INTRODUCTION

A NIGHT OUT AT THE MOVIES

On a night out at the Cine República in 1920s São Paulo, Brazil,[1] moviegoers crowded the street as they waited in line for tickets, though ushers and a metal barricade stood to prevent the crushing of bodies.[2] They listened and danced to a live jazz band in the lobby before they entered the screening room, bottlenecking at the doors.[3] Women, demonstrating their respectability, sat with chaperones in the first few rows on the ground floor. Unknown persons and those presumed up to no good filed into the darkest corners in the back. The most elite *senhoras*—or "ladies," a title marked by a combination of class and respectability—filled the private boxes that wealthy families rented by the month. There they sat "in the front with their heads tilted, and men stand on foot behind them."[4] Even as they sat decorously in their private boxes, the young ladies had chances to read and hum the sexualized lyrics of the *sambas cariocas* (popular music from Rio de Janeiro)[5] printed in the multipage cinema program: "I kissed my girl / without anyone seeing us / the moon saw, smiled, and heard, everything that I said . . . what a delicate taste / the kiss of a *morena* [brown-skinned woman] / I don't deserve it / and I suffer for it / to the point of pain."[6] These lyrics were printed among advertisements for German pianos and "Ambra soap," the "perfume of the aristocracy."[7] To the scandal of the ladies, other young boys avoided the bottleneck in the center

aisle by running through the private boxes and then jumping over the short wall into the seats below.[8] The hundreds of moviegoers who had bought the cheapest tickets climbed three flights up a narrow staircase to the third-floor balcony. The cinema held two thousand moviegoers, and it took time for all to find their seats and settle down.

There were loud shushes as the lights dimmed, but people continued to chat when the first film, a short documentary, showed the "marvels" of the Brazilian countryside and panoramic shots of distant cities. The more prudish portion of the audience grimaced at the sight of scantily clad Indigenous people or Afro-Brazilian women market sellers on screen, but whether they admitted it or not, many others had come just to see such pleasurable, sensational sights. Filmmakers and viewers made permissible the images of Brazil's "uncivilized" interior, the exhibition of brown, naked bodies, under the guise of anthropological education, which they packaged within the modern medium of cinema and the elegant furnishings of the movie theater.

The shushes grew louder as the feature film began, usually a Hollywood drama, a European import, and occasionally, the grand premiere of a Brazilian production. Even those who outwardly disapproved of the less respectable members of the audience could still be held rapt by images that were foreign, exotic, sexy: Rudolph Valentino as a Middle Eastern sheik, Pola Negri as an Egyptian dancer, and Mary Pickford as a geisha and as an Indian woman, face darkened by dirt. To the annoyance of those engrossed in the story, a group of young boys loudly cracked jokes during the most dramatic moments.[9] The amateur film critics in the audience sneered at both groups, the boys who disrespected the film and the tasteless fans who knew nothing of cinema as art, but instead enjoyed anything with a handsome actor.

In between each film, the lights flashed on, forcing anyone in a close embrace to suddenly withdraw. Others took advantage of the light to admire the handsome men with pomaded hair and women with short hair and even shorter skirts. When the film ended, the two thousand patrons filed slowly out of the cinema, bottlenecking again at the main entrance. As moviegoers slowly spilled onto the streets, they criticized the films and made jokes about whom and what they saw. The same boys who had shouted obscenities during the film's most dramatic moments sang the lyrics of another *samba* printed in the cinema program so that the exiting ladies could hear them. The song was about a young guy "crazed" for "fried fish," and when exiting a streetcar, he grabs the leg of a young woman, apologizing, "I thought it was the horn!" The chorus followed:

"How good it is,
In a honk-honk-honk-honk
Walking slowly in the dark
Honking with satisfaction."[10]

The sexual innuendo of "honking with satisfaction" was not lost on those leaving the movie theater, whether they too were boarding a streetcar or stepping into a flashy automobile. Just as the rumbling and honking of the city, represented by the streetcar, infiltrated the movie theater via the song "Fried Fish," the sounds, songs, jokes, and emotions from the cinema spilled out onto the sidewalk.

Songs about kissing in the moonlight, couples embracing in the darkness, women with short hair dressed as *melindrosas*, a type of Brazilian "modern girl"—these images and figures were not contained within the walls of the movie theater, but were part of a new urban landscape in Brazil. Both real and imagined, these visualizations of gendered and sexual practices were present in city streets and in the blooming popular production of film, literature, magazines, and memories. In the expanding print and visual culture of the time period, artists, intellectuals, filmmakers, and moviegoers imagined how shifting gender norms were part of Brazil's ever-changing urban environments. Did women's expanded spatial mobility, their looming presence in spaces of leisure and consumption like movie theaters, portend the liberalization of gender norms? Could Brazilian cities accommodate these new types of femininity and rituals of romance while maintaining the moral sanctity of the "traditional" Brazilian family? On and off the silver screen, what would a "modern" city look like, what was women's place within it, and what would these entangled concepts mean for the future of Brazil?

In the Darkness of the Cinema argues that sexual morality, gender, and urban space were mutually constitutive in the early twentieth century and beyond. Artists, intellectuals, filmmakers, and moviegoers imagined how women and gender norms were essential to determining the shape and moral fiber of Brazilian cities and Brazilian society writ large. They viewed movie theaters as bellwethers for how urbanization catalyzed changing gender norms and vice versa. Whether women could participate in urban consumption and leisure while upholding traditional expectations for family and motherhood was a key question as to what urbanization meant for Brazil. In a study of moviegoing and film culture, we see how sexual morality and gender were central to determining individual social status, and also were intertwined

with the potential of urban life. Such an examination not only enriches our knowledge of women's everyday experiences and expectations for gendered propriety, but also illuminates the role of gender in constructing visions of the modern city. Intersecting with race and class, ideologies of gender were pivotal in the construction and representation of cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. From intellectuals' hand-wringing in the 1920s to moviegoers' nostalgic memories in the late twentieth century, Brazilians looked to movie theaters—and the social activities within them—as an arena for the changing rules governing sexual morality. And their judgments of women's behavior were entangled with their hopes, dreams, and memories of urban Brazil.

A night at the movies was not limited to watching the films on screen. Rather, moviegoing was the site of multiple activities, media, and interpretations. Beyond the exhibition and reception of films, moviegoing included the social practices of audience members, the built space of the theater, the advertisements for aspirational commodities, the whispers floating amid the music, and the scandals that moviegoers witnessed or imagined to occur in dark corners and seats. Moviegoing was an experience at once visual, visceral, commercial, and spatial. As a place that was both private and public, global and local, elite and popular, the movie theater was a microcosm of the turbulent early twentieth century in Brazil. Cinema was a locus for the transnational flow of US, European, and Latin American films. Through media like Rio de Janeiro's sambas, printed in São Paulo film programs, or a São Paulo film critic's review of a film from Recife, cinema was also a hub for regional and national circulations of popular culture. Cinema's reach was wide, touching various sectors of the population. Film intellectuals and filmmakers, municipal officials and engineers, public health professionals, artists and writers, movie theater owners, and of course the moviegoers themselves used movie theaters and thought about the meanings of cinema. Their diverse perspectives across a vast array of historical sources provide a rich portrait of the early twentieth century and beyond, and underline the role of gender and sexuality in shaping a dynamic time period.

In 1925 an essay entitled "Cinema in the Light and the Dark" appeared in *Vida Doméstica*, a Brazilian women's magazine. Playing on the various meanings of "light" and "dark," the essay detailed how the lights would flicker on between films during a night at the movies. The acts that occurred in the movie theater included sexual assault, adultery, and other forms of deviance, which according to the essay affronted traditional family relationships. In the darkness, *bolinas*—a term for men who groped women in movie theaters—not

only victimized women but "tormented zealous husbands and fathers." Yet when the lights came on, the bolinas were the first to uphold these hierarchies and to condemn "the rare confrere that gets caught with his hand in the cookie jar."[11] In the brightness, a woman screamed, not because she was being assaulted, but because she spied her husband in the arms of another woman. Upon being found out, the husband fled, "leaving his mistress to brave the four winds." The cinema in the "dark" and the "light" was simultaneously a space for private sexual acts and for the condemnation of them.

As evidenced in the story, the movie theater was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provided a venue for forbidden sex acts—a threat to the gendered order. In the darkness of the cinema, women were subject to harassment, husbands cheated on wives, and marriage, chastity, and moral values were all at stake. But when the lights came on, the movie theater was also a space to expose these acts, condemn bad practices, and reinforce (even if hypocritically) standards of sexual morality. The surreptitious bolina openly criticizes his "confrere," and a jilted wife asserts her family position over the hidden mistress. The anecdote serves to illustrate wider anxieties regarding the instability of gender and sexual norms. And movie theaters were not just a suspicious cause of these ills, but the perfect stage to both perpetrate and condemn such crimes. On a metatextual level, the story of the "dark" and the "light" is also an example of how observers of the moviegoing experience brought these acts to light for a wider audience, amplifying such stories across multiple media.

However, between the dark and the light, there are inevitably shades of gray, and here too is where cinema provides a revelatory platform. Although the essay above points out egregious examples of assault and adultery, what about the semilicit acts that characterized the moviegoing experience? The romance, the flirtations, the pleasurable enjoyment of watching alluring movie stars on a big screen? In these small gestures, affects, and emotions, we see a more nuanced way in which cinema was a destabilizing force in Brazilian society. Moral panic and hand-wringing portrayed cinema as throwing all good morals into disarray, but moviegoing illuminates how concepts of sexual morality and gendered propriety were constantly evolving. Moviegoers simultaneously constructed and negotiated the boundaries between forbidden pleasure versus semilicit romance or even a newly acceptable form of dating. The limits and rules of such behavior were dynamic, and cinema provided an arena for commentators of the time period to explore and determine where exactly these limits lay.

Gender, Honor, and Early Twentieth-Century Brazil

The largest country of South America, larger than the continental United States, Brazil is a vast nation made up of a diverse populace and distinct regional identities. In the early twentieth century, Brazil was a profoundly hierarchical yet also flexible society. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and post-abolition time period, immigration, industrialization, and urbanization threw many Brazilians' social status into flux. While the destinies of the "intractable poor"—those who remained in poverty even as they drifted between various social and legal statuses—and the oligarchic "traditional families" were more certain, geographic and social mobility characterized the lives of the millions who participated in mass migrations to Brazilian cities or who joined new sectors of work.[12] A descendant of rural enslaved people might become a factory worker in the city; a shopkeeper might become downwardly mobile amid a growing class of urban professionals.[13]

In previous centuries, Brazil had been the largest recipient of enslaved people from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it was also the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888. At the time of abolition, Brazil's total population was about 14 million, and by 1920, it had more than doubled to over 30 million. Between 1890 and 1919, 2.6 million immigrants entered Brazil, mostly from Portugal, Italy, and Spain, but also from Asia and the Middle East.[14] Brazil today has both the largest population of Afro-descendant people outside of Africa and one of the largest populations of Japanese-descendant people outside of Japan. Much of this early wave of immigration concentrated in the state of São Paulo, a region that needed laborers for its vast coffee plantations. Both external and internal migrations shifted population growth from the north to the southeast of Brazil and changed Brazilian cities demographically and structurally. Brazil's urban centers grew in population and transformed in terms of industry and economy. Rio de Janeiro, the country's capital, expanded as a hub of the federal government and for the importation and consumption of manufactured goods. The city of São Paulo, the capital of São Paulo state, was the eventual destination for many migrants who found work in textile and food factories, among other sectors. A "sleepy town" of 35,000 people in 1880, the city swelled to 600,000 in 1920, and 2.2 million by 1950.[15] The growing urban centers reflected Brazil's racially and culturally diverse population with pockets of ethnic communities, including Jewish, Japanese, European, and Black communities, as well as neighborhoods and hubs where they mixed.[16]

These shifts in population growth and urbanization occurred during the Brazilian Old Republic (1889–1930), which sought to instill "order and

progress"—a motto still emblazoned on the country's flag—in the nation's political, cultural, and racial order. Though implementing republican ideals of electoral democracy, like many young nations, popular democratic participation was an uneven process. Women, for example, were not accorded the right to vote until 1932, after the end of the Old Republic.[17] However, although only 1 to 3 percent of the population voted in federal elections that were more perfunctory than democratic, there was popular participation in "layers of republicanism," especially among the growing urban milieu.[18] Politicians and intellectuals expressed affinity with Western European and North American models of "progress" that influenced policies toward urban reform, education, and public health, which met with degrees of resistance and negotiation.[19]

Amid these transformations in demography and politics, gender norms also underwent change. In the early twentieth century, in Brazil and across the world, women became increasingly visible in mass media and urban spaces of leisure. From shopping to driving automobiles and acting on movie screens, women gained greater prominence in sites of consumption and sociability.[20] Of course, women had previously inhabited the streets to work and shop,[21] but new forms of femininity appeared on the pages of glossy magazines, newspapers, and advertisements.The "melindrosa" in Brazil, like other global manifestations of the "modern girl," presented a gendered quandary to notions of progress and social change.[22] These women frequented public spaces like department stores, amusement parks, and cafés, as well as movie theaters. The new media of the time period, including cinema, radio, and the attending "paratexts" such as print advertisements, reviews, and commentaries, amplified these visions and sounds of modern femininity.[23]

In Brazil, women also entered the workforce in greater numbers. For centuries, free and enslaved women labored inside and outside the home as domestic servants, market sellers, seamstresses, and more.[24] However, the twentieth century introduced a greater array of occupations tied to the commercial economy, including those in industry and retail shops. New sectors of the female population entered the workforce in "white-collar" professions, performing salaried, nonmanual work, such as secretaries and teachers. While still a minority, the number of women in white-collar professions rose rapidly; between 1920 and 1940, male participation in public administration doubled while women's participation increased by over 600 percent.[25] As Susan Besse has shown, however, even as some advocates encouraged women to work and contribute to household incomes and to broader society, critics still worried about the effect of women's work on Brazilian children and families.[26]

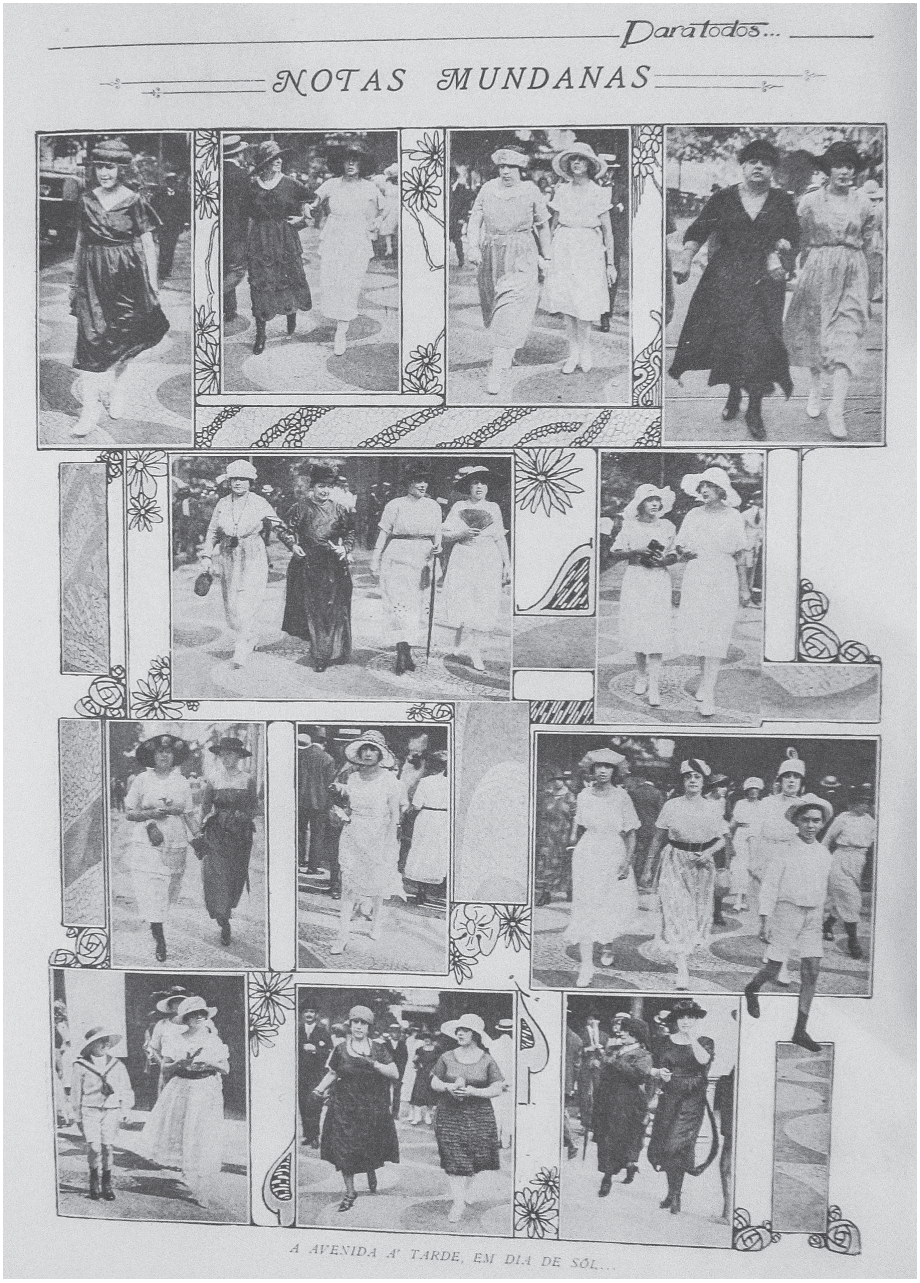

Figure I.1. "Afternoon on the Avenida on a Sunny Day," photographs of women walking on Avenida Rio Branco, a central avenue in the center of Rio de Janeiro and location of the city's elite cinemas. "A avenida á tarde em dia de sol," *Para Todos*, no. 122, April 16, 1921, RC Para Todos, Cinemateca Brasileira São Paulo.

The relative respectability of these "public" women was a point of great debate, especially considering the importance of gendered honor in Latin America. In Brazil, honor was both a social and legal concept that regulated individuals' adherence to codes of sexual and gendered behavior. The degree of one's honor was a factor in determining one's social and even racial status. In contrast to North America, Brazilians have traditionally based racial identity on skin color and phenotype, as well as factors like class and moral status, and they have also recognized mixed-race categories of identity like *pardo,* or being "brown."[27] For women, honor meant the preservation of virginity and the display of chastity, among other expectations for gendered propriety.[28] For men, honor might mean their ability to command public respect equal to their status and self-worth, or their participation in rituals to prove masculinity, social rank, and even ethnic superiority, for example by publicly dueling with those who offended them.[29] Sueann Caulfield has demonstrated how intellectual, political, and popular understandings of gendered honor persisted well into the twentieth century in Brazil, and how it was not a concept limited to or imposed by elites.[30] Caulfield and Martha de Abreu Esteves have examined court cases of "deflowering" to show how Brazilian women and their families, some of whom were poor women of color, asserted their possession of honor through the legal system by bringing sexual assailants and other offenders to court. While some intellectuals reduced women's sexual honor to the definitive possession or lack of a hymen, others took a more nuanced approach that bent with the changing social context. For men and women in the early twentieth century, honor could also mean belonging to a good family, not displaying sexual desire, or avoiding heterosocial spaces like cinemas and dance halls.[31]

Even seemingly mundane perambulations—moving between public and private spaces, from home to work, or from café to movie theater—had implications for women's honor. Women who circulated in public walked a fine line as they walked the city, and their spatial practices informed their moral status. According to Brazilian sociologist Roberto da Matta's framework of "house and street," home is the arena of family, safety, and morality, while the street represents danger, conflict, and anonymity. As in other languages and countries, the Brazilian Portuguese term for a "woman of the street" (*mulher da rua*) is euphemistic for a female sex worker. In contrast, a woman of the house enjoys the safety and status accorded to her place within a family unit.[32] Historians of Brazil have pointed out that the house was only a safe space for elite women. For servants and enslaved people, the house was a space of danger and repression while the street offered comparative liberty.[33]

Moviegoing adds to this discussion by demonstrating how these debates about honor, respectability, and social status extended well beyond the courtroom and permeated the realm of leisure and popular media. In the private/public space of the cinema, sexual respectability was both nuanced and nebulous. Outside the medical definition of virginal chastity and the legal language of honor, sexual respectability was a standard that moviegoers determined in fleeting social and physical interactions. As historians have previously shown, women's social status was heavily dependent on their sexual honor. Moviegoing, however, reveals how valuations of sexual morality and social status were often fluid rather than fixed, determined in the moment and shifting with context, precariously balanced within the social etiquette measured by the flirtations and desires within the movie theater. Moviegoers determined their own and others' social and moral status based on their quotidian interactions and spatial practices. The same woman who might be perceived as a "lady" when she sat in the private box of a morning matinee might be perceived as sexual prey or predator if sitting alone during a nighttime show. Social mobility was not without limits, and women continued to encounter barriers to their spatial movements. The movie theater was not a utopia in which people otherwise marginalized by race, class, and wealth became suddenly liberated from social expectations. Quite the opposite, the movie theater could function as a microcosm that reflected Brazilian society's social differences, where women who had fewer liberties outside the movie theater might have fewer inside as well. However, in the eyes of the multiple people who depicted moviegoing in the early twentieth century, moviegoers' identities were both intersectional and multifaceted, with aspects dependent on transient social practices: how they went to the movies, where they sat, and what they did in the darkness.

Examining these quotidian interactions reveals a diversity of emerging gendered identities and enriches our knowledge of femininity in this era. An evolving lexicon labeled women as *melindrosas* (modern girls), *mademoiselles*, *senhoras* (ladies), and *moças* (girls), among other terms, to describe them in varying shades of respectable behavior and sometimes racially tinged sexual allure. These feminine identities existed on a continuum and were differentiated by imprecise mixtures of fashion, consumption, and leisure habits. They were discrete yet mutable entities, and one could be mistaken for or become another by changing minute details: style of hat, length of skirt, choice of movie theater. The greatest disruption that these women posed, however, was not only that the boundary between a "mademoiselle" and a "senhora" could be so easily transgressed, but that it was not clear where the boundary lay.

Moviegoing highlights the complex sociability of urban Brazil, showcasing the various shades between black and white, the spectrum of femininity that existed between the binary of women either with or without honor.

Gender and Urban Space

In Brazil and in other national contexts, women's increasing liberation from domestic space was intertwined with questions about urbanization and what it meant for structures of family, health, and gender. Some of this discourse was aimed at women's "place" in the city—where they belonged, or conversely, how much of the city might belong to them. This question had both literal and symbolic meanings, as people debated where women should physically circulate and, more broadly, how increased spatial mobility might result in greater freedom from other strictures of confinement. This discussion was fundamentally gendered in the premise that women should be confined to any space at all. In contrast, the concept of the *flaneur* emerged around the same time, a de facto male observer of city spaces who walked anonymously in the crowds. In Brazil, *crônistas*, short-form writers who wrote journalistic and sometimes whimsical accounts of city life, provided this urbane perspective.[34] In an analysis of turn-of-the-century public amusements in Chicago, historian Lauren Rabinovitz asks whether there was a female counterpart to the flaneur, a "flaneuse," a rambling, urban woman who observed and consumed urban pleasures, or if her gender would instead cast her as a "streetwalker," a sexual commodity rather than a consumer herself.[35] The question extends to turn-of-the-century Brazil, where a woman's relationship to a moviegoing male flaneur might be as the object of desire, whether on the streets or on screen in erotic or even pornographic films.[36]

Historians of the Americas have explored urban spaces of leisure and consumption, such as movie theaters, amusement parks, and restaurants, tackling the question of what women's presence within them meant for a more traditionally defined public sphere. To clarify, I differentiate between public space and public sphere, as I do domestic space and domestic sphere, as activities in the public sphere did not always occur in public spaces.[37] Separating the terms recognizes how marginalized groups like women might participate in one but be excluded from the other.[38] While Jürgen Habermas's definition of the public sphere emphasized the process by which public social activity might generate public opinions and politics, scholars have taken an expanded view of the public sphere to examine how mass media, popular culture, and broad engagement with public life were involved in the creation of communities, subjects, and one's sense of place in the city. At the turn of the twentieth