

## **The Touristic Experience of Gays in Istanbul: Sensual and Sexual Body as Object of Consumption**

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### **Abstract**

*Setting out from the concept of post-tourists, we have tried to determine whether the city of Istanbul is undergoing transformation owing to the considerable weight of tourism in the economy and the expectations of post-tourists. More specifically, we sought answer to the question whether the overflowing male and female sensuality, erotism and sexuality of Istanbul (needless to say, characteristics assigned to the city in the Orientalist imagination through an Orientalist or Neocolonialist discourse) are reproduced, experimented with and transformed by the practices of gay tourists. We carried out interviews with around fifteen gay tourists through semi-structured questionnaires in order to collect information on their touristic experiences of Istanbul. Thereby it has become possible to observe that it is not only stereotypical “Oriental” images of Istanbul which are reproduced, but that there are also other images formed to bestow meaning upon the touristic experience of gays in Istanbul.*

**Key Words:** Touristic experience, tourist gaze, post-tourist, gay tourism, tourism market, Orientalism, Neocolonialism

### ***Visual, Verbal, Multisensory and Multidimensional Experiences in Divergence***

At the moment of transition from modern/industrial society to postmodern /postindustrial society, it is necessary to reconsider the bonds connecting tourism and consumption. It is the difference between these bonds which allows us to speak of the post-tourist. In this day and age, the society of spectacular consumption gives birth to new forms of consumption. In order to gain a better understanding of these new forms in the field of tourism, it is necessary to determine what differentiates mass tourism based on Fordist consumption from individualized tourism based on Post-Fordist consumption.

How can one identify the post-tourist and her/his touristic activities? The producers of the tourism industry must focus on the demands of the consumer/tourist, which, in line with commercial logic, have become very dominant in the production of touristic goods and services. Again according to this same market discourse, the preferences of consumers are very volatile, which in turn require a high degree of segmentation in the tourism market and entail the diversification of offers via the creation of alternative goods which are attractive and distinct from touristic goods of mass consumption. This process is one of continuous renewal, due to the demand volatility among consumers who opt for a form of production and consumption which is less and less functional and more and more estheticized (Urry John 1995: 151 and 1990 ; Baudrillard Jean 1970, Bourdieu Pierre, 1979). The notion of estheticized consumption suggests that the postmodern tourist prioritizes the symbolic value of tourism as a form of cultural capital accumulation (Shaw G., and Williams A., 2004: 118).

This leads us to postulate a fundamental paradox between the search of an authenticity continuously reconstructed by the tourism industry on the one hand, and the tourist's access to faraway lands which standardizes the places visited on the other. In John Urry's conceptualization of the tourist, she/he is basically perceived as a consumer seeking the original, authentic and extraordinary, but at the same time reproduces the experiences already codified and standardized by marketing processes in the tourism market. inauthentic.

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This concept hardly helps us grasp the differentiation of touristic activity among individuals in line with their social class and sexual identity, especially as the characteristics of touristic activity and the tourism industry change throughout history. Whereas the tourist of the industrial age goes after the authentic, the tourist of the postindustrial age claims to take pleasure in the inauthentic. Based on such observations, scholars of tourism argue that the notion of the tourist gaze takes into account solely the visual repertory of touristic consumption (Everett Sally, 2008: 338-340). This concept is criticized by Dean MacCannell (2001: 25-33) on two basic grounds: it is founded on an erroneous opposition between the ordinary and the extraordinary; it misreads the verbal experience. To deprive the tourist gaze from its conceptual hegemony, other researchers have indicated that the postmodern experience of the tourist is multisensory -that is, linked to taste, smell and hearing- and multidimensional (Everett S., 2008: 351). In addition, the touristic experience of the postmodern age is also hybrid and paradoxical in its multisensory and multidimensional aspects.

### ***Gay Tourism, Space, Sexual Identity and Corporeality***

In studies on tourism, the reduction of the touristic experience to the sense of sight is not the only cause of gaps found in problematization perspectives. In fact, other lacunae were also revealed in mid-1990s by researchers who started to look into the implications of gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality by analyzing tourism. Accordingly, gay tourism as an object of study can be considered a part of the problematization of relations among sexuality, space and tourism. By embracing a different sexual identity, gay tourists assign a particular sense to the places they visit. From this perspective, one must take into account the fact that touristic destinations, whose images and signs are constructed and reconstructed continuously by the tourism industry, are also social spaces in formation. These spaces need to be conceived in terms of corporeality (Crouch David, Desforges Luke, 2003: 7). Touristic destinations are always linked to questions of sexuality and are always reshaped by the bodies, subjectivities and desires of tourists. Social spaces are defined not only by received notions, but also by impressions from the five corporeal senses. What do touristic destinations signify to gays? In fact, these are spaces of leisure which are neither static nor closed. Rather, these spaces ought to be viewed as socially constructed and reconceptualized through fragments of nature, history and culture (Wait Gordon and Markwell Kevin, 2006: 13-14 and 19; Stock Mathis, 2007: 109 and 116).

### ***Binary Oppositions of Modernity and Tourism***

Both in a theoretical context and in the context of actions and practices, we can see that the hierarchies between the civilized world and the non-civilized world, or between white/Western man and non-white/non-Western persist. In fact, tourism as a social experience of modernity is founded upon a binary hierarchy between the Other and the Self: a hierarchy which is geographic, architectural, sensory, corporeal, sexual or political in nature. There is a popular discursive process formulated through a modernist, ethnocentric and hierarchical perspective, which disseminates information on the sexuality of non-Western countries, portraying it as a sexuality based on excess and degeneration arising from an unprogressive tradition.

Taking into account the reproduction of this binary opposition by the Western tourism industry, which on the other hand strives to adapt itself to the postmodern global world of the 21st century by recognizing the multiplicity of subjectivities, David A. B. Murray (2007:50) argues that gay tourism as an industry and cultural practice is in many respects very similar to other forms of tourism. This similarity is due to the fact that gay tourism is also based on social, political and economic inequalities. It therefore must be noted that modern and postmodern models of tourism bring about both an opening-up to another world and a closing-down on one's own. In fact, by assuming the position of the spokesperson of a civilized and democratic world of technical and scientific progress, the Western/gay tourist can reproduce a colonial glance on his non-Western destination of visit. This glance is in fact constructed as a point of departure to evaluate this other world which in the context of civilizational, technical and political hierarchy is visited as a backward place frozen in the past (Murray D., 2007:52). From this point of view, touristic space itself is constituted by diverse social, economic and cultural dynamics. As a social structure, gender is among the constitutive elements of touristic space. As a product of a sexed society, tourism traditionally has a character associated with a masculinity shaped by the concepts of adventure, pleasure and exoticism.

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According to Frederic Jameson, post-modernity is based on the central role of reproduction (culture in all its forms engulfing the social world) in the decentered network of global and multinational capitalism (Featherstone M., 1996 : 30)

Masculinity is constructed in opposition to a femininity defined in relation to the notion of domesticity (Pritchard Annette, Morgan Nigel et al., 2000: 116). The global touristic imagination determined by the Western, white masculine and heterosexual glance has its roots in the patriarchal order and reproduces it. Therefore tourism is a cultural arena which reflects configurations of power (Pritchard A., Morgan N., et al., 2000: 117). Today's sexed and sexualized spaces can be viewed as the extension of the colonialist conception of space where gender, sexuality and ethnical original blend into one another. The image of virgin, wild territories waiting to be discovered, penetrated and conquered by the white man is still today an important aspect of the imaginary luggage of the tourism industry. This imagination which represents the non-Western world as passive, virginal and feminine, also defines it as “tempting”, “innocent”, “sinful”, “sensory” and “seductive”.

These remarks are all the more important due to the geographic location of Istanbul at the intersection of West and East. As such they can help us determine how these binary oppositions concerning the city of Istanbul are formulated in the discourse of gay foreigners interviewed about gays of Istanbul, as well as about local culture and religion. Do the respondents reproduce the clichés and stereotypes rooted in the binary and hierarchical oppositions of modernist thought and reformulated by the systems of commerce and media? Or rather, do they correspond to the figure of a geographically plural and mobile individual? Does this plurality, where it exists, redefine the representations of the visited space, cognizant that the cultural, aesthetic, sexual and geographic identity of that very space is subject to constant flux and reconfiguration?

### ***Gay Tourism in Istanbul***

From this perspective, Istanbul stands out as a distinct and interesting destination of gay tourism. At first sight, it is difficult to qualify Istanbul as a destination of gay tourism when compared to those Western cities which define themselves as pilgrimage sites of gay tourism. The city does not present a space of freedom to help break away from heterosexual domination, in a way similar to those spaces created by Western social movements for the recognition of homosexual identity in the 1960s. Moreover, this city clearly is not promoted across the gay tourism industry as a gay destination, since Turkish society and state are conservative in nature. Despite all these negative factors, Istanbul is becoming a popular destination for European and American gays. To better grasp the sociocultural and economic dynamics of the touristification of Istanbul, we carried out semi-structured interviews with fifteen gay individuals as well as with the Turkish representative of Istanbul travel agencies for ILGTA (International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association).

The basic elements of sexuality in Turkey are determined by a traditional patriarchal society and by a statist and secularist conservatism, which simultaneously embraces and defies the former. This conservatism draws the outlines of sexual identity for the well-being of the authoritarian and modernizing nation state (Tutal Nilgün, Çeler Zafer and Sahar Mutlucan, 2011). Consequently, gay identity is tolerated as long as it is experienced inside the boundaries of private space, without public expression. The state does not recognize the presence of gay identity. Although this latter is neither prosecuted nor punished by law, it is all the same oppressed as an immoral act detrimental to the social and judiciary order.

The Turkish gay movement was born in the 1980s and made headway as a component of social and identity-based protest movements. Nowadays, the movement reaches across Turkey and has been fighting for the freedom, rights and visibility of gays for 20 years: frequently, gay organizations are victims of judiciary pressure and prosecution. It is possible to think that the interest of gay foreigners towards Istanbul is aroused, on the one hand, by the activism of Turkish gays making homosexuality more visible, and on the other, by the efforts of economic actors who view gay tourism as a means of expanding their market share in the tourism industry.

According to the Turkish representative of ILGTA, Mustafa Kartopu of the travel agency Aristo Tours, gay tourism presents an important market potential for Istanbul. Indeed he states that his agency has decided to venture into the gay tourism market as a crisis exit strategy during the economic crisis which hit Turkey from 2002-2003. Around fifteen Turkish travel agencies have become members of the ILGTA. According to Mustafa Kartopu, this rise in the number of member travel agencies goes to show that the Turkish tourism industry closely follows the global trends in the sector with a view to draw considerable economic gain, suggesting the country and Istanbul should make an impartial assessment of gay tourism's potential. Mr. Kartopu chooses not to respond to questions concerning pressures on gay identity and gay tourism in Turkey, and denies the existence of any security threats to gay tourists despite gay tourists being apparently unwelcome in Southern Turkish villages.

For instance, on September 6th, 2000, gay tourists traveling to Kuşadası by a cruiser were driven away by military authorities. Such incident was considered scandalous by shopkeepers and the media (Radikal, 09. 07. 2000) who were particularly resentful towards the military's attitude and deemed it very detrimental to the regional economy. From time to time, the media publishes articles outlining the economic value of gay tourists. For example, one newspaper story entitled "Gay tourists are big spenders" reveals this interest towards gay tourists, and emphatically states that Turkish tourism must tap into this potential, just like Greece, Turkey's eternal rival (Radikal, 08.10.2005).

An article entitled "Gay tourists spend the most" found on a touristic web site is a clear indication of how gay tourists are viewed as wealthy targets: "Gay tourists are never mistreated in Turkey. The shopkeeper earns much more from these masses of tourists in constant circulation than he does from the German or the English because gays always go for high quality, enjoy having fun, and spend a lot. They prefer stylish hotels rather than all-inclusive ones. That is why they continue spending throughout the day. If an ordinary customer consumes three glasses of wine, they consume one or two bottles, and eat at à la carte restaurants" ([www.tumtatilturlari.com](http://www.tumtatilturlari.com)). As indicated by these brief citations from the discourses produced by the media and the representatives of the tourism industry, the gay tourist is accepted and made visible in the Turkish public space as a source of economic gain. Since she/he is a traveling foreigner who does not reside in the country and is tolerated even by shopkeepers, one of the most conservative groups in the country.

Just like the global tourism industry, the gay tourism industry, too, has a sexed character. The Gay tourism is in development since the early 90s, and has seized upon gays as a "niche market". Although the gay tourism industry positions itself as a defender of sexual diversity and constructs favorable representations of gays, in fact it reduces gay visitors to a market segment and the gays in the host country to a touristic attraction. It thereby creates a homonormative space based on an acceptable homosexuality which does not threaten the society. This portrayal of gays as acceptable, invisible, and docile is thus one of the key characteristics of gay tourism.

In the wake of this development, cities such as New York, San Francisco, Amsterdam or Manchester have been subsumed by the "pink travel economy" into its system of consumption. As a result, a vast economic structure was born with thriving cafés, pubs, restaurants, hotels and souvenir shops (Graham Mark, 2002: 21). It should be noted that post-tourists are pleased with the inauthenticity and performativity of their experience. It is evident that tourists have an ambiguous relationship with exoticism, which can be considered as a form of authenticity of the touristic destination: "Today's tourist can be said to be seduced by the factitious character of her/his experience, since she/he seeks entertainment rather than authentic traditions, and this experience is similar to a game" (Le Ménestrel Sara, 2002 :469). The marketing of gay spaces in the abovementioned cities was developed under the hegemony of the heteronormative cultural economy. The language of strategy employed by marketing firms, travel agencies, web sites, and touristic guides reduces sexuality to two basic themes, where the first depicts a sexuality experienced like an apolitical pastime, whereas the second positions gay sexuality inside a commercial framework.

### ***Istanbul's Sexual and Fluid Identity***

As has already been emphasized above, the romanticization and eroticization of the other are closely linked to a type of colonial nostalgia. These interestingly resemble the othering discourse constructed during the colonial era as the basis of white man's supremacy. The marketing of gay tourism in the European and American arena is thus rooted in a colonial and heteronormative discourse which clearly attributes a heterosexual exoticism to the non-Western world. A number of studies reveal how the booklets of travel agencies utilize a heteronormative discourse based on binary Neocolonial oppositions concerning travel: civilized/primitive, self/other, reason/eroticism, heterosexual/homosexual. In this context, non-Western societies are depicted as spaces defined by sexual fluidity in a natural state (Waitt G., Markwell K., Gormon-Murray A., 2008: 787).

Such attributions abound in various international web sites and magazines on Istanbul. In these media, the Turkish society is always specially associated with a sexuality of fluid and varying boundaries, purportedly very different from sexuality in the Western world. The Turk, as an exotic male figure, is viewed as a person enjoying sexuality in an Oriental ambience. This sexuality is portrayed, on the one hand, as an element to be cautious about, and, on the other, as an interesting and appealing experience waiting to be discovered. For instance, an article published in the well-known magazine *Advocate* describes Istanbul as a mystical city (October, 2011).

One of the most frequent issues discussed in many forums and web sites for discussion is the clear difference between gay sexuality in Istanbul and Western sexuality. This difference is often reconstructed with reference to Turkish baths, which are perceived as Eastern sites of a sensory and carnal sexuality. As such, they, too, are an integral part of the Western imagination of the East ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)). This Orientalist perspective is also evident in Turkish web sites: "Traditionally Turkey has had a bisexual culture or heteroflexible sexuality, rooted in the past. Gay sexual relations take place between real gays and "curious bisexual" men. In fact, in Turkey there isn't a clearcut distinction among sexual orientations. The boundary lines separating the heterosexual (straight), bisexual, gay, queer, transsexual, and transvestite are rather permeable." ([www.istanbulgay.com](http://www.istanbulgay.com)).

As for the gays we have interviewed, sexual fluidity is a common feature of their perception of Istanbul. Some of them view these ambivalent boundaries of sexual identity as a source of curiosity, since it enables them to think that sexual experience is available everywhere, possible and tolerated. In addition, some believe that bisexuality is the norm in Turkey and that every Turkish man is a potential sex partner. For instance, a 69-year old retired man from San Francisco, who used to work in the advertising sector, confessed to us that he has experienced the most unforgettable vacation in his life thanks to the ambivalent sexual character of the Turkish man:

"Since my childhood, I had listened to stories about Turkish bisexuality. Once in Istanbul I realized that these were not just stories, and I was simply dazzled by what I saw. We first went to a Turkish bath. What I later experienced and saw in Istanbul made me live one of the most savage vacations in my life. If you are a gay man living the USA, once you reach 40, your life loses all its sexual meaning. But in Istanbul I started to live a second youth. The gays of Istanbul, unlike those back in my country, do not harbor sexual categories. They are unsullied by the Western civilization and are very innocent."

Others, however, are not of the same opinion. They consider that this sexual fluidity erases the readable modes of conduct between individuals, and thereby makes it harder for them to approach the locals. In addition, the misreading of sexual codes is also viewed as a danger, which stems from the state of indecision and ignorance concerning the reaction to be given to advances, and the right codes for approaching a potential partner. A Swedish engineer living in Berlin says that sexuality is ubiquitous in Istanbul:

"During my stay in Istanbul, men of all ages made advances towards me. People from my hotel, cab drivers, people in the gym or on the Istiklal Street, or people sitting in cafes came to me to propose sexual intercourse. I found that very exciting yet dangerous. I refrained from visiting certain locations which I absolutely wanted to see, because I realized that I would be unable to read their modes of conduct which I don't share."

The informations and the images that gay visitors have before arriving in Istanbul are shaped and stereotyped by an Orientalist perspective. They gather information on Istanbul from web sites and/or friends and have in mind questions like "Is gay life in Istanbul free? Is there veritable security for gays?" The magazine *Advocate* warns gay tourists in regards to the dangers that young male prostitutes could create, and the mishaps they might run into if they do not respect the country's cultural codes. (*Advocate*, October, 2011). Although in subtler form, the binary and colonialist opposition between the civilized West and the violent Other are reproduced by this magazine by emphasizing what lurks behind every corner in Istanbul to endanger tourists. For example a 49-year old Italian hailing from Rome explains how anxious he was before coming to Istanbul:

"I was told that Istanbul was a huge city and that I had to be very cautious, that I could run into difficult situations. Ultimately, I was traveling to a Muslim city at the other end of Europe."

Following Murray we suggest that such security issues concerning Istanbul can be expressed in the following terms: "Are Eastern countries as democratic and free as the democratic and developed nations which we live in?" (Murray, 2007: 52.). In other words, gay tourism frequently produces a discourse of authority and observation which confirms the political progress and historical development in other nations. In a way, the gay tourist becomes the representative of a progressive and socially visible gay identity linked to democratic and enlightened nations, which are supposed to serve as the benchmark of progress to non-Western countries. This tourist gaze which evaluates the level of progress of a society also constitutes a normative gay model.

We have defined it as the Western, well-educated, white, middle class gay with class habitus representing homonormativity, who, upon encountering local gays lacking his own social and economic attributes, categorizes them as individuals making progress towards the Western norm.

A 30-year old Belgian from the city of Ghent has very illuminating opinions concerning this issue:

"The first thing I saw upon setting foot in Istanbul was the banner of the association Gokkusagi (Rainbow) in a gay cafe, and I was utterly stunned by this sight. I did not expect to see such a publicly visible gay place. Later on, we went to a bar which exactly resembled those in Belgium. The only difference was that the patrons were Turkish. I did not expect to run into such a widespread gay culture. The behaviors of Turkish gays are very exaggerated: they exaggerate either femininity or masculinity, whereas in Scandinavia or Belgium gays behave normally. Istanbul took me back to the Spain of forty years ago. Maybe in time the city will come to resemble Spain."

Gay tourists who responded to our questions were surprised to run into liberal individuals in a conservative country. In their opinion, Istanbul has very diverse and rich features owing to its historical and cultural legacy. Nevertheless, they do not emphasize this richness when it comes to talking about gay life reputed the omnipresence of gay cafés, pubs and restaurants in the city of Istanbul as a result of Western influence, and authentic spaces such as Turkish baths as neither as numerous as they expected, nor as authentic as they used to be in the past. The authenticity dreams of a 30-year Hungarian tourist hailing from Budapest were shattered as soon as he arrived in Istanbul: "Before coming to Istanbul I had imagined it as a very romantic city. How should I say... it is romantic, but in a Western sense, not in a Turkish sense! For instance, I expected to see Turkish baths filled with young men."

When asked about the motives for their visit, the respondents do not mention their gay identity as their foremost motivation. They explain their decision by the desire to get to know the history of a culture-wise rich city. This approach indicates that tourism is still defined by heterosexual codes of conduct. Sexual experience as a part of touristic activity is ignored and misread by its actors, though, as interviews progressed, it became evident that gay bistros, pubs, cafés and baths were their first destination in Istanbul. Accordingly, the search for sensual experience is implicitly present, although not directly linked to sexual intercourse. On the contrary, it is moralized in line with sexual norms defined by heterosexuality and perceived as an auxiliary activity which results from an experience of sensuality specific to Istanbul and is imagined as an exotic, lively, incredible and vibrant city. Although we could observe the uniformity in the perceptions of gay tourists to Istanbul, the interviews showed their experience in this city to have a much more complicated structure, which needs to be qualified. Thus, we could see that personal experiences could indeed break the perception filters imposed by the tourism industry and the media -even though gay tourists stayed in Istanbul for a short period- especially in differentiated spaces of identity, or when they entered into contact with the locals. This experience allowed them to shatter received notions.

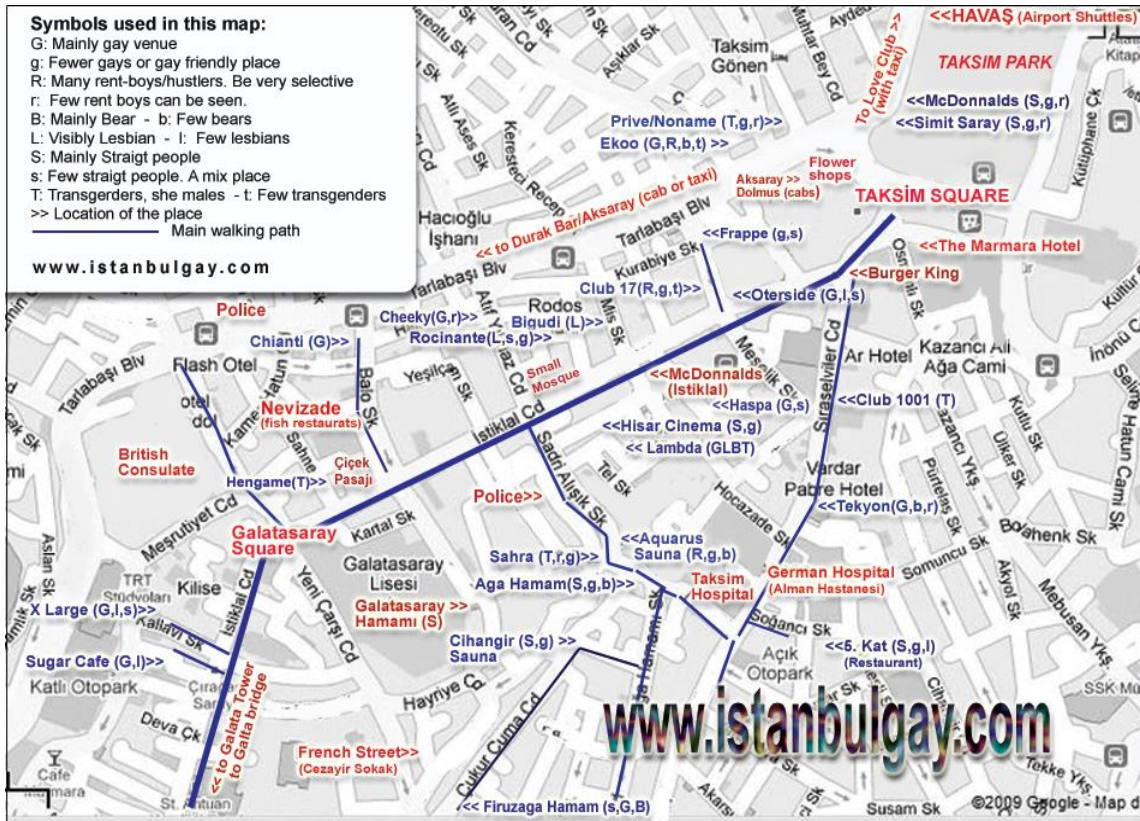
The respondents indicate that, at the end of their stay, the city appeared to them as much more complex than presented in the media. A 37-year old PhD student from New York says, "I came to realize that life in Istanbul, including gay life, is very cosmopolitan. The gay life is complex and formed of different social groups." Another New Yorker, 31-years of age, goes even further: "I did expect to see a cosmopolitan metropolis. However, I did not expect to find a gay life with so many different spaces. Gays from different social classes have created different spaces of culture and entertainment. I had the chance to see some of this diversity. Nevertheless that won't be possible unless you abandon the typical touristic perspective."

As suggested by Lionel Cantú (2002), the touristic experience is paradoxical in nature: it can be at the same time oppressive and liberating, for both hosts and visitors. Its oppressive character is revealed in two respects: on the one hand, the tourism industry turns gay tourists into a rich and white, homogenous and unified, mass target; on the other, this same industry attributes stereotypical characteristics to non-Western countries and turns them into objects of commerce. Additionally, Cantú (2002) maintains that the encounter between the tourist and the host is contingent to the place of visit, and dependent on individual, collective and political contexts. Although gay tourism plays a role in the continuation of Colonial oppositions, at the same time it helps create boundary zones and spaces of negotiation between two cultures (Waite G., Markwell K., Gormon-Murray A., 2008 :788).



Such zones or spaces establish a field of dialogue for sexual identities experienced in different geographic locations (please see the map below).

(<http://www.istanbulgay.com/map.htm>)



### Conclusion

We can think that the tourism industry ignores the political and identity struggles of gays, and offers Istanbul to the world market as a site of fantasy for gays. Nevertheless, we could see that voyage goes far beyond economical and commercial market factors to enable the creation of spaces of encounter between gay communities from all over the world. Thus, it cannot be taken for granted that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the Neocolonialist imagination inspired by the Orientalist memory promoted by the media and tourist guides on the one hand, and the experiences of tourists on the other. The development of gay tourism thereby contributes to the multiplication of living spaces for the gays of Istanbul. Owing to the flow of gay tourists, we can observe the appearance of a different geographic configuration in which gay identity becomes more and more politically visible.

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