that of Betina Botox’s – and remain undeniably masculine to preserve his immigrant male attractiveness. In light of that, Betina Botox represents a premodern reference point for my participants who can (or aspire to) pass as whitened homonormative and incorporable figures in a global LGBTQ+ community and as exceptional workers in the racial and ethnic hierarchies of a neoliberal economy.

### **Lobixomen**

Like “Betina Botox,” Nelson circulated youtube clips of “Lobixomen,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tPUivesH3c>) another Brazilian comedic character from Zorra Total, a show on the Brazilian O Global channel that Nelson, Carlos, and their friends joked about and found amusing. “Lobixomen” or “wolf man,” is about a brown-skinned and professional and middle class heterosexual and masculine man (Raul Cordeiro) with a burly mustache who at night transforms into a queer, evil and tragic figure when the full moon is out. He becomes a dragged out brown-furred half wolf and half man “bicho<sup>vi</sup>” who succumbs to his non-heteronormative desires and lewdness, a stark contrast to his heteronormativity during the day. After Lobixomen’s transformation, he wears cherry-red nailpolish and hoop earrings that effeminize him as a non-heteronormative figure and potentially transgender too.

While “Lobixomen” is a consumable, humorous fictional character for my informants, “it” serves as social commentary about how some men lead silent, double and closeted lives by organizing their sexual and gender behaviors and associations in ways that do not interfere with dominant spatial-temporality but remain peripheral. I argue here that specifically for my Brazilian gay/queer informants, “Lobixomen” is also a dominant ideological tool that polices a heteronormative space by relegating racial, sexual and gender transgressive behaviors, subjectivities, and associations to the night or to places outside heteronormative space that must remain undetectable or else the subject in question will face social stigma. Raul Cordeiro’s transformation into a brown wolf disrupting the world around him is symbolic of the excess and threat he poses to a white(ned) space of order and hetero- and homonormativity. Similarly, Susana Peña (2005) discusses how queer Cuban Marielitos perceived as poor, brown, and sexually and gender deviant exiles disrupted the tame gay white mainstream culture in Miami. For example, their public behavior and eccentric “colorful and tight dressing, hair too long, speech patterns, and mannerisms,” rendered gay Cuban culture a visibly undesirable one and generated a fear of being associated with it. (Peña 2005, 133-134 and 139-141). These “gender-transgressive Marielito gay men...pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior...” [in disruptive ways that] “...had an impact at the street level, on daily life” in Miami (Peña 2005, 133-134). Such moments indicate these queer Cuban Marielitos’ self-determination to not assimilate to Miami’s pre-Marielito conservative sexual culture but to fight for a sexual freedom that changed or “browened” Miami’s sexual culture altogether (Peña 2005).

Lobixomen is a message within the Ironbound and queer Brazilians’ context that they should explore their non-heteronormative sexualities at night—only when the full moon is out—outside white(ned) and heteronormative space. In effect, Lobixomen’s transformation and non-heteronormative sexuality is symbolic of the sexual freedom and possibilities of non-heteronormative sexualities and groupings existing only at night. Lobixomen’s transformation at full moon represent queer men’s symbolic restriction to seeking their non-heteronormativity not every night but intermittently, which in effect limits any routine engagement needed for strong

queer non-heteronormative local community building. In spite of that, Lobixomen's untamable and uncontainable sexuality, as reflected in my queer participants, engenders new possibilities of queer subjectivity and queer worldmaking (Buckland 2002). As I will show in the second-half of the next section, these queers also show an openness to Latinx queer subjectivity and worldmaking in a booming local nightly queer scene within the Ironbound, aside from what I found in the privacy of my queer subjects homes and parties (Avivi 2015).

## **At the Fringes and the Center of Brazilian Ironbound: An Ethnography of Queer Spacemaking, Dance Publics and Counterpublics**

### **Assuming Your Sexuality Publicly like Betina? Good Ethnicity, Tamed Whiteness, and Aspiring Homonormativity at the Center**

At night, on karaoke nights in particular, some venues were not labeled as gay or straight, which perpetuated a sexual and gender plurality even if strategically silent within these spaces. For example, Riverbank Café, located across from Riverbank Park and parallel to Ferry Street, was in a central area of the Brazilian Ironbound. Danilo Danilo, the promoter, who was gay, maintained these nights as mixed or assumedly straight nights. This discreet gay scene discouraged non-Brazilian non-heteronormative gay black and brown populations from coming to the party. Further, the hetero- and homonormative culture and mostly MPB<sup>vii</sup> karaoke music also discouraged non-Brazilians from coming to the bar. I also witnessed this at Brasilia Grill's gay nights, where DJs spun Brazilian pagode, samba, and fojo only and maintained a Brazilian-only gay crowd that was on its "best behavior" and exuded homonormativity. Brasilia Grill is situated in the heart of the Ironbound's busy restaurant and retail business area right off Ferry Street, the neighborhood's main commercial artery. The family-style restaurant represents an iconic heteropatriarchal media image of a thriving Brazilian Ironbound community celebrating Brazilian Day Festivals and soccer cup games, which instructs queer subjects to tone down their excess (even at gay nights). The café had successful karaoke nights among a Brazilian-only crowd where several of my informants, including Carlos and Nelson, enjoyed going frequently. On several occasions, I went with them and saw Brazilians who were assumedly heterosexual men and women along with gay friends I knew through Carlos.

According to another interviewee, gays and queers also went to another local restaurant/bar called Sagres, a Portuguese restaurant on Ferry Street, for assumedly straight karaoke nights. He explains, "...I go to Sagres. Have you been to Sagres? That's a bar. They have karaoke. A lot of gay people [go] because you know gays like to sing." This informant shows how Sagres is a heteronormative bar where gay and queers also go. Yet, his account suggests that even among the strict gender and sexual ambiance in the bar, gays and queers still have a good time singing and performing classic Brazilian old and new MPB songs while identifying ethnically as Brazilians and as Portuguese speakers amidst dominant heteronormative Ironbound in a similar way to an example offered by Marquez (2007) of how Colombian immigrant queers living among Colombians in Queens are strategically silent and generally co-exist peacefully in their neighborhood bars and gay friendly businesses amidst the predominating heteronormative culture of the neighborhood and market of the neighborhood. As I saw at Riverbank Park Café, the gays and queers that sing karaoke are contained or tame within the heterocentrist public sphere. It did not surprise me when Nelson and Carlos laughed at my emotional karaoke debut after I sang "Encontros e Despedidas" ["Reunions and Farewells"] by

Brazilian singer Maria Rita. Carlos said I sang well but also judged my performance as being overtly gay in a mixed yet straight-privileged space. Nelson's and Carlos' critique of my performance shows the pressure to be tamed within the heteronormative public of the Ironbound. Danilo Danilo explained to me that even while a lot of gays went to karaoke nights, gays did not display open affection or kissing, especially because the crowd was mixed and included conservative and heterosexual men and women.

However, Danilo Danilo revealed that "curious," and "closeted" men often secretly asked him to set them up with gay men to experiment with having sex with men either as the active, passive or versatile partners. Ultimately, such behavior and desires realized at Riverbank Café justified the strategic importance of maintaining these mixed crowds undeclared because publicly straight men were not questioned for going to these venues at night. It was reminiscent of Lobixomen's thirst and desires, but in a much less disruptive manner.

### **In Lobixomen's Nightly Stride: Impossibilities of Latinx Group Making at the Fringe**

The Guitar Bar was located at the fringes of the Ironbound where I argue that Brazilian gays and queers had a chance to break away from the more dense, (trans)national, and rigid heteronormative space of the Ironbound. The Guitar Bar was just across the street from one of the rail lines parallel to Mac Arthur Highway, which marks a racial boundary between the largely immigrant (white) neighborhood and the majority (black and brown) African American and Puerto Rican and growing South and Central American city. At the Guitar Bar, Brazilian gay and queers were in proximity to non-Brazilians in and near the neighborhood, particularly African Americans and Puerto Ricans found living nearby, unlike in the centralized part of the neighborhood where only a more homogeneous Brazilian crowd attended. In fact, the bar was situated close to historic African American and Latinx/Puerto Rican LGBTQ landmark sites of a black and brown nightlife and ballroom culture of the late 1960s and early 1990s that fought for safety, local rights and dignity (Stewart-Winter and Strub 2016). This proximity lured African American and Puerto Rican and other Latinx gays of South and Central American descent living on the other side of the tracks to enjoy the Guitar Bar.

In my experience, the significant presence of young African American, Puerto Rican, and Latinx gays voguing on Guitar Bar's main floor on gay night was not only different from Brazilian queer culture in central points of the neighborhood but suggested how black and brown gays added a non-heteronormative and politicized presence to the bar's gay night. I saw a number of African Americans and Latinxs that catwalked, vogued and battled, which revealed that the club was receptive to a black and brown ball culture that gay venues in a more centralized location of the Brazilian Ironbound did not attract, or discouraged. Several of them had modest crossdressed outfits—fitted two-piece dresses, black bob-styled wigs, dangling earrings and stilettos that reflected the effeminate personas they exuded while engaging with others in a scene of queer homemaking of self-determination "as they are" in critical diverse groupings outside state definitions (and policing) of race, gender, sexuality, multiculturalism and individual market success (Rodriguez 2003, Buckland 2002 and Rivera Servera 2012). The DJs played an assortment of Brazilian music (samba and funk) with U.S. hip-hop, deep house, at times sampling artists like Beyonce, Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin and Whitney Houston, who performed top-40 U.S. gay hits. The music medley encouraged a diversity of gays and queers to belong within this jumping, packed, strobe-lit and sweaty main floor. This space brought queer subjects together for local queer worldmaking (Buckland 2002) of non-heteronormativity at

night across race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender and made the social and sexual boundaries more porous between greater Newark and Ironbound Newark.

Amidst this diversity, my gay and queer informants visited the looming gay ball culture that took over the main floor from time to time by leaving their bar seats where they always situated themselves with the other Brazilian queen men from the neighborhood. These boundaries within the club were clear social markers of aspiring homonormativity and non-heteronormativity at gay night. My informants, unlike the non-heteronormative African Americans and Puerto Ricans, dressed more butch while performing at first a more tamed sexual and gender performance. While they were at the bar, they seemed bored and unapproachable while meticulously texting with their I-phones out in the open. I found the bar area more uptight and different from other main lounge where eccentric gays were busy dancing, exuding transgressions and creating an engaging diverse scene across race, ethnicity, class, sexual and gender diversity. The kinesthetic energy among the swaying bodies on the main floor may have seemed foreign to Carlos and his friends at first but they eventually eased into that commotion. Carlos and his friends would leave their bar spots to spend twenty minutes at a time standing and dancing beside others, watching and reacting to the battle circles and catwalks between Brazilian, Puerto Rican, South and Central American queer subjects. At musically climactic moments, Carlos and his friends mingled and danced close to black and brown strangers on the main floor, befriending them in this queer spacemaking non-heteronormative scene. The queer politics of choreography (Buckland 2002 and Rivera-Servera 2012) of bodies in unison between samba and voguing created a defiant temporary public (Dolan 2005) of relationality among queer and immigrant brown and black bodies. These nightly moments—in Lobixomen's stride—represented a transformation toward sexual and gender freedom and the uncontainability and unpredictability of non-heteronormative desire and relationality.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I examined the queer televisual representations of Betina Botox and Lobixomen and the ways my queer informants reacted to their humor in light of their everyday plight as queer immigrant men in Newark's Ironbound. More than humor though, I examine their (global) hegemonic ideologies and the particular ways my queer informants face symbolic colonization reifying exceptionalism, consumerism, and aspiring homonormativity. Within this neighborhood, for example, I show the ways these queers uphold a tamed and normative image within unmarked mixed crowds of Brazilian-only or lusophone nightlife scenes that not only uphold a dominant heterocentrist ethnicity and whiteness within a black-majority city but also discourage non-lusophone and working class Latinx and African Americans from identifying with these scenes.

On the other hand, both Betina Botox and Lobixomen do in fact speak to counterpublic audiences that encourage non-heteronormative Latinx groups within the Ironbound context. Even while Betina Botox's "wrong" clubber wear is a parody of tacky queerness, she does stand for sexual and gender diversity and a local and a premodern non-consumerist positioning (similar to the bakla) outside a globalized narrative of progress and encourage my queer interlocutors to break away from neoliberal and homonormative values. And Lobixomen's transformation at night is suggestive of my queer subjects' own, when they take the opportunity to embrace and meaningfully identify with their non-heteronormativity and with local queer non-lusophone African-American and Latinx Puerto Rican and South and Central American queers at the fringe

of the Ironbound. These may be passing moments but should not be taken lightly; they are moments in which these subjects can envision a more inclusive, anti-neoliberal, and anti-consumerist tomorrow with other marginalized and non-heteronormative subjects and break up a white versus black dominant Newark narrative.

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<sup>i</sup> See Darnell L. Moore's "A Conversation with Mayor Cory Booker on LGTBQ Policy in Newark (VIDEO) *The Huffington Post*. 8 May 2012. Print.

<sup>ii</sup> According to this site, Baraka and Holmes were murdered because of their lesbian relationship: <https://www.autostraddle.com/ending-violence-against-queer-black-women-is-everybodys-responsibility-229818/>. Darnell L. Moore's "Why do we still have so much violence directed at queer women of color?" *Out* 20 March 2014. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> Berg defines a cholo in Peru in her study according to Larson 2005: "a person of indigenous origins in the urban environment who has adopted urban manners and lifestyles...the term carries a derogatory connotation because of its 'in betweenness' in ethnic and political terms" (1).

<sup>iv</sup> In Portuguese the phrase means very funny.

<sup>v</sup> Keep in mind that there are different episodes of Lobixomen. The name is also spelled in different ways on youtube. The link I show is one episode of many. This essay gives a general overview about Lobixomen based on several episodes.

<sup>vi</sup> Bicho is implied in the word Lobixomen, which in Portuguese means a bug or a thing. It also suggests the word bicha, which is a derogatory term for an effeminate passive-role gay male in Brazil.

<sup>vii</sup> MPB among Brazilians means Música Popular Brasileira (Popular Brazilian Music).