

Money Talks: Female Sex Tourism in Jamaica

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The issue of sex tourism is one that is most frequently explored as a gendered practice involving relationships between male tourists and female sex workers. By using the case of sex tourism in Jamaica, this article explores the fluidity of gender roles in an environment where foreign female tourists exchange money or material goods for sex with local males. I argue that the significance of sex tourism work is its illumination of flexible aspects of gender and culture that seem to be rather stable and fixed in the overall societal context. Female sex tourism demonstrates the performativity of men who are excluded from various sectors of society and have found a way to use masculinity, sexuality, and cultural identity in order to profit from a practice that has become commonplace in many Caribbean tourism destinations. This article situates female sex tourism in relevant literature on gender and tourism in order to examine unexplored aspects of this particular type of tourism, as well as contextualizes sex tourism in the political economic background of the Caribbean tourist destination.

Introduction

The topic of sex tourism has gained a significant amount of attention in countries that are heavily reliant upon tourism-generated capital. While much of the research on sex tourism has focused on male sex tourists, the practice of female sex tourism is one that deserves particular consideration because of its relative obscurity. In certain Caribbean tourism destinations, foreign female tourists engaging in liaisons with local men have become a familiar part of the vacation landscape. Based on preliminary research in a popular Jamaican resort town and an extensive literature review, I argue that exploring sex tourism work in Jamaica is significant because of its illumination of flexible aspects of gender and culture that otherwise seem to be stable and fixed in the overall societal context. Female sex tourism demonstrates the performances of men who are excluded

from various sectors of society and have found ways to use masculinity, sexuality, and cultural identity in order to gain from a profitable practice.

This type of “romance” tourism inverts commonly held notions about gender and sex work, and challenges concepts of what prostitution actually entails. These men, often referred to as “gigolos”, “rent-a-dreads”, and “beach boys” in the Jamaican context, utilize local cultural symbols in order to offer female sex tourists the type of “authentic” experiences they seek. Here I will contextualize the practice of sex tourism in the political economic situation in Jamaica, then discuss how female sex tourism demonstrates the performances of both gender and culture by local men in order to contribute to the selling of place in this tourism destination. The paper concludes with an explanation of how certain gaps in existing literature on sex tourism are filled by this examination of the concept of performativity in relation to the practice. Through a focus on the example of female sex tourism in a specific location, I examine more generalizable issues of gender, culture, power, and authenticity that the topic reveals.

Tourism in Jamaica

Tourism receipts worldwide totalled approximately \$856 billion dollars in 2007; of this amount, \$22.6 billion was generated in the Caribbean region (UNWTO 2008). Jamaica had the third highest rates of tourism in the Caribbean in 2008, following Cuba and the Dominican Republic in terms of numbers of tourists (Caribbean Tourism Organization 2009). The utilization of tourism as a way to provide sustainable support to the economy, however, has had a problematic impact on the island. Economic growth has not correlated with increases in the tourism sector (International Monetary Fund 2008). The politics of debt and the international tourism trade have become inextricably

linked (Enloe 1989:190), and revenues from tourism in Caribbean countries frequently benefit foreign business owners more than nationals (Pattullo 2005; Turner and Ash 1976). Reliance on tourism increases the vulnerability of Caribbean destinations at both state and community levels. While the effects of tourism on these populations are not universal, there are evidently negative impacts for those who do not reap economic benefits from the growing tourism sector (Black 2001; Cabezas 2008; Cunningham 2006; Dunn and Dunn 2002; Kincaid 1988; Pattullo 2005; Taylor 1993; Turner and Ash 1976; Wright 1992).

Many of the local women and men who have access to employment opportunities in the industry hold unskilled positions with relatively low social and income statuses, yet high turnover rates (Dunn and Dunn 2002; Pattullo 2005). Increases in tourism promotion lead to greater risk of criminalization for local people, which can be seen in current harassment laws that leave local vendors, taxi operators, and sex workers at risk of being arrested for interacting inappropriately with tourists (Ajagunna 2006; de Albuquerque 1999; Gmelch 2003; 2008; Mullings 1999). Local perspectives of tourism have been found to focus on increased crime, prostitution, and drug use in communities reliant upon tourism (Dunn and Dunn 2002; Pattullo 2005; Taylor 1993). Caribbean governments, including that of Jamaica, seem to turn a blind eye to illicit tourism-related practices in order to emphasize the overall benefit that tourist dollars bring to the region. Because of the structures that maintain exclusivity in the demand for tourism workers, as well as marginalize a large segment of the work force, opportunities for many Caribbean people to work legally in this sector are limited (Cabezas 2008). While many studies have focused on the ways in which women in the region navigate the structural issues

that exclude them from legal work in the tourism industry (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 1999; Fernandez 1999), there is a gap in the literature regarding the alternatives to tourism work that men in similar circumstances seek.

This analysis focuses on the way in which female sex tourism operates within the larger frameworks of Caribbean sexuality and culture. An important aspect of the way in which this type of sex tourism is situated in the context of Jamaica includes the political economic structures relevant to the practice. Sex tourism has emerged in response to government policies that treat tourism as an effective revenue generator, yet marginalize much of the employable population from legal work in this sector. As Enloe (1989:190) points out, “Sex tourism is not an anomaly; it is one strand of the gendered tourism industry.” Jobs in hotels, resorts, and transportation are competitive; the privatization of much of the tourism industry in the Caribbean leaves little room for unskilled workers lacking formal educations. By engaging in sexual relationships with foreign tourists, male sex workers (MSWs) demonstrate the ability to profit from the industry despite their exclusion from official employment in tourism. These men are at once contributing to the overall tourism program that the Jamaican government promotes, and concurrently benefitting themselves and their families.

Gender fluidity in female sex tourism

The practice of sex tourism has been written about specifically in the Caribbean region, where the hypersexualization of men and women of color has attracted white tourists seeking “exotic” sexual relationships (Kempadoo 2004; O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1999). Differences between male and female sex tourism have been noted in terms of the nature of these relationships, with some research terming heterosexual

relationships between local men and foreign tourists as “romance tourism” (Pruitt and LaFont 1995). This term alludes to the aspects of flirtation and fantasy that occur between MSWs and their female clients, often during relationships that last longer than temporary flings. Part of maintaining this fantasy is the disjointing of these relationships from “real” prostitution; the men do not explicitly request specific amounts of money during their interactions with these women, but rather hint at their dire economic situations with the expectation that the women will respond generously (Herold et al. 2001; Pruitt and LaFont 1995). Participants in this type of tourism are likely to consider this a romance or seduction that occurs, rather than an actual transaction based on sex, because of the perception of prostitution as feminized work. Because the local sex workers, who are most commonly referred to as gigolos, are men, they are not viewed as prostitutes as their female counterparts are. Referring to men involved in “romance tourism” as “beach boys” and “rent-a-rastas” both contributes to the affirmation of their masculinity while avoiding recognition of the financial transactions that occur in their relationships with foreign females.

As Kempadoo (1999:25) writes, “An exchange of sex for material and financial benefits with a female tourist [...] reaffirms conceptions of ‘real’ Caribbean manhood, creating a space for the liberation of a masculinity that, within the international context is subordinated to an economically powerful, white masculinity.” Here it is important to consider the meaning behind terms related to Caribbean masculinity, and how these are reflected in, or challenged by, male involvement in sex tourism. Theoretical discourse in the region has called into question the concepts of reputation and respectability, based on Wilson’s (1973) use of these terms in *Crab Antics*. While relevant critiques of Wilson’s

work have emerged on explorations into gender relations in the region (Yelvington 1995, 1996), the emergent practice of sex tourism fits with the concept of male reputation. This foundation of a man's respect, according to Wilson (1973), is based on his virility, and tied into expressions of flirtation and "sweet talk" that are a part of Caribbean men's interactions with women (Chevannes 2001; Pruitt and LaFont 1995; Yelvington 1995, 1996).

Also essential for situating male sex work in the larger theme of masculinity is understanding the role of transactional sex in many societies of the region. Previous research on female sex tourism has failed to connect female sex tourism with the commonly described practice of transactional sex in the Caribbean setting. Studies that include investigations of gender relations in Caribbean countries have demonstrated the use of sex and sexuality as a tool for women to attain material assets (Figueroa et al. 2007; Grenade 2007; Kempadoo and Taitt 2006; Muturi 2008 ; Pan-Caribbean Partnership on HIV/AIDS 2002). According to Figueroa (2008:111), "transactional sex (sex in exchange for social support, school fees, food, a gift, etc.) is fairly common –20% of adults in one survey in Jamaica –." In his discussions with Jamaican women on the important aspects of relationships with men, Chevannes (2001) found that many women valued money from men more than faithfulness. He quotes a popular Jamaican saying: "Men need sex, which women have: women need money, which men must find to satisfy their demand. *No money, no sex.* [italicization added]" (Chevannes 2001:198). The challenge for understanding how Caribbean masculinity connects with men's participation in female sex tourism is incorporating this concept of transactional sex, which is generally used to describe the behaviors of women and female adolescents.

This analysis of female sex tourism contributes to the discourse on sexuality by demonstrating how male sex workers in the tourism destination navigate the feminized practice of transactional sex through the incorporation of “masculine” behaviors. The theory of gender performance offers an effective lens for interpreting men’s participation in transactional sex with foreign women.

An essential component of the relationships between foreign tourists and Jamaican men involved in sex tourism is the performance of the “gigolos” in order to attract these women. It is useful here to consider the ways in which this type of performance is accounted for by Butler’s theory of gender performativity. This idea of performativity reflects the constructionist position on sex and gender, lending support to the fluidity of notions of gender that are often perceived in society to be fixed. Butler (1990:3) reminds us that gender ideals are changing “...because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.” Instead of gender identity, there is an identity that is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990:25). From this performative perspective, masculinity reasonably fits into the practice of sex work in terms of the performances that males utilize to express themselves as Caribbean men for the tourists. Female tourists have suggested that they seek relationships with young, fit, “natural” black men who embody the type of island maleness that is outside of their reach at home (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1999; Phillips 1999). The men, in turn, use their bodies in order to create the fantasy that the women wish to maintain as a part of their vacation stays. Padilla (2008:102)

discusses the performativity of MSWs' interactions with tourists in the Dominican Republic in terms of the "marketable fantasy" that these men create. By using their bodies as commodities, the sex workers in Padilla's study were found to be active participants in the state-run tourism economy while at the same time working to increase their individual gains from the industry.

Although it may seem that the behaviors of these men are contrary to the conventional gender role of men in the Caribbean, Press (1978) argues that Barbadian beach "hustlers" utilize alternative means to fulfill traditional societal expectations. These men play a role for tourist women, articulating their thoughts and ideas in such a way that the tourists get what they want to hear. This involves changing their voices and demeanors, and expressing overt politeness as they "sweet talk" the women (Wright 1992). Flattery is a tool used by MSWs in order to attract tourist women, particularly those who may not be perceived as attractive by conventional European and American standards, or who are much older than the men (Herold et al. 2001). The men might show off their muscular bodies with their clothing or engagement in athletic activities; they demonstrate to the women that they are available to make their stays on the island more pleasurable in any way possible. This is not to say that the women solely play passive roles in the relationships that transpire with the male sex workers they encounter. There are gender negotiations, dual performances that occur between the tourists and the beach boys. While the men display the ability to maintain their reputations through relationships with foreign women, these women have their own power to exert based on their economic statuses, independence, and often their race. Tourist women also have the power to choose their partners, as well as the economic advantage that allows them to

decide the extent and duration of the relationships. Whether or not the man is able to join her in her hotel room, dine alongside her in an expensive restaurant, and will be sent money upon her return to her country is entirely based on her determinations.

Cultural performance

While a number of distinct types of tourism have been identified, sex tourism falls into the purview of recreational tourism, which is focused on sun, sand, sea and sex (Ryan 1991; Smith 1989). Analyses of tourism have indicated various aspects of the relationships between hosts and guests, including the concepts of liminality and authenticity that seem to motivate tourists (Burns 1999). The idea that foreigners involved in recreational tourism are freed from their daily routines is linked with the concept that there is an “authentic” culture that one can experience in the vacation setting. The tourist destination provides a space for the “consumption of place” that includes the provision of consumer services, and even the possibility of the consumption of identities, for both the tourists and local people (Urry 1995). Vessey and Dimanche (2003) describe tourists as “consumers looking for purchasable versions of the culture they seek.” Tourists visiting Caribbean islands often participate in activities related to organized tours, beaches and water sports, and even “hedonistic consumption” that can be found in the tourism economies of these destinations (Mullings 1999). Part of this commodification of cultural forms stems from the desire of some tourists to experience the authentic “back regions” that MacCannell (1999), drawing from Ervin Goffman’s work, describes as “the sharing which allows one to see behind the others’ mere performances, to perceive and accept the others for what they really are.” Literature on authenticity in tourism destinations leads to the question of what is truly authentic, if

authenticity is even possible (MacCannell 1999; Urry 1995; Vesey and Dimanche 2003). However, the agendas of Caribbean governments and private stakeholders promoting tourism certainly include the demonstration of some sort of natural, authentic sense of place and people for the consumption of tourists (Black 2001; Bolles 1992; Mullings 1999). These cultural brokers have the power to decide what will be promoted as authentic in the creation of the tourism destination. Advertisements for countries like Jamaica often include serene views of beaches where white couples relax while being served by smiling, black local workers. National governments in the region have used public announcements and other tactics in order to encourage their citizens to contribute to the tourism agenda for the betterment of their economies (Cabezas 2008; Wright 1992).

Cultural brokers choose products that have the most “authenticity” for commodification (Green 2007). In the case of Jamaica, along with many other Caribbean nations, certain products reflecting folk concepts of culture are generally those that are reproduced for the purposes of consumption. These include cultural symbols representing reggae and calypso music, local patois, ganja paraphernalia, and Rastafari. Shirts, mugs, and key chains purchasable on many islands depict figures of black bodies sporting short dreadlocks that are dancing or beating drums. It is evident that many of these cultural productions are predicated on the creation of a Jamaican “Other” that necessarily coincides with blackness, despite the ethnic diversity that can be found in the country. Taxi drivers and tour guides teach their tourist passengers phrases like “Yeah, mon” and “No problem” as they transport them from the airport to their hotels. Such cultural commodification on the islands, along with advertisements viewed prior to

reaching these destinations, seem to indicate that black people are consumable products just as the souvenirs are. Black men who offer their bodies to foreign females for monetary exchange present themselves as being available for tourist consumption. By enhancing their Jamaican accents and code-switching abilities, by growing their hair into sun-bleached dreadlocks, and by demonstrating their seemingly natural abilities to dance, MSWs appeal to the tourist seeking an “authentic” experience with a “real” Jamaican man. These are *cultural* performances in which the men utilize cultural symbols decided upon by cultural brokers for the benefit of both tourists and, supposedly, the economy of the country. They are well aware of the assumptions and stereotypes about local men that many tourist women hold prior to arriving on the island, and are more than willing to profit from the perpetuation of these ideals. There is no doubt that many of the female tourists involved in sex tourism are willing participants in the performances of culture (and gender), understanding that these are a part of the tourism display put on by members of the local population. However, it would seem that new arrivals and inexperienced tourists might take added pleasure in the idea of being exposed to this particular “back region” of Jamaican society. By becoming involved with a local man, a foreign woman can gain easy access to family-owned restaurants and local bars that do not fall along the well-trodden tourist path. Developing a long-term relationship with a citizen in the tourism destination could also involve the additional experiences of becoming part of an exotic social network that many tourists do not experience, and, more literally, could include trips into the “back regions” of local people’s homes and lives.

Discussion

The interactions between gender, sexuality, race, and culture in the study of female sex tourism offer extensive opportunities to explore the impact of tourism in certain locales. The specific context of Jamaica is of particular interest because of my multiple experiences observing the practice of sex tourism in one resort town on the island. For locals in that particular tourism destination, relations between “gigolos” and tourists are an everyday part of life that is rarely questioned or reflected upon because of its commonality. Speaking to residents in the town about tourism, both those employed in the sector and others who are not, offers crucial perspectives from one side of the looking glass. These are generally people who are exposed to the decadence and frivolity of vacationers, yet lack the opportunities to actually experience the type of lifestyle first hand. While the government promotes tourism as an increasingly profitable revenue generator for the economy, most tourism workers fail to reap significant benefits from the industry. Those who are able make the best of university degrees in tourism and marketing by attaining positions in the many foreign-owned resorts and hotels that pop up along the country’s coasts. Others struggle to maintain employment in unstable posts that fluctuate according to the season while utilizing side “hustles” to earn a living. For the men and women who use transactional sex with foreign visitors to provide for themselves and their families, illicit work in the tourism industry offers a way in to the industry that marginalizes many of the unskilled, less educated citizens. Moreover, sex tourism provides an opportunity for these men and women to experience, in some part, the vacation experiences that their island advertises for the European or North American guest. As is the case in any tourism destinations of extremely stratified societies, un- and

underemployed segments of the population often lack opportunities to explore the exclusive hotels, restaurants, and attractions available to foreign guests with ample travel funds. Having a tourist companion is one way in which a local person could access the exquisite cuisine, the all-day jeep tour, the expensive nightclub, and other aspects of “paradise” that the island adventure has to offer.

The fact that women engage in sexual relationships with foreign men in order to benefit from the tourism industry is somehow more easily accepted than the concept of female sex tourism for those who are not regularly exposed to the practice. This is related to the gendered notion of prostitution that readily places vulnerable females in the position to sell sex to men. The reverse situation somehow seems to feminize and demean the masculine subject, who should be the buyer of sex according to general societal norms. Even in the case of Jamaica, transactional sex is frequently described as a way for women to exchange sex for material objects from men. The distinct terminology used for male sex workers indicates the differentiated gender-based perceptions of prostitution. In order for the prevalence of heterosexual male sex workers to have become so commonplace in such an environment, there have been shifts in the concepts of gender and sexuality as experienced by both the local residents and tourists to the Caribbean destination. Despite the feminization of sex work, men have been accepted as sellers of their bodies in ways that both reflect their masculinity as well as undermine the power dynamics that customarily give them advantages over women in their societies. Men who participate in female sex tourism perform masculinity to the extent that both they and the women with whom they interact can benefit. The men display their virility, sexual prowess, and blackness in such a way that upholds their reputations as Caribbean

men while simultaneously fulfilling the women's gendered, racialized fantasies. The money, material goods, access to tourist establishments, and even possibilities to travel that are gained from these transactions compensate for the acceptance that the tourist women ultimately have control over the extent of the relationships. The men will profit as long as these women remain satisfied with their vacations liaisons.

While the government does not officially sanction the practice of sex tourism, the selling of sexuality is a salient aspect of tourism marketing. Locals are often depicted as scantily clad, exotic, and carefree people who are willing and available to attend to the whims of the various types of travelers visiting the island. These men and women have become integrated into the tourism landscape, commodified along with the packaged tours, reggae music, and spicy cuisine that are perceived as "authentically" Jamaican. MSWs, who are well aware of the prevalent stereotypes of Jamaican culture, can be observed utilizing cultural cues in order to appeal to foreign tourists: accentuating their accents, strategically using patois phrases, and inviting women on private tours of natural attractions off the beaten path. Women who hope to achieve non-tourist status through experiences of the "real" Jamaica can easily be drawn in by the cultural performances displayed by male sex workers. With them, tourist women are provided access to aspects of the tourism destination that are ignored by those vacationers who fail to explore the country outside of their all-inclusive resorts.

Conclusion

This analysis contributes to sex tourism literature by introducing the concept of performativity as a way to explore the convergences between gender and culture in a Caribbean tourism setting. The discussion of female sex tourism reveals the significance

of the practice in terms of understanding the fluidity of the concepts of gender and culture. By problematizing the gendered notion of sex work and addressing the structural factors that contribute to heterosexual male sex work, the case of a resort town in Jamaica is used to demonstrate more generalizable characteristics of sex tourism. The ramifications of the tourism industry for the island are analogous to those in similar tourism-reliant destinations. Focusing on this particular practice is a way to understand both the structural factors and the local responses to tourism. Unlike much of the published literature on sex tourism, this discussion situates male sex work in the political economic context in which it operates as well as in the regional framework of gender and sexuality studies. This approach offers unexplored perspectives of an emergent practice that can provide powerful information regarding the intersections between masculinity, culture, and tourism.

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