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Euro-American Sex Tourism in the Caribbean

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The focus of this paper is sex tourism in the Caribbean, more specifically on Euro-American white women traveling for sexual relationships with Caribbean men. I will be analyzing these relationships through an intersectional approach by race, gender, and socioeconomic perspectives. The key point of my paper is to gain insight into the complicated sex for money 'relationships' and how they exist in places such as the Caribbean. Beginning with race, the typical makeup of these types of relationships are Euro-American white women who travel to places like Latin America and the Caribbean in search of these sexual relationships with local men who are often black. This brings us to the gender perspective, where, because of the gender dynamic, the terminology is often changed from sex tourism or prostitution to romance tourism because it is women seeking romance or courtship with men. Finally, the last perspective that will be discussed is the socio-economic aspect. The fact that these women are often giving expensive gifts or money in exchange for sex supports the notion that women are coming from higher socioeconomic statuses and the men are coming from lower statuses who participate as means of making a sustainable living or helping provide for their families. All three of these factors intertwine to create the platform for these sex-for-money relationships to exist in the Caribbean.

“Sex tourism is the organization of vacations with the purpose of taking advantage of the lack of restrictions imposed on prostitution and other sexual activities by some foreign

Countries (Oxford Dictionary).” Tourism is one of the Caribbean’s strongest economic sectors and also provides employment for the region. In 2011, tourism directly supported an estimated 687,000 jobs (Kennedy, 2017). In 2014, the direct contribution of travel and tourism to the Caribbean’s GDP was USD 16.1 billion and expected to rise to USD 22.9 billion by 2025 (Edghill, 2013). Sex tourism began to become embedded in Caribbean society in the mid-1990s (Kempadoo, 2001) and sex work became known as sexual-economic exchanges in which people provided sexual labor with multiple partners while publicly acknowledging their participation. Globalized labor markets and industries in conjunction with growing global wealth disparities contributed to maintaining a socioeconomic divide between the global North and South which then helps create the platform for sex tourism. ”Globalized capitalism demands the continual development of new commodity forms” (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001, p. 548).

Race is an extremely important factor in the relationship construct of sex tourism especially because of systematic racism that is prevalent in the Caribbean which makes it an ethnically organized region. Within each approach (race, gender, and socioeconomic), the power dynamic of the relationships are ever present and can shift or be renegotiated. ”Race and class are earmarked, along with gender, as a primary set of relations of power within which the sexual subject is to be explored and theorized” (Kempadoo, 2003, p. 63). Blackness in the Caribbean is seen as a tourist attraction and the hypersexualization of male black bodies is seen as exotic by the female sex tourists. Euro-American women imagined a standard for the type of men they would find in the Caribbean. Attached to these imaginations of hyper-erotized and hyper-sexual black men were “‘White stereotypes of primitive black male potency’, and colonial, sexual racist fantasies of ‘the big black dick’, are also said to lure female (sex) tourists to Caribbean countries” (Simoni, 2013, p. 184). Due to these fantasies and imaginations, global

reputations have been created for the Caribbean region to the point that Cuba gained the nickname of “Pleasure Island”. The makeup of the types of women that were traveling to the Caribbean were typically the same: Euro-American white women who may not even have the intentions of sex tourists before they arrive, they become completely enamored by the charm of the local Caribbean men. Women that were traveling to the Caribbean, “as an aggregate, they were broadly middle class, well-educated, well-traveled, and professional-and career-orientated” (Frohlick, 2013, p. 138). A 2001 survey conducted by Jacqueline Sanchez-Taylor, found that the majority of the women surveyed who have entered into sexual relations with local men were white women between 30-40 years old. In the literature, there was a consensus that supported the racial construct of these relationships. While not always, the majority of these relationships require a specific type of woman and man to exist. Sex tourism in the Caribbean is almost dependent on the “blackness as a tourist attraction” of the local men and the allure of the Euro-American white women.

Racism in the Caribbean is prevalent in economic sectors and part of the everyday lives of “beach boys” and other locals where the majority of people of African American descent are still living in poverty and still do not own land. Local men who cannot otherwise find formal employment in the tourist sector are then pushed into other forms of tourist services such as sex tourism where the majority of these men are typically black. What I found to be completely fascinating is the racial assumptions that tie into sex tourism. It is automatically assumed that any local black person in Cuba is a jinetero/a, and even black tourists are automatically assumed to be sex tourists even if they do not participate in the sex sector of tourism; “Put another way, desire and affection are defined as ‘lighter’ and prostitution as ‘darker’, effectively racializing the whole process” (Cabezas, 2004, p. 1002).

Within the socio-economic aspect of my paper, there are several approaches to explore. First, it is important to look at the Caribbean region as a whole. “Tourism has become essential to the economic development programmes designed to reverse crippling economic problems and poverty, repay international debt, and improve rates of unemployment” (Taylor, 2006, p. 43). Unfortunately, the income from tourism, and the hopes of it being the cure-all to poverty in the Caribbean, only stretched to certain populations. With the introduction of all-inclusive tourism, formal tourist employees were hurt economically. The gratuities that these locals so heavily depended on to subsidize their lacking wages were gone and they were pushed into the sex sector of tourism to make up for their loss of earnings. Unlike the local Costa Rican and Afro-Caribbean women, northern women held the promise of a range of tangible and intangible things. Among the tangible things are trips outside of the country, gifts and cash. A sense of coolness, and “clean” sex (in other words “disease-free” sex) were the intangible promises that were attached to the white women.

The second approach to explore within the realm of socioeconomic factors lies in the hierarchy of jineteros. Many analysts consider jineterismo to be elitist but often disregard the conditions that leave one to be an active jinetero. Jineteros can make \$240 to \$1400 monthly based on the hierarchy that is in place. There are three ranks among male sex workers. The lowest rank is called “rough and ready,” and these men are seen as beginners. The local men at this ranking are often times from the lowest socioeconomic classes and it is apparent in their appearance. The second ranking, appropriately named the “middle ranking”, are still from poverty initially and still uneducated. However, the men in this ranking often are economically better off than the “rough and ready” men due to their success in the sex sector of tourism. All of the nice things they’ve acquired such as name brand clothing, fancy televisions or even living

arrangements are paid for by the wealthy female sex tourists. The highest ranking is the “old veteran,” who by far are the most well off men and may even own several small local businesses and fancy cars such as Mercedes Benz and speak at least one European language. Of course, all of these luxuries are paid for and/or supported by the clients of the “old veterans” who, at this stage in their lives, are most likely married to a European or American woman.

This brings up the question, once again, about who exactly is exploiting whom? Is the local male exploiting the female tourists or is the wealthy female tourist exploiting the local men due to financial distress? Via the socioeconomic perspective, it seems a bit more blurry than in the perspective on race. More often than not, local men will have as many clients as possible simultaneously to maintain a sustainable living income. The jineteros and beach boys have often stated that they “hunt” or “shop” for the perfect partner who shows the most promise which clarifies their intents going into these relationships. Female tourists are getting to experience the “holiday romance” that typically does not intervene in their everyday lives while the local men are making a sustainable living and, in the case of the “old veterans,” completely removing themselves from the line of poverty.

Lastly, it is important to explore the payment portion of these transnational, interracial heterosexual relationships. The Euro-American women that are traveling for sex would not typically pay for sexual relations or financially support their partner in their home countries because it is socially unacceptable but there is a shift in the Caribbean; not only is it socially acceptable but it also provides bragging rights. Afro-Caribbean women don’t buy anything for or financially support their men either due to the absence of social acceptability. Although it is not socially acceptable to pay for sex or to financially support a man in either region/home culture, there is a shift in the power dynamics that allows it in these transnational relationships. In

Taylor's study, 57% of women who entered into relationships with local men in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica gave help in the form of cash, gifts, and/or meals; monetary exchanges are also prevalent in the cases of all three rankings of jineteros.

The final perspective to explore is that of gender, which may be the most important approach to answering the question of exploitation. "...[P]rostitution was not exclusive to women's activities, but rather was also shared by men in the region, it was found that the global location of the Caribbean as a service center and playground for wealthier nations and peoples has positioned Caribbean women and men as sex workers, reinforcing not only global gender inequalities but also the long-standing patterns of dominance and subordination between the north and the south" (Kempadoo, 2001, p. 40). Kempadoo's point in this statement reinforces all of the points made via the race and socioeconomic approaches; Euro-American wealth is the dominant factor over gender, race, or cultural normatives regardless of the region. Black men have been eroticized and now represent a male population on the service side of prostitution which changes everything from the language that we use to the power dynamics of relationships.

The first point of discussion is the difference of language used and attitudes towards local men and women who are active participants of sex tourism. Taylor argues that the term "'female sex tourism' is contradictory because 'sex tourism' already implies the use of a prostitute." In addition to (female) sex tourism, other titles that are used in lieu of prostitution are holiday romances, romance tourism, and real love. While most female sex workers identified themselves as prostitutes, male sex workers used a slew of titles such as "beach boy," "beach bum," "gigalo," "sanky panky," or "hustler." In a similar fashion to global capitalism, global patriarchy is to blame for the simple vocabulary that we choose to use.

The attitudes of both women and men as active participants in sex tourism also differs greatly but still obliges to the global patriarchy. Locally, female sex workers are marginalized and disrespected for flaunting their sexuality while their male counterparts are not only able to flaunt their title and their “clients” but also have reputations with other locals such as taxi drivers, bar owners, foreign male tourists, and are even hinted at in some guidebooks. This is concerning for several reasons: from a socioeconomic perspective, the openness and glorified reputation that revolves around male sex workers only works in their favor as sort of free marketing and can also add to the mystery and allure that surrounds them. It is also concerning because of the social stigmatization that female sex workers have to endure and the discrimination that comes along with it which stems from the control and regulation of female sexuality. This ideology also prevents women from being seen as capable of being sexually hostile or predatory. This is a result of the dichotomy of gender and sexuality which creates the impossibility of women sexually exploiting men.

Euro-American female tourists can “fall in love” or develop romantic feelings for local men without any trouble or stigmatization while their male counterparts throw out anecdotes such as, “You must be crazy to fall in love with a Cuban!” This is a problematic choice of words because it is harmful to local women who can then be seen as disposable both locally or globally which reinforces the stigma local female sex workers face every day. It is also problematic because it invalidates their role as women in the sex sector and other roles in their lives.

Power dynamics and masculinity of these transnational, interracial, heterosexual relationships in the Caribbean have still not been explored in detail leaving local men to be seen as exploiting tourist women rather than the other way around, but we know that this ideology is rooted in patriarchy from the colonization of the region. ”Masculinities linked to discourse of

machismo, homophobia, and misogyny were seemingly consolidated via relations with tourist women”(Frohlick, 2013, p. 141). In interviews conducted by Taylor, female tourists spoke of feeling powerful over the local men and feeling empowered in relation to white men (2006). Female and male tourists engage in these relationships in similar fashions and both do not seek middle-class locals but rather lower economic status to create that superior power feeling. The power dynamics are an extremely important factor because both parties typically feel that they have the upper hand with the most power over the other. A debate over where lies the power in the female tourists/local male relationships is questionable when there is no such debate for the reverse.

In a similar fashion, a payment for sex with foreign men and local women is just that, a payment for sex; that is what it is and that is what it is called. While with the reverse, the discussion of payments is danced around and hardly ever negotiated before the actual relations. Frohlick states, “the men don’t get paid for sex but they do get money” (2013). In turn, do the local women get paid for sex or for the experience? There seems to be a disconnect between sex and money in that there are payments being made but it isn’t directly for sex, it is seen as financial support for “lovers” or “boyfriends.”

In a reflection of the class discussion we had about sex work, approximately two thirds of the class voted in favor of the legalization of sex work while there were some very strong opinions for the opposite. We also saw a movie in class about male sex workers and the response seemed lacking. The difference in reactions sparked my curiosity on the subject and the further I researched into sex tourism, the more clear it became: because of the gender dynamics, racial and socioeconomic factors, female sex tourism is not as simple as one would think. Euro-American white women seeking local Afro-Caribbean men for “holiday romances” is a

completely intersectional issue and cannot be addressed solely at one layer but rather in its entirety. You cannot analyze these relationships in the same manner that you would of Euro-American men seeking local Afro-Caribbean women for sexual relations. The relationships are simple reciprocates but are different in every aspect. These transnational, interracial, heterosexual relationships are complicated at every level and in every form.

At each perspective (race, socioeconomic, and gender), the power dynamics that are normal of heterosexual relations shift, the questions of who is being exploited are not as black and white as they are in the opposite forms, and it all begins with the language we use to identify and describe these relationships. Through all of my research, it has become clear that the model for these relationships in the Caribbean has to be exact in order to be successful, making them extremely complicated.

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